

The Ontological Arguments

Anselm > *Proslogion* > Chapter 2

Truly there is a God, although the fool hath said in his heart, There is no God.

AND so, Lord, do thou, who dost give understanding to faith, give me, so far as thou knowest it to be profitable, to understand that thou art as we believe; and that thou art that which we believe. And indeed, we believe that thou art a being than which nothing greater can be conceived. Or is there no such nature, since the fool hath said in his heart, there is no God? (Psalms xiv. 1). But, at any rate, this very fool, when he hears of this being of which I speak --a being than which nothing greater can be conceived --understands what he hears, and what he understands is in his understanding; although he does not understand it to exist. For, it is one thing for an object to be in the understanding, and another to understand that the object exists. When a painter first conceives of what he will afterwards perform, he has it in his understanding, but he does not yet understand it to be, because he has not yet performed it. But after he has made the painting, he both has it in his understanding, and he understands that it exists, because he has made it. Hence, even the fool is convinced that something exists in the understanding, at least, than which nothing greater can be conceived. For, when he hears of this, he understands it. And whatever is understood, exists in the understanding. And assuredly that, than which nothing greater can be conceived, cannot exist in the understanding alone. For, suppose it exists in the understanding alone: then it can be conceived to exist in reality; which is greater. Therefore, if that, than which nothing greater can be conceived, exists in the understanding alone, the very being, than which nothing greater can be conceived, is one, than which a greater can be conceived. But obviously this is impossible. Hence, there is no doubt that there exists a being, than which nothing greater can be conceived, and it exists both in the understanding and in reality.

The Analysis

1. Definition: God is the greatest of all conceivable things.
2. Premise: The concept of the greatest conceivable thing is the greatest concept.
3. Therefore: The concept of God is the greatest of all concepts.
4. Premise: The Fool understands the meaning of the description “God is that than which no greater can be conceived”.
5. Premise: If you understand the meaning of a description, then you have a concept of the thing described.
6. Therefore: The concept of God exists in the mind of the Fool (that is, God exists in the understanding of the Fool). Note that God is not a concept. Your concept of your car is not your car. Concepts are not things.
7. Premise: A concept either exists only in the mind or in both the mind and in reality. A concept that exists in reality is one that is realized by some thing. My concept of my coffee cup exists in reality, since my coffee cup exists.
8. Premise: Any concept that exists both in the mind and in reality is greater than any concept that exists in the mind alone.

9. Premise: It is obviously true that some concepts do exist both in the mind and in reality. For example, the concept of my coffee cup.

10. Hypothesis to be Tested: God exists only in the understanding of the Fool and does not exist in reality. That is, there is a concept of God, but no thing which realizes that concept.

10A. Therefore: The concept of my coffee cup is greater than the concept of God.

10B. But if any concept is greater than the concept of God, then the concept of God is not the greatest concept.

10C. So, the concept of God is not the greatest concept.

10D. There is a contradiction between 10C and 3.

11. Rejection of Hypothesis: The hypothesis that God exists only in the understanding of the Fool and not in reality leads to a contradiction; so it must be rejected.

12. Conclusion: God exists in both the understanding of the Fool and in reality. There is a concept of God (the greatest concept) and there is a thing which realizes that concept (the greatest thing). This greatest thing is God.

Properties rather than Concepts

- (1) There are some abstract properties.
- (2) These properties are ranked in terms of their goodness.
- (3) One of these properties G is better than every other property (it is the best).
- (4) Properties are either instantiated by things or not instantiated by things.
- (5) An instantiated property is better than an uninstantiated property.
- (6) Some properties are instantiated (e.g. humanity by humans).
- (7) Assume that G is not instantiated.
- (8) If G is not instantiated, then some properties are better than G.
- (9) But then G is not the best.
- (10) So the assumption that G is instantiated leads to a contradiction.
- (11) Therefore: G is instantiated.
- (12) The thing that instantiates the best property is the best thing.
- (13) So there is some thing which is better than all other things.
- (14) This thing is divine.

Neoplatonism: The best thing is the One.

Theism: The best thing is God.

Pantheism: The best thing is the universe or nature.