

What Might Anselm Have Said to Aquinas?

A fictional response on the Ontological Argument

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My dear brother in Christ, your remarks on my argument are quite similar to Gaunilo's and so I have the same response. Either someone thinks of a Greatest Conceivable Being or one does not. If they do think of such a being, this being's existence cannot be denied without contradiction. If they do not think of such a being, then any conclusion they derive is of no consequence to the issue at hand. Since this latter is quite obvious, I will show the former to be indubitable as well.

One cannot consistently deny the existence of the Greatest Conceivable Being. This being cannot be thought not to exist under pain of contradiction. Now your response to this is twofold; first you make the distinction between what is self-evident in itself but not to us versus what is self evident in itself and to us, and from this you conclude that prior to some argument that we do not know the nature of God (God's nature is not known *to us*) and so we cannot say what he is.¹ Your second response is that even if it is granted that God is something than which nothing greater can be thought, still it does not follow from this that what the concept signifies exists actually.²

In response to your first objection, I reply that we can have a notion of something than which nothing greater can be thought. And if someone were to say that this is not God's nature, that is if they say that God's nature differs from this, then this person is clearly witless, for then they say that it is possible for something to be greater than God. It simply cannot be denied that God is equivalent to the greatest possible being, for that would entail that something could be greater than God. So from the outset it seems impossible to deny the equivalence between the nature of God and the Greatest Conceivable Being.

In response to your second objection, you say that even if one grants the identification of God and "that which nothing greater can be conceived", still it does not follow what this signifies exists in reality. But I reply, how could it possibly be thought otherwise? It is sufficient to prove any proposition by showing that the contradictory proposition is impossible. So I take the contradictory of "The Greatest Conceivable Being exists" as "The Greatest Conceivable Being does *not* exist". This last statement is self-contradictory, and so the former must be true. Put formally my argument is:

The Greatest Conceivable Being cannot be thought of as not-existing in reality
God is the Greatest Conceivable Being
Therefore, God cannot be thought of as not-existing in reality

Now please understand these premises are both necessarily true. To deny the major results in contradiction. If the Greatest Conceivable Being is thought to not-exist, then it is not the Greatest Conceivable Being. The second is necessarily true because of what was said before. If there be something greater than God, then God would not be God, and if one thinks of God as not-God, then again they utter a contradiction and so can say nothing to militate against my point. Now Bonaventure, a colleague of yours, has made this same argument by saying that *si Deus est Deus, Deus est*. This is undeniable.

¹ ST I.2.1

² *Ibid*, ad.2

Nor will it do to say this is only a rule of thought but not about real existence, for to deny that this conclusion is about real existence results in the same contradiction as before, since my major term explicitly involves thinking about real existence. Thus, it is clear that either the Greatest Conceivable Being exists or it does not. If it exists, my point is proved. If not, then a contradiction results, for then the Greatest Conceivable Being is not the Greatest Conceivable Being.

Therefore, it is undeniable that the Greatest Conceivable Being must exist.

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