
Anselm was born in 1033 in Aosta, a border town of the kingdom of Burgundy, France. In his adolescence, he decided that there was no better life than the monastic one. He sought to become a monk, but was refused by the abbot of the local monastery, so he went to Bec in Normandy, studying under Lanfranc. Anselm devoted himself to scholarship and enjoyed the monastic life. Unable to decide between becoming a monk at Bec or Cluny, becoming a hermit, or living off his inheritance and giving alms to the poor, he put the decision in the hands of Lanfranc and Maurilius, the Archbishop of Rouen, who decided Anselm should enter monastic life at Bec, which he did in 1060. In 1063, after Lanfranc left Bec for Caen, Anselm was chosen to be prior, instructing the monks and carrying on rigorous spiritual exercises, which played a great role in his philosophical and theological development. He became particularly well known, both in the monastic community and in the wider community, not only for the range and depth of his insight into human nature, the virtues and vices, and the practice of moral and religious life, but also for the intensity of his devotions and asceticism. In 1070, Anselm began to write, particularly prayers and meditations, which he sent to monastic friends and to noblewomen for use in their own private devotions, and left behind numerous letters. In 1077, he produced the *Monologion* (*Soliloquy*), and in 1078 the *Proslogion* (*Discourse*). Eventually, Anselm was elected abbot of the monastery. At some time while still at Bec, Anselm wrote *On Truth, On Freedom of Choice, On the Fall of the Devil*, and *On the Literate*. In 1092, Anselm traveled to England, and King William Rufus nominated Anselm to become bishop. Anselm attempted to argue his unfitness for the post, but eventually accepted. In addition to the typical cares of the office, his tenure as arch-bishop of Canterbury was marked by nearly uninterrupted conflict over numerous issues with King William Rufus, who attempted not only to appropriate church lands, offices, and incomes, but even to have Anselm deposed. Anselm had to go into exile and travel to Rome to plead the case of the English church to the Pope, who not only affirmed Anselm’s position, but refused Anselm’s own request to be relieved of his office. While archbishop in exile, however, Anselm did finish his *Cur Deus Homo*, also writing the treatises *On the Incarnation of the Word, On the Virgin Conception and on Original Sin, On the Proceeding of the Holy Spirit, and On the Harmony of the Foreknowledge, the Predestination, and the Grace of God with Free Choice*. Upon returning to England after William Rufus’s death, conflict eventually ensued between the archbishop and the new king, Henry I, requiring Anselm once again to travel to Rome. When judgment was made by Pope Paschal II in Anselm’s favor, the king forbade him to return to England, but eventually reconciliation took place. Anselm died in 1109. He was declared a doctor of the Roman Catholic Church in 1720, and is considered a saint by the Roman Catholic Church and the churches in the Anglican Communion. (From: [http://www.iep.utm.edu/a/anselm.htm](http://www.iep.utm.edu/a/anselm.htm))
contemporary or personal, examples whenever possible it helps students understand the material better.

**What is Anselm’s main thesis or point?** Anselm is trying to argue that God exists with an argument that is now known as the Ontological Argument. As Cottingham says, this is an *a priori* argument; that is, this argument is prior to sense experience; it does not require any premise that involves sense experience or observation of the world (it only involves reasoning abstractly). [The opposite type of argument is *a posteriori*, after or involving sense experience.]

**What is the argument?** In the first section, Anselm is warming up, but not saying much that is philosophical (except I do not seek to understand in order that I may believe, but I believe in order that I may understand; belief comes first, then understanding, for Anselm).

The second section (“God truly exists”) actually contains the proof for God’s existence. Here’s my rendition of Anselm’s argument there:

1. God = something than which nothing greater can be thought (that is, God is the greatest being anyone can conceive of; God is the greatest conceivable being). So:
2. The conception of God exists in your mind, and God may exist in reality (God is a possible being).
3. If God only exists in the mind, and may have existed in reality but does not currently exist, then God might have been greater than He is.
4. But, premise 1 (God = something than which nothing greater can be thought), so premise 3 cannot be true.
5. Therefore, God exists in reality as well as the mind.

Premise 1 is assumed to be true by definition. For premise 2, Anselm uses the example (EX) of a fool (i.e., and hereafter the atheist; see the next section’s analysis) who understands the phrase “something than which nothing greater can be thought” in his mind, but who does not understand that that being exists in reality. So because the atheist can understand what the concept of God is, even the atheist will grant that the concept God exists. (Anselm also uses a similar painter example.) Premise 3 points out that if God does not exist in reality, then God is not truly something that we can think nothing greater than, and the definition of God would have to be wrong. Premise 4 basically says, “But the definition is correct, so God cannot only exist in the mind.” Statement 5 is the conclusion, which validly follows from what has been said.

**Third section:** In the “God cannot be thought not to exist” section, Anselm is drawing out and emphasizing a point that his argument makes: That is, because of the definition of God and what that definition entails, it is logically inconsistent for someone to think that God is the greatest conceivable being AND that God does not exist in reality. (Also, everything other than God can be thought not to exist, but not God, since God is the greatest being.) So, only a fool can think that God does not exist (though the fool, according to Anselm, is inconsistent in his thought, and/or wrong). Anselm is alluding here and in the last section to the Biblical passage, “The fool hath said in his heart: there is no God” (*Psalms* 14:1). Note that Anselm commits a fallacy in this section – the Ad Hominem fallacy against the atheist. He should have referred to the “fool” Biblical passage once, and then used “atheist” to describe the atheist, and not said that an atheist is dull and foolish if he or she doesn’t believe in God. (Why? The atheist may not have seen or thought about Anselm’s argument, and he or she may have a great OBJ against it that Anselm cannot answer, and Anselm cannot know this in advance.)

**Fourth section:** In the next section about the fool (atheist), Anselm asks questions about what is going on in the atheist’s head. He wonders whether having something in one’s heart = one’s thinking something is true. The atheist can only say God does not exist in no sense or in a strange sense, but the problem is that the atheist simply does not understand God’s true nature. So with the proper understanding of God’s nature, one cannot think that God cannot exist.

**Fifth section:** In the last section, Anselm repeats a bit but expands on the “greater than everything else” quality of God: Not only is it better for God to exist, but it’s better if God is the supreme good, the source of every good that exists, just, truthful, blessed, etc. than if God is ugly, bad, unjust, untruthful, etc.
In short, don’t forget all of the OTHER great qualities of God (which follow from the definition of God). Also, note that Anselm says in this section that God created everything out of nothing. This is a principle that many philosophers (even Aquinas and Descartes, e.g.,) deny as being logically impossible, but Anselm might argue that God can do anything. [However, this is not really a philosophically satisfying response, because if God can do logically impossible things, then God can exist and not exist at the same time in the same respect, but this contradicts what Anselm says in the third section about God being a necessary being.]

[What is the issue?] The issue here is whether or not God exists, and what properties, characteristics, qualities or features God has.

[Why is this issue important?] If God exists, it may change the way the whole world acts, depending on the qualities of God, what God wants, if we can know what God wants, and so on! God’s existence is a fundamental metaphysical question that could become an assumption for other arguments concerning ethics, etc., depending upon its answer.

[Does Anselm make any assumptions?] Anselm assumes the definition of God (something than which nothing greater can be thought) and that he can rationally prove God’s existence. Please NOTE that EVERY argument assumes something or other. It is not necessarily a fault of an argument if it makes an assumption. There are two important points here: First, you should learn to recognize WHEN or THAT someone makes an assumption; and second, you should assess whether the assumption is warranted (i.e., well-supported). Anselm is not objecting to anyone per se, but his opponent is obviously the atheist, as well as those philosophers (Pascal, Kierkegaard, and James) who believe that the issue of God is a matter of faith and cannot objectively be proven.

3. CLARIFICATION: (5-15 minutes, depending on your and the other students questions) Is there anything about this material that you did not understand (after looking up unclear or unknown words, etc.)? What are you confused about? What did not make sense in the reading? What questions would you ask if you could talk to this philosopher right here and now? [NOTE: This is where I want everyone to be really honest and tell me if they were confused about ANYTHING! You will not have points taken off from your presentation for asking questions answering questions will only increase everyone’s understanding of the material.]

I didn’t really have any points of confusion, since I’ve presented this material before. But do YOU have any questions about something that may have been unclear?

4. PRAISE/CRITICISM/ANALYSIS: (2-5 minutes not a one sentence summary of what you thought) What do you think about the authors argument or point? Do you agree and why or why not? Do you have any objection(s) to the author’s argument? If so, how do you suppose the author would respond to it (or them)? Do you have a better idea, and if so, what is it? How does this author’s position or argument compare with other authors positions or arguments already presented?

Good things about the ARG: I must hand it to Anselm this is a very interesting and clever argument. It still has its proponents (as well as opponents today). It’s good that it does not rely on sense experience (or is a priori).

Possible objections:

OBJ1: (Strong OBJ): Kant (German philosopher who lived much later as we will see) (as Cottingham also mentions) questions whether existence is a property just like any other property (e.g., I am six feet tall), but is existence the same kind of property as tallness (e.g., to say of me that I exist)! Also, if I imagine a dollar, and I then have an actual dollar in my hand, is the actual dollar a better dollar because it is in my hand, or actually exists? Note that this is not the same thing as saying you can spend the dollar, so is being able to spend the dollar better, the question is, Is the dollar better for itself because it is in my hand, and not in my imagination?

OBJ2: (Strong OBJ): Again, Cottingham mentions that (and this is also Kant’s objection, but Cottingham does not tell you this) even if we grant to Anselm that whatever qualifies for greatest thinkable being must
exist, is it not still an open question whether there is anything which does qualify for this title in the first place?

**OBJ3**: (Strong OBJ): Anselm may not be proving that the version of God he believes in (“something”=a being) exists. Plotinus (and possibly Plato and Buddha) hold that the highest “being” is not a being at all, since being a being would limit it. On the contrary, the highest entity (or Source of All things or whatever we name it!) is beyond being and not being, and beyond all qualities or properties—truly unlimited and limitless. If you say I’m six feet tall, then I’m NOT 5’9”, one foot tall, etc. But if you say that I’m beyond height then height makes no sense to ask about in reference to me, right? So Anselm’s greatest being could still be a great being, but not the greatest possible entity, if Plotinus is correct.

**OBJ4**: (Weak OBJ): Cottingham mentions Gaunilo (a monk in Anselm’s monastery who believed in God), who basically asked, “Hey, if the perfect island is that than which no greater can be conceived, then does not the perfect island exist in reality and not just in my mind, since it’s better for the perfect island to exist in reality and not just in the mind?” **REP1**: Anselm replies that the logic of his argument ONLY applies to God, THE most perfect being and not everything else in the universe. **REP2**: Descartes replies: perfection is part of the essence of God’s nature, just as the interior angles of a triangle = 180 degrees is part of the essence of a triangle, and just as mountains and valleys cannot exist apart.

**OBJ5**: (Weak OBJ): What about the perfect Evil being? Wouldn’t that being have to exist as well, according to Anselm’s ARG? Even if the principle were not supposed to be true of anything other than God, wouldn’t the perfect Evil being have to exist – all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-evil? Can there be a tie for first here? Anselm would probably reply that we cannot suppose that evil is perfection, and this might work. What do you think?