

The Ontological Argument

Handout
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1. Existence in the understanding and existence in reality

St Anselm's picture: some things exist both in the understanding and in reality (Bill Clinton, cows); some things exist in the understanding but don't exist in reality (Sherlock Holmes, golden mountains). Perhaps there are also further things that exist in reality but don't exist in the understanding, and things that don't exist in reality or in anyone's understanding.

'Whatever is understood, exists in the understanding.' How should we understand this principle? Perhaps as follows:

If x understands the expression "an F ", then an F exists in x 's understanding.

Do we understand the expression "a round square"? If so, this principle entails that round squares exist in our understanding. Is that a conclusion Anselm would want? If not, we need to modify our understanding of the principle. Maybe Anselm has in mind something like this:

If x clearly understands how something could be an F , then an F exists in x 's understanding.

2. Greatness and existence

Anselm's other premise: (other things being equal) a being is greater if it exists in reality than if it merely exists in the understanding.

3. Anselm's ontological argument

Putting it all together:

- (i) The fool clearly understands how something could be a being than which nothing greater can be conceived.
- (ii) Therefore, a being than which nothing greater can be conceived exists in the fool's understanding.
- (iii) But for any x , if x exists in the understanding but not in reality, something greater than x can be conceived.
- (iv) Therefore, a being than which nothing greater can be conceived exists in reality.

4. Gaunilo's argument

- (i) I clearly understand how something could be an island than which no greater island can be conceived.
- (ii) Therefore, an island than which no greater island can be conceived exists in my understanding.
- (iii) But for any x , if x exists in the understanding but not in reality, something greater than x can be conceived.

(iv) Therefore, an island than which no greater island can be conceived exists in reality.

5. One possible response to Gaunilo

...is to dispute the first premise. Maybe the factors that make for greatness in islands can be increased without limit? Or maybe existence makes something a *greater being* without making it a *greater island*...?

6. Another attempt at *reductio ad absurdum*

(i) I clearly understand how something could be a flying pig existing in reality.

(ii) Therefore, a flying pig existing in reality exists in my understanding.

(iii) Therefore, a flying pig exists in reality.

7. Diagnosis

The problem must lie in the principle 'Whatever is understood must exist in the understanding', as understood by Anselm.

8. An alternative picture

Everything there is exists, i.e. exists in reality.

Names like 'Sherlock Holmes' don't refer to anything. Predicates like 'golden mountain' and 'perfect island' don't apply to anything.

A puzzle: what do we say about sentences like 'There are many things that don't exist, for example Sherlock Holmes and perfect islands'?