

**Additional Objections to Anselm's Argument  
(from the § 0207 discussion) Feb 17, 2006**

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Anselm's ontological<sup>1</sup> argument, translated in SFCS, reads:

All things of which a greater cannot be conceived are things that exist  
God is that which a greater cannot be conceived  
∴ God exists

Since it's an example of an AAA<sub>1</sub> syllogism, it's therefore valid.

For rhetorical force, Anselm of course used the method of *reductio ad absurdum*, in which he specifically points out the contradiction in denying the major premise (i.e., its negation becomes an E-form: "Some things of which a greater cannot be conceived are things that do not exist.") Anselm argues that this is a contradiction because, for example, if one conceives of some such thing with a list of such properties  $P_1, \dots, P_n$ , but lacking the property of existence, then I can always think of another thing which has all the same properties as yours (i.e.,  $P_1, \dots, P_n$ ) but including the additional property of existence. Thus what I conceive of is therefore greater than what you have conceived of. Therefore what you claim to be thinking of, i.e. something of which a greater is inconceivable, is always false, since I just showed there's something even greater than that.

For example, if I told you I was thinking of the greatest house, let's say my 'dream home', and I told you there's no home better than that, and you asked me to describe it, and I told you it's got a wrap-around porch, an old oak tree on the front lawn, beautiful hardwood floors, etc., and "oh yeah, by the way, I almost forgot to mention, it doesn't exist," you'd probably laugh and say: "I can think of a *much* better home than *that*...what about the same one you just described to me which *does* exist? So what you're telling me *cannot* be the greatest home conceivable, to you or to anyone else!"

A number of interesting responses concerning the soundness of Anselm's argument came up in section 0207, which I summarize:

1. (Dean Gogerdchi) a) Anselm's line of reasoning doesn't seem to 'get you anywhere,' in the sense of giving positive evidence for God's existence.  
b) Shouldn't we be considering what we mean by 'existence?'
2. (Marisa Neaman) What's the connection between *conceiving* of something and the *existence* of something?
3. (Brittany Galanis and Josh Lambert) How is this 'proof' reconciled with his later claim that God is perfection beyond conception?

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<sup>1</sup> 'Ontology' is a subdiscipline in philosophy which studies the notion of existence. Anselm's argument is called 'ontological' since it uses the concept of existence as one of its major terms in its premises. (Contrast this with some Aquinas' cosmological and teleological arguments which use the concept of causation in their premises.)

The objections brought cover a broad range of issues. Dean's Objection 1a) for instance, is *methodological*. In other words, he's questioning the very applicability of this kind of reasoning in such matters. Regardless if the reasoning is valid, is it even *relevant* to apply deductive reasoning *alone* to offer new metaphysical evidence in the existence of something? For example, deductive reasoning alone cannot ever prove a scientific fact, like the existence of bacteria, for example. We need inductive reasoning as well as some other systematic methods of testing (experiment) plus a vast network of theories and subtheories and methods falling under the discipline of biology. This is essentially the same objection as Hume's, as we'll later see.

Dean's objection 1b) brings up the issue of *senses* of existence. This is an *ontological* issue. For example, a mathematician can argue that a solution to a particular problem "exists" and we know immediately that the existence of such a solution is not of the same sort as the physical existence of chairs and tables. So in other words, Anselm doesn't make distinctions here concerning what notion of existence is meant in the argument, then he's in danger of confusing (or equivocating<sup>2</sup>) different senses of this notion.

Marisa's objection overlaps with Dean's objection. However, she is also asking a question involving the *overlap* between epistemology and ontology. In other words, if something is conceivable does it follow that it exists? (And if it does, then, in reference to objection 1b), in *what way* does it exist?) Conversely, if something exists, is it conceivable? Anselm seems to think so, in both cases. But, I can *conceive* (not *imagine*) all sorts of contradictory things like 'square circles,' 'unmarried bachelors,' etc., and such things don't even exist *in the weakest logical sense* (i.e., in the sense that they're not even consistent within any standard logic.) But I can still have such thoughts.<sup>3</sup> It's harder to test in the other direction for counterexamples (i.e., if something exists, is it conceivable?) But it seems perhaps reasonable to think that if human reasoning is limited, then, in principle, it can be possible for such things to exist (I guess we'd call them mysteries, i.e., things that are apprehensible, but incomprehensible. Perhaps the subatomic world is like that, since the behavior of electrons sometimes seem to violate the very rules of basic logic.) Aside from these questions, there's the even more basic issue as to whether or not existence can be treated as a property, or predicate. (*Can* it? Immanuel Kant didn't think so, as we'll see later in class.)

But internal to Anselm's claims, he seems to contradict himself yet again, as Brittany and Josh had pointed out. For Anselm begins by appealing to deductive reasoning, in arguing that perfection implies existence. Then he concludes that God lies beyond all that. You can't have your cake and eat it too! Either you start off by postulating that the existence of God lies beyond deductive reasoning, (in which case no argument has been made, it's just a claim) *or* you stick to your methods of arguing and your conclusion. Anselm talks out of both sides of his

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<sup>2</sup> Recall the *fallacy of equivocation* mentioned in the posted handout on argument fallacies.

<sup>3</sup> There's the other issue concerning whether or not such thoughts possess any meaningful content.

mouth here, since he first seems to rely on the notion that anything existent is conceivable, and then he argues that God's perfection lies outside the bounds of what is conceivable.

Is this an argument or a sermon? It's an example of much Mediaeval theology, which relied heavily on logic and deductive reasoning, on the one hand, but on the other hand its aims weren't analysis per se, but synthesis. What many Mediaeval theologians were trying to synthesize, was some vast metaphysical picture, imbued with much that today looks like wishful thinking. Anselm is an example of someone who was straddling between reasoning and rationalizing.