

What Everybody Knows Is Wrong with the Ontological Argument But Never Quite Says

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People's sense that one cannot argue for God's existence in the way Anselm's Ontological Argument attempts to do so can be shored up with the help of Aquinas' well-known distinction between three different acts of reason. That distinction helps identify how the Ontological Argument commits the fallacy of equivocation. The same fallacy of equivocation can also be used against Anselm's argument by reducing it to the absurd.

While some people are convinced that God exists once they have been exposed to Anselm's Ontological Argument, many are not. The unconvinced sense that one cannot argue for God's existence in this way and thus that the argument's logic is flawed. Articulating the flaw is not easy, however. In fact, Anselm's Ontological Argument has provoked a collection of strange, convoluted, and unconvincing responses: Kant's assertion that existence is not a predicate; Aquinas' claims that (1) not everybody understands God to be that than which nothing greater can be thought, (2) Anselm's reasoning assumes, rather than establishes, the existence of that than which nothing greater can be thought, and (3) since God's existence is part of His essence and His essence is unknowable by creatures, His existence is not self-evident; Gaunilo's objection that that than which nothing greater can be thought cannot even be understood; and reductions to the absurd such as to a Perfect Island, to the Devil¹ (that than which nothing worse can be thought), and to God's own mini-me² (that than which only one greater can be thought). In contrast to these responses, Aquinas's distinction between three acts of human reason provides a clear and convincing way to flesh out the notion that *one simply cannot argue in this way* and to state what exactly is wrong with the Ontological Argument. What is wrong turns out to be an equivocation in the argument.

Where the equivocation lies can be seen more readily when the Ontological Argument is stated with precision. One such version of the argument, which at least seems plausible and logically rigorous, is:

- (1) *That than which nothing greater can be thought* is understood.
- (2) Whatever is understood exists in understanding.
- (3) So, *that than which nothing greater can be thought* exists in understanding.
- (4) It is one thing for something to exist in understanding and quite another for it to exist in reality.
- (5) It is greater for something to exist in understanding and in reality than in understanding alone.

¹ Haight, David and Marjorie Haight. "An Ontological Argument for the Devil," *The Monist* 54, no. 2 (1970): 218-220.

² Colgan, Quentin. "On Reasoning about That Than Which Only One Being Can Be Thought Greater," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 65 (1991): 99-105.

- (6) Suppose that *that than which nothing greater can be thought* exists only in understanding and not in reality.
- (7) If *that than which nothing greater can be thought* exists only in understanding, then something greater than it can be thought, namely, *that than which nothing greater can be thought* as existing in understanding and in reality.
- (8) But it is obviously absurd to think that something greater than *that than which nothing greater can be thought* can be thought.
- (9) Therefore, it is absurd to suppose that *that than which nothing greater can be thought* exists in understanding and not also in reality.
- (10) Therefore, *that than which nothing greater can be thought* exists in understanding and in reality.
- (11) *That than which nothing greater can be thought* is what is meant by *God*.
- (12) Therefore, God not only exists in understanding, but also He exists in reality. In short, God exists.

That this version of the Ontological Argument seems not only to be plausible and rigorous but also a faithful elaboration of *Proslogion*, chapter 2, is not obvious perhaps. Premise 1 is an impersonal generalization of Anselm's "but certainly that same fool, when he hears me say *that than which nothing greater can be thought*, understands what he hears" (sed certe ipse idem insipiens, cum audit hoc ipsum quod dico, *aliquid quo maius nihil cogitari potest*, intelligit quod audit). Surely, Anselm's and the fool's understanding of *that than which nothing greater can be thought* is generalizable to more than just them. Premise 2 is similarly the impersonal generalized statement of "and what the fool understands is in his understanding" (et quod intelligit in intellectu eius est), which Anselm himself generalizes later with "et quidquid intelligitur in intellectu est." Again, the conclusion in step 3 is the impersonal generalized form of "therefore even the fool is also convinced *that than which nothing greater can be thought* exists in understanding" (convincitur ergo etiam insipiens esse vel in intellectu aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari potest). Premise 4 captures Anselm's claim that "existing in understanding is different from understanding that something actually exists" (aliud enim est rem esse in intellectu, aliud intelligere rem esse) and his illustration of this difference in the example of the painter and painting. Premise 5, or something else like it, is the abstract value principle that Anselm implicitly appeals to but never states. Premise 6 isolates separately the subordinating clause "si enim vel in solo intellectu est." Step 7 captures Anselm's conclusion: "Si enim vel in solo intellectu est, potest cogitari esse et in re, quod maius est." Conclusion 8 is Anselm's "if therefore *that than which nothing greater can be thought* exists only in understanding, something greater than it can be thought but certainly this cannot be" (Si ergo id quo maius cogitari non potest est in solo intellectu, id ipsum quo maius cogitari non potest est quo maius cogitari potest. Sed certe hoc esse non potest). The conclusion in step 9 is another way of stating Anselm's "and certainly *that than which nothing greater can be thought* cannot exist only in understanding" (et certe id quo maius cogitari nequit, non potest esse in solo intellectu). The conclusion in step 10 is the last sentence of chapter 2: "Existit ergo procul

dubio, aliquid quo maius cogitari non valet, et in intellectu et in re.” Finally, steps 11 and 12 simply make clear that Anselm intends the previous reasoning to be a proof for the existence of God.³

The equivocation in this version of the Ontological Argument is among the cognitive verbs *understand* in steps 1 and 2, *suppose* in step 6, and *think* in steps 7 and 8. The result is that conclusions 9, 10, and 12 do not follow.

What exactly the equivocation is can be identified with the help of a distinction Aquinas makes in many places. One such place is in his first lecture of his commentary on Aristotle’s *Posterior Analytics*. There Aquinas distinguishes three acts of human reason. They are: (1) forming, grasping and examining concepts, (2) affirmation or denial, and (3) discursive reasoning. Aquinas describes the first act as one whereby the mind conceives what a thing is, and he says the first part of Aristotle’s *Organon*, the *Categories*, is devoted to this act. The second act involves composing or dividing, that is, affirming or denying, and in this act the mind achieves truth or falls into falsehood. Aristotle’s *On Interpretation* deals with this act. The third act is discursive reason proper wherein the mind advances from one thing to another, such as from the known to the unknown. This act is the topic of Aristotle’s *Prior Analytics*, *Posterior Analytics*, and remaining logical works. So, if the first act is grasping *P* in some fashion (with precision or without precision), the second act is asserting *P exists* or *P is Q* or denying something like *P is not R*. The third act is reasoning to *P exists*, *P is Q*, or *P is not R* by means of other considerations. In the context of the *Proslogion*, an example of the first act is entertaining the idea of a *supreme being* or *God*. The proposition *God exists* is an example of the second, and the Ontological Argument is an example of the third.

Since all three acts count as human thinking, their differences explain why the term *thinking* as well as other cognitive terms are often ambiguous. I can *think* about *P*, *think P is Q*, and *think P is not R* for reasons *L*, *M*, and *N*. Similarly, I can *understand* something about what cats are, *understand* that cats are not dogs, and *understand* the consequences of letting cats out of bags. So also, I can *grasp* the idea of existence, *grasp* that I do in fact exist, and *grasp* that I must exist because in thinking right now my existence is implied. Anselm’s Ontological Argument exploits the ambiguity in cognitive terms to achieve plausibility,⁴ but once the terms are distinguished carefully, the plausibility evaporates.

Specifically, in the above version of the Ontological Argument, the relevant cognitive terms in premises 1 and 2 seem to refer to the first act of the mind, to grasping what something is.⁵

³ The Latin text is from the M. J. Charlesworth edition of the *Proslogion* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), and the translations are my own.

⁴ In *Proslogion*, chapter 2, the ambiguous cognitive terms in Latin are *intelligere*, *cogitare*, and perhaps *intellectus*.

⁵ No doubt, premises 1 and 2 are assertions and thus second acts of the mind. But what is the *understanding* that they are asserting something about? It would seem to be the first act of the mind—conceiving. In contrast, if the *understanding* in premise 1 refers to the second act of the mind, then one wonders what is being asserted or denied of *that than which nothing greater can be thought*. If existence is being asserted or denied, then the Ontological Argument is over before it began. The argument begins and ends with premise 1: “*That than which nothing greater can be thought exists*” or “*That than which nothing greater can be thought does not exist*.”

If the *supposing* in premise 6 is interpreted to mean the first act of reason such that premise 6 is understood to mean “Suppose that *that than which nothing greater can be thought* is conceived as existing only in understanding and not in reality,” then premises 7 and 8 are ambiguously stated, and conclusions 9, 10, and 12 do not follow. So also, a different value principle is needed at step 5 so that something actually is entailed. If all the problematic premises are unambiguously stated, the appropriate value principle replaces the old one, and the proper conclusions are inferred, the new argument would read (with revisions in the numbers prime):

- (1) *That than which nothing greater can be thought* is understood.
- (2) Whatever is understood exists in understanding.
- (3) So, *that than which nothing greater can be thought* exists in understanding.
- (4) It is one thing for something to exist in understanding and quite another for it to exist in reality.
- (5') It is greater for something to be conceived as existing in understanding and in reality than in understanding alone.
- (6') Suppose that *that than which nothing greater can be thought* is conceived as existing only in understanding and not in reality.
- (7') If *that than which nothing greater can be thought* is conceived as existing only in understanding, then something greater than it can be conceived, namely, *that than which nothing greater can be thought* as existing in understanding and in reality.
- (8') But it is obviously absurd to think that something greater than *that than which nothing greater can be thought* can be conceived.
- (9') Therefore, it is absurd to suppose that *that than which nothing greater can be thought* is conceived as existing in understanding and not also in reality.
- (10') Therefore, *that than which nothing greater can be thought* must be conceived as existing in understanding and in reality.
- (11) *That than which nothing greater can be thought* is what is meant by *God*.
- (12') Therefore, God must be conceived as existing in understanding and in reality. In short, both existences are part of God's conception.

The final conclusion that “God must be conceived as existing in understanding and in reality” is true enough perhaps. But it is hardly what anybody would call a proof for the existence of God. Instead, it is a proof for an adequately formed concept of *God*.

In contrast, if the *supposing* in premise 6 is interpreted to mean the second act of the mind—affirming or negating something tentatively or hypothetically—such that the premise is understood as “Suppose *that than which nothing greater can be thought* is affirmed to exist only in understanding and denied to exist in reality,” then once again various steps in the Ontological Argument need reformulating for purposes of unambiguity, consistency, and logical rigor. But the reformulations do not produce a sound or cogent argument. Consider, for example, premise 7. It might be revised in one of two ways, but both are problematic.

First, premise 7 might be restated as “If *that than which nothing greater can be thought* is affirmed to exist only in understanding, then something greater than it can be conceived, namely, *that than which nothing greater can be thought* can be conceived as existing in understanding and in reality.” Thus, premise 7 refers to the second act of reason in its antecedent and to the first act in its consequent. Premise 7 so restated, however, is nonsensical. A concept can no more be greater than an assertion (or judgment or proposition) than a universal negative proposition (an E proposition) can be greater than a Barbara syllogism or than *modus ponens*, or than running can be greater than scratching, or than the number 14 can be greater than a cube, or than the hardness of diamond can be greater than the sourness of a lemon, or than a given temperature can be greater than a ferret. The comparison between more and less in this restatement of premise 7 is simply impossible. It contains an apples-and-oranges comparison or an incommensurability problem.

Things are no better if the antecedent and consequent are reversed such that the antecedent refers to the first act of reason and the consequent refers to the second act. Accordingly, if premise 7 is restated as “If *that than which nothing greater can be thought* is conceived as existing only in understanding, then something greater than it can be affirmed, namely, *that than which nothing greater can be thought* can be affirmed to exist in understanding and in reality.” The same nonsensical comparison reappears.

Second, premise 7 might be restated instead as “If *that than which nothing greater can be thought* is affirmed to exist only in understanding, then something greater than it can be affirmed, namely, *that than which nothing greater can be thought* can be affirmed to exist in understanding and in reality.” Thus, premise 7 refers to the second act of reason in both its antecedent and consequent. Premise 7 so restated, however, is simply false. Propositions are better or worse—greater or less—to the extent that they are true, probable, plausible, convincing, poetically delightful, useful for some other purpose, or embody some other value. They are not better or worse because of what they refer to. For example, propositions about broken pottery are not worse than propositions about unbroken pottery, even though the unbroken is more perfect than the broken. Again, propositions about angels are not better than propositions about dust bunnies, even though angels are higher in the chain of being. Still again, the law of contradiction, though about things that do not and cannot exist, is not inferior to some tautology that is necessarily true and about something that does exist. So also, propositions about extramental reality are not better than propositions merely about the contents of human minds.

In the end, the Ontological Argument fails as a proof for the existence of God when careful attention is paid to the cognitive terms that it employs. When the terms are disambiguated, either nothing philosophically interesting follows or nothing follows at all.

Perhaps an easier way to see how the Ontological Argument shuttles illegitimately between the first act of reason and the second emerges when one thinks about the following concept: the Greatest Ontological Argument Trump (or GOAT for short). The GOAT is not a reference to a United States president. Nor does the GOAT refer to the Ontological Argument’s ability to defeat some claim or other. Rather, the GOAT is a decisive refutation of Anselm’s own argument. Thus,

the GOAT equals *the greatest trump of the Ontological Argument*, where the *of* is an objective genitive (as in “love of money” and “trafficking of people”), not a possessive genitive (as in “son of mine” and “roads of New Hampshire”). Like other concepts, the concept of the GOAT involves several concepts when understood and articulated with precision. The GOAT also involves judgments because it is the concept of an argument and all arguments involve premises, which are judgments. Finally, it involves discursive reason because it is the concept of an argument, and every argument is an example of discursive reason. Despite its complexity and despite its entanglement with all three acts of reason, the GOAT is still a concept.

Furthermore, the GOAT by definition is composed of concepts so simple and clear that anybody with the intelligence of a six-year-old child can understand them. Likewise, all of the GOAT’s premises are self-evident propositions so obvious that anybody with the intelligence of a six-year-old child can recognize them to be true. The logical reasoning of the argument is also so brief, direct, and obvious that nobody who grasps the argument’s concepts and premises can fail to see the validity of the argument.

Still further, the GOAT by definition does two things. First, it defeats decisively Anselm’s Ontological Argument and all other possible versions of the Ontological Argument. In fact, it defeats all Ontological Arguments by showing that they are self-contradictory and thus logically and metaphysically impossible. Second, the GOAT is such a powerful argument that it both anticipates and refutes all possible objections to its concepts, premises, and logic.

So far, the GOAT has only been designated in an extrinsic fashion. Like Cartesian coordinates with regard to three dimensional space, the descriptors of the GOAT point to a location in logical space without specifying what is in that location. That nothing about the content of this Ontological-Argument-defeating argument has been specified, however, is not important. One can still ask: does the GOAT exist?

I have never come across it in any historical writings. I know of no contemporaries who have crafted such an argument. Nowhere have I sketched such an argument in the margins of my copies of the *Proslogion* or anywhere else. Moreover, I doubt very much that such an argument is even possible. Thus, I deny that the GOAT exists.

But suppose the following property also belongs to the GOAT: as soon as the Ontological Argument comes into existence, this objection does as well. The two are coterminous. Since the Ontological Argument certainly exists, then must not the GOAT also exist? No, the judgment is different from the concept. The content of the concept may demand that it exists because Anselm’s argument exists, but our judgment remains the same. No evidence can be found for the existence of an argument that instantiates or fulfills the concept of the GOAT.

Suppose a different property belongs to the GOAT. Suppose it has the property that all people (past, present, and future) must assert its existence or that all people (past, present, and future) must loudly and publicly proclaim its existence. Or suppose it has the property of being

known by everybody thanks to a cosmic light that shines on human minds pleasantly like a warm summer rain on bare skin. Or suppose it has the property of eternal existence, or of necessary existence, or of being enfolded in the fabric of God's own eternal, simple, and necessary existence and essence. Are we not now required to affirm that the GOAT exists? No, the judgment is different from the concept. No matter how intimately existence, human knowledge, or human acknowledgement is conceived as part of the concept of the GOAT, we need not judge that it in fact exists, nor need we assert or proclaim anything.

The lesson of the GOAT is clear. No matter what somebody packs into a given concept, that concept does not force, obligate, or entail any judgments of the sort Anselm sought in the Ontological Argument.

One might think that the fallacy of equivocation which is being levelled at the Ontological Argument can be neutralized by simply denying the distinctions that it relies on, that is, the distinctions among the three acts of the mind. After all, the distinctions may be unfamiliar, and they may seem like esoteric doctrine and thus controversial claims. In fact, people have collapsed the distinctions between conception (or apprehending or understanding), judgment, and reasoning. David Hume, for example, refers to these distinctions—which, according to him, are “universally received by all logicians” and a “vulgar division of the acts of the understanding”—as “a very remarkable error.” All three acts, he says, “resolve themselves to the first and are nothing but particular ways of conceiving objects.”⁶ But, Hume simply reintroduces the distinction he claims to deny. He claims all three acts reduce to conception, but then he concedes that there are different “ways” or modes of conceiving. Whether the three acts of reason are called *acts* or *ways* makes no difference so long as one agrees that these three are different:

- (1) Dinosaurs, that is, large prehistoric reptiles of various sorts
- (2) Dinosaurs do not exist any longer
- (3) Dinosaurs must have once existed because the bones of the dinosaurs to which they belonged have been found.

In the end, nothing is unusual, suspect, or problematic about the three acts of reason.

One might also think that the previous, twelve-step formulation of the Ontological Argument is not what Anselm said or meant, and thus both the GOAT and charge of equivocation miss the mark. No doubt, people can interpret and formalize the Ontological Argument in ways very different from the formulation above. Every natural language argument, after all, can be interpreted and formalized in an indefinite number of ways, though of course some will not be plausible, logically rigorous, charitable, or interesting. Thus, while not every version of the Ontological Argument has been defeated, a standard version has been. The equivocation problem is also what everybody knows is wrong with the Ontological Argument (or at least one way that it

⁶ See David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Selby-Brigge, 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), Book 1, Part 3, section 7, pp. 96-97.

can be interpreted) but never quite says. Why? Because everybody knows the difference between thinking about what a thing is and affirming or denying something about that thing and because people regularly sense that the Ontological Argument blurs that difference. This blurring explains the common objections that the Ontological Argument attempts to define things into existence, which is impossible, or that the Ontological Argument assumes the existence of what it sought to prove, or that nothing about the content of the concept of God requires anybody to admit that God in fact exists.