First Prize: An Analysis of the Ontological Argument of St Anselm
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Introduction

St Anselm (1033CE-1109CE) was a philosopher and theologian and held the office of Archbishop of Canterbury from 1093CE until his death. He is remembered chiefly as the originator of the first 'Ontological Argument' for the existence of God. Ontological Arguments[1] are *a priori*[2] arguments purporting to establish the existence of God from the very definition of the same. Many such arguments have been advanced since Anselm's, but Anselm's original argument has remained a popular object of study.

The Argument

Anselm's argument is set out in the second chapter of his work 'The Proslogion':

> And so, O Lord, … give me to understand … that thou art … a being than which none greater[3] can be thought. Or can it be that there is no such being, since "the fool hath said in his heart, 'There is no God'"? [Psalms 14.1; 53.1] But … this same fool … must be convinced that a being than which none greater can be thought exists at least in his understanding… . But clearly that than which a greater cannot be thought cannot exist in the understanding alone. For if it is actually in the understanding alone, it can be thought of as existing also in reality, and this is greater. Therefore, if that than which a greater cannot be thought is in the understanding alone, this same thing than which a greater cannot be thought is that than which a greater can be thought. But obviously this is impossible. Without doubt, therefore, there exists, both in the understanding and in reality, something than which a greater cannot be thought.[4]

Anselm gives another, similar argument in the third chapter of The Proslogion, but most scholars consider that this adds nothing to the argument above.

Gaunilo's Objection

Anslem's argument has never been accepted by theologians. St Thomas Aquinas did not accept it, and it was not accepted into official church doctrine[5]. Today, the vast majority of scholars believe the argument to be fallacious, although there is disagreement as to exactly why.

The first criticism of Anselm's argument came from a monk contemporary, Gaunilo of Marmoutiers. Gaunilo's method was to demonstrate by way of parody that the argument must be logically flawed. He imitated the form of Anselm's argument in his 'proof' of the

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1 The term is due to Immanuel Kant.
2 Arguments on the basis of reason alone, without recourse to observation of the world.
3 Although a precise definition of 'greater' is neither offered by Anselm nor necessary for this argument, it is likely that Anselm had in mind something like 'superior' or 'more perfect' [Hick1964] p23.
4 [Hick1964] pp25-26
5 [Russell1996] p388

existence in reality of a perfect island (an island than which none more perfect can be thought). One can continue in this vein to 'prove', amongst other things, the existence of the devil (a being than which none *worse* can be thought) and the existence of the ultimate lover (a lover than which none more satisfying can be thought)![6] Gaunilo's reasoning was that, since these conclusions are ridiculous, Anselm's form of argument must be invalid.

Anselm's response to Gaunilo's criticism was that, for theological reasons, the argument form is valid in its application to the question of the existence of God[7]. This response sidesteps rather than addresses the underlying question of logical validity.

My view is that Anselm's argument is indeed invalid because it contains a logical error which becomes evident upon detailed analysis of the argument form.

Analysis of the Argument

To facilitate investigation of the logical structure of Anselm's argument I will set it out formally. Note the following:

- I use the generic term 'object' to denote anything in the ontology, including animate 'beings' and inanimate objects, things that exist in reality and things that are purely imaginary, fictional or historical.
- I introduce the predicate 'godlike' to express the key property that Anselm ascribes to God, namely "that than which no greater can be imagined".
- To say that an object exists is not to say that it exists in reality (to quote Anselm, it might exist 'only in the understanding'). I introduce the predicate 'real' to express the additional property of existence in reality. Hence x is real if and only if x exists in reality.

Anselm's argument can then be formalised as follows.

[Definition 1] *An object is said to be 'godlike' if and only if it is greater than all other objects.*
Fortunately very few properties of this 'greater than' relation are needed for this argument!

[Axiom 1] *A godlike object exists.*
But perhaps only in the understanding and not in reality. Since this object does exist, it cannot hurt to give it a name; so I will call it '**G**'. Then I can re-state [Axiom 1] as:
[Axiom 1a] *G is a godlike object*

[Axiom 2] *If one godlike object is real and another is not real, then the real object is the greater.*
This adequately expresses the only property of the 'greater than' relation necessary for this argument[8]. The restriction of the scope of the comparison to godlike objects is satisfactory because Anselm's argument compares only godlike objects.

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6 [Blackburn2001] pp156-7.
7 [Kenny2012] p479
8 Other than the standard mathematical properties of reversal, trichotomy and transitivity.

The argument then proceeds by way of *reductio ad absurdum*. Anselm supposes that **G** is not real in order to force a contradiction and therefore conclude that **G** must be real. However I shall demonstrate that this does not quite work!

[Supposition 1] *G is not real*

It is correct now to deduce, following Anselm, that were a real godlike object to exist then it would be greater than **G**, in which case **G** would not be godlike, in contradiction to [Axiom 1a]. However Anselm provides no means of establishing the existence of such a real godlike object, so to maintain rigour this must be added as a further supposition:

[Supposition 2] *There exists a real godlike object*

Now the sought contradiction to [Axiom 1a] follows from [Definition 1], [Axiom 2], [Supposition 1] and [Supposition 2]: *G is not godlike.*

It follows from the contradiction that the *conjunction of both* suppositions must be false:
Either G is real or there does not exist a real godlike object

This can be restated as:
If there exists a real godlike object then G is real.

Since the giving of the name **G** was arbitrary we may recover the existential quantifier:
If there exists a real godlike object, then there exists a real godlike object.

Anselm's argument is thus seen to be begging the question: it assumes that which it purports to prove. The argument is circular. In the form stated by Anselm it is invalid because it raises a supposition, [Supposition 2], to the status of an axiom.

It follows that Gaunilo was correct to criticize the logical form of the argument because it is indeed invalid.

Further Objections

In the 18th century Immanuel Kant produced a different objection: that existence is not a predicate[9]. Existence is not merely a property that can be attributed to objects, such as the property of being a particular colour or having a certain mass, but is the ontological hook from which properties hang.

I think that Kant is essentially correct, but that this is not the problem with Anselm's argument. In the formalisation above it is not *existence* (in the understanding) that is being treated as a predicate
but *existence in reality*. These two are very different and I consider it coherent to treat the latter as a predicate (but not the former).

Simon Blackburn argues that it is simply nonsensical to compare properties of real and non-real objects. For example, which is the heavier: a real feather or an imaginary ton of lead?[10] Whilst this is a valid point in general, the present argument requires only that a God that

9 [Oppy2015] Introduction
10 [Blackburn2001] pp157-8

exists in reality is superior to one that is purely imaginary, and to me this seems beyond doubt.

It has also been argued that the very notion of a greatest possible being might be incoherent, just as there can be no greatest possible integer[11].

Conclusion

St Anselm's original Ontological Argument remains a popular object of study. The vast majority of scholars believe it to be fallacious, but there is disagreement as to exactly why. This essay has attempted to demonstrate that the early critic Gaunilo was correct to declare the argument logically invalid. Other objections are possible, but I regard Kant's and Blackburn's objections as tangential to Anselm's argument.

Bibliography

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11 [Kenny2012] p479