

## **Anselm vs. the Fool (with a Little Help from David Hume): Can the “Unsurpassable” Be Surpassed?**

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*Anselm begins Proslogion chapters 2 and 3 with the “Fool” saying, “There is no God.” This paper explores the possible content of the Fool’s claim. To falsify the claim that God is the unsurpassable reality, the Fool needs to explain reality sufficiently enough that God’s existence would be contradictory to the explanation. Hume’s Philo in Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion attempts to do this in his critique of Demea’s argument for God’s existence. However, if the Fool adopts this argument, the Fool would fail because, due to an inconsistency and vagueness in Philo’s argument, he cannot prove that God does not exist.*

My primary interest is to examine the plausible content of the Fool’s denial of God’s existence in Anselm’s *Proslogion*, chapters 2 and 3, and thereby help assess the success of Anselm’s proof. Even though Anselm does not spell out the Fool’s argument (giving only the Fool’s conclusion), I believe an investigation into its implicit logic clarifies more of the nuances of Anselm’s argument and, perhaps, reveals more of its logical persuasiveness. This has not been sufficiently addressed by commentators on Anselm’s argument.

In brief, for the Fool to succeed within the logical parameters of Anselm’s argument he or she needs to know and articulate something so unsurpassably real that God cannot exist because of it. The Fool asserts to know something that in his mind refutes the claim that God exists. To see how such a claim can possibly argue against Anselm’s description of God as “that than which nothing greater can be conceived,” I also explore whether someone taking the Fool’s position would be helped by using David Hume’s Philo and his critique of Demea in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*.

### **Section I**

From Anselm’s argument in *Proslogion* chapters 2 and 3 and from his response to Gaunilo, we can gather the possible content of the Fool’s argument that there is no God. The most distinguishing feature of *Proslogion* chapters 2 and 3 is Anselm’s explanation of the thought of God as “that than which nothing greater can be conceived.” Though it has roots in St. Augustine’s thinking, Anselm coins the description and finds it useful to refute the Fool’s challenge. From its meaning, he concludes that “Whoever really understands this understands clearly that this same being so exists that not even in thought can it not exist. Thus whoever understands that God exists in such a way cannot think of Him as not existing.”<sup>1</sup> Chapter 2 develops this conclusion by claiming that it is greater to exist in reality and the mind than only in the mind. Chapter 3 develops the conclusion by claiming that God exists necessarily. These

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<sup>1</sup> Anselm, *Proslogion*, 4, tr. M. J. Charlesworth, in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies and Gillian Rosemary Evans, translation by (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 89.

appear to be separate arguments, but each builds on the internal logic of the idea of God as “that than which nothing greater can be conceived.”<sup>2</sup> God’s unsurpassable and necessary existence is so well known to the mind that any denial of it is self-contradictory, and, consequently, the Fool’s position is conceptually incoherent and false ontologically.

Can we gather from Anselm’s response to the Fool what Anselm might have believed to be the content of the Fool’s atheistic argument? There are three possibilities. First, the Fool could mean that, since he cannot empirically demonstrate God’s existence, God does not exist. To such a challenge Anselm would have made an argument that such a demand for an empirical demonstration would be totally inappropriate to the nature of God as an eternal and infinite being. He could have illustrated the point by saying that we know that many mathematical objects exist and do not feel the necessity empirically to prove their existence. However, Anselm does not argue this way, and hence we can assume that he was not trying to rebut such an argument.

Second, the Fool could mean that the idea of God is incoherent because it contradicts itself. For instance, if by God we mean what is both eternal and infinite and also existing, we would have a contradiction, because it is meaningful to say only temporal and finite things exist. We cannot envision how anything else could exist. To such a challenge Anselm would need to explain how the notion of existence has subtle meanings and various uses, not exclusively tied to spatial and temporal realities. Though Anselm does stress that we can clearly understand the thought of God and that a necessary being does exist, he is not primarily emphasizing the possibility of the coherence of the idea of God. In fact, for Anselm, the emphasis is on the reality of a necessary being that is understood correctly as “that than which nothing greater can be conceived,” rather than on the logical possibility of conceiving of a necessary being. He recognizes that the idea of God exists in the mind and that even the Fool understands it clearly. Hence, we can assume that Anselm does not believe that the Fool’s atheism is based on such an argument.

Third, the Fool could mean that he knows something so clearly it makes God’s existence impossible. The Fool both understands the idea of God and denies God’s existence, and if the Fool understands God to be “that than which nothing greater can exist,” then he knows a reality that precludes the existence of such a being. That is, his idea of what is greater refutes the theistic claim. In that Anselm builds his argument on the necessary existence of God as the unsurpassable being, the import of the argument is to refute the claim that one can know

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<sup>2</sup> Norman Malcolm argues that the argument in *Proslogion*, chapter 2, is a different logical argument from the one in chapter 3, with the first one failing, because we cannot conceive of how existence would be a greater-than quality, and the second succeeding. “But once one has grasped Anselm’s proof of the necessary existence of a being a greater than which cannot be conceived, no questions remain as to whether it exists or not [because ‘necessarily existing’ and ‘existing’ would be identical].” Norman Malcolm, “A Contemporary Discussion,” in *The Existence of God*, ed. John Hick (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1964), 59. Karl Barth in 1931 had also recognized there were two arguments but he thought both collectively succeeded. Karl Barth, *Fides Quaerens Intellectum: Anselm’s Proof of the Existence of God in the Context of His Theological Scheme*, tr. Ian W. Robertson (Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1975).

anything greater in reality and thought than God. Such a claim seems to be the content of the Fool's atheism, and thus *Proslogion* 2 and 3 contain the clash of mutually exclusive claims.

We come to a similar conclusion in examining how Anselm replies to his fellow monk, Gaunilo. Gaunilo thinks that he rightly understands the Fool's position (in fact, the title is *Pro Insipiente*) and that Anselm does not refute it. The gist of Gaunilo's rebuttal is this: "For this is in my view like [arguing that] any things doubtfully real or even unreal are capable of existing if these things are mentioned by someone whose spoken words I might understand, and, even more, that [they exist] if, though deceived about them as often happens, I should believe them [to exist]—which argument I still do not believe."<sup>3</sup> He illustrates this point by thinking of a Lost Island that contains all the perfect characteristics of an island. Just because we understand such an excellent island does not mean we can postulate that it must exist. It is still logically possible to understand an excellent island and also think that it does not exist. Our ordinary use of the word existence allows us to do this, and, consequently, the same would apply to God.<sup>4</sup> We might understand God as what is greater than everything, but we can also think that God does not exist, as does the Fool. The understanding of God does not guarantee God's existence.

Anselm is surprised that Gaunilo so easily misunderstands and misrepresents his argument. "However, nowhere in all that I have said will you find such an argument. For 'that which is greater than everything' and 'that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought' are not equivalent for the purpose of proving the real existence of the thing spoken of."<sup>5</sup> God is not like the greatest conceivable island, which easily can be thought not to exist, even though we may understand its characteristics. Certainly, if it were to exist, then it would exist as the perfect island. However, God is not such a thought. God is not the greatest thought but that than which nothing greater can be thought, the former being fully describable, but the latter known as that which always exceeds in greatness what can be thought of it.

In fact, Gaunilo's argument on behalf of the Fool actually undermines theism. By saying that we can understand God's existence and still think that God does not exist, Gaunilo describes another thought than the thought of God. As a believer in God, Gaunilo must recognize the existence of the thought of God, and if he understands that thought, then he must say that God exists in reality as well as in the thought. However, to say that we can think that God might not exist based on our understanding of God as "that than which nothing greater can be conceived" is to misconceive the reality of the thought of God. If it is possible both to understand the name of God and to think that God might not exist, then it is the case that we do not have the thought of

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<sup>3</sup> *Pro Insipiente*, 2, *Major Works*, 106.

<sup>4</sup> Gillian Rosemary Evans makes the point that one of the main differences between Anselm and Gaunilo is their different understanding of what makes words meaningful. "[Gaunilo] speaks of *voces*, or ordinary words, rather than of the *naturalia verba* [i.e., direct apprehension] to which Anselm must have intended his view of the way we think about God in the *Proslogion* to be referred." Gillian Rosemary Evans, *Anselm and Talking About God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 73.

<sup>5</sup> *Pro Insipiente*, 5, *Major Works*, 116.

God. As Anselm says to Gaunilo, “I am astonished that you have said that you do not know this.”<sup>6</sup>

Anselm’s reply to Gaunilo tries to redirect him to what he is actually arguing. Gaunilo reduces Anselm’s argument to something to which Anselm would not object: just because we can understand something does not mean we can postulate its existence. This is obvious, and it is not Anselm’s point. Though Gaunilo believes he represents the Fool’s possible objection to Anselm, he also misrepresents the implied argument of the Fool, which is not as trivial as Gaunilo implies. The Fool’s argument is more profound: he denies God’s existence altogether, even if we understand the meaning of God’s name. This issue is not over linguistics but metaphysics.

In fact, we could say that Gaunilo mistakes the Fool’s argument as a “weak form of theism.” That is, because of the limitations of our ability to conceive an unsurpassable, necessary existing being or because we have not yet formulated a valid logical argument to convince us that God exists, it is reasonable to say there is no God. However, Anselm does not address such an atheism in *Proslogion* 2 and 3. He is critiquing, so to speak, a “strong form of atheism.”<sup>7</sup> The Fool rejects altogether the possibility of God’s existence. Regardless of any linguistic or logical shortcoming on our part, God does not exist. This is a strong ontological claim that rejects outright any possibility of being wrong on the matter.

It is to this “strong form of atheism” that Anselm gives his famous proof.

## Section II

The Fool’s claim and Anselm’s proof are mutually exclusive. In light of the way Anselm reasons, we can say that the Fool knows something so clearly that no matter what Anselm argues about God’s existence, God would still not exist.<sup>8</sup> This is not a tentative claim, mixed with some humility, which the fool might give up if faced with a better argument. It is a confident claim based on an indubitable knowledge. It is not that the Fool says that, since he himself does not

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<sup>6</sup> *Pro Insipiente*, 4, *Major Works*, 115.

<sup>7</sup> Though I do not know of anyone making this distinction in an evaluation of Anselm and Gaunilo between “weak atheism” and “strong atheism,” Brian Davies makes a similar distinction between Anselm’s language understood “constitutively” or “parasitically.” As to the former, “when we refer to or think of things, we commonly do so without distancing ourselves from what other people think or believe”; the latter happens when “we latch on to what has been said.” Brian Davies, in *The Cambridge Companion to Anselm* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 173. According to Davies, if we share the same constitutive use of religious language as Anselm, then his argument is impressive, but it would not be so if we saw his use of the language of existence, greater, and necessary being to be parasitical on their ordinary uses. Gaunilo believes Anselm uses language parasitically, and thus he believes that the Fool wins the argument because linguistically we cannot think of God in such ways. Gaunilo incorrectly understands the Fool’s objection, because the Fool’s position denies any constitutive meaning to God’s existence, and this would be a form of “strong atheism.”

<sup>8</sup> The Fool’s objection would pertain to the arguments in both chapters, because each is based upon the claim that God is “that than which nothing greater can be conceived”; thus, it is not necessary to determine whether or not the Fool would respond differently to the two arguments.

know God, he does not have to worry about disproving God, but rather the Fool maintains that what he knows makes it impossible that God exists, even if Anselm has the idea of God as “that than which nothing greater can be conceived.”

To make this argument, the Fool must have an idea of God. At this point, Anselm might believe that he has won the argument because, if the Fool thinks of God as “that than which nothing greater can be conceived,” then the Fool would contradict himself by saying that such a being does not exist, because if it is greater to exist in reality and the mind, the Fool would not be thinking of “that than which nothing greater can be conceived” when he says God does not exist in reality. There is a bit of logic to this point—the Fool cannot think of something if he also denies the definition of that about which he is thinking, but the point also begs the question. It assumes that the Fool and Anselm agree in the meaning of the claim “exists in reality.” Both Anselm and the Fool are making claims about something that does or does not exist. The Fool is not just saying that since he does not have an idea of God, God does not exist. The idea that God does not exist is more than just a thought without propositional intent. It has existential import and intends to rebut Anselm’s claim that God exist. Such a being is not found and is not possible in reality. The Fool is making a claim about reality with his idea, not just saying that he lacks Anselm’s idea of God, and so the issue between them is “whose idea is actually about reality?”

### Section III

To help make the phrase “exists in reality” clearer, I adopt several distinctions made by Lynne R. Bakker and Gareth B. Matthews in their article, “Anselm’s Argument Reconsidered.”<sup>9</sup> They argue that though Anselm’s argument may not be the *a priori* argument he contends he has established (that is, necessarily true premises yielding a necessarily true conclusion), it nonetheless succeeds. I will not examine the merits of their argument but will agree with some early points they make.

Bakker and Matthew do not think that the Fool’s claim is refuted just because he has the idea of God. The Fool has the cognitive ability to have the idea of God without having to say such a being exists. We make this distinction with many ideas, that is, we understand them but are not committed to their existential import.<sup>10</sup>

Bakker and Matthew then say that, if objects of thought are understandable, they have two kinds of properties—“a property-in-thought” and “a property-in-reality.” Although they do not define “property,” by their use of the term we can say it refers to the intrinsic attributes of a proposition, that is, to the reality of the thought and to the thinker’s intentionality. The thought of the object entails both the reality of the thought to the person and that the person with the thought intends the existence or nonexistence of the object. Whether an object actually exists in reality

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<sup>9</sup> Lynne R. Bakker and Gareth B. Matthews, *The Review of Metaphysics*, 64, no. 1 (September 2010): 31-54.

<sup>10</sup> Bakker and Matthews give examples of this point. We readily understand mythic and fictional figures without claiming they exist in reality and know their believers are wrong. Sociologists of Religion understand God as an object of thought to study social movements and do not contend that God must exist; see pages 35-37.

divorced from the thought of it or not, the thought of something has the properties of being “in-thought” and “in-reality.”

They maintain that we can assess the success of Anselm’s argument by sorting out his claim according to the kinds of properties involved in saying that God does and must exist. Be that as it may, my interest is in how they lay out Anselm’s explanation of God as a proposition with properties. For an assertion about the existence or non-existence of something to convey meaning about something that does or does not exist, the proposition must have the two properties of “in-thought” and “in-reality.” That is, we must be able to think it and, because of what we think, be able to assert something is the case about reality.

Of course not all thoughts about objects are correct about their “properties-in-reality” actually being in reality. We can understand an idea but be wrong about whether its “property-in-reality” actually exists in reality, and such a thought would be an incomplete thought because it does not do what it intends to do. But a complete thought does do what it intends to do, that is, it refers to an object that actually exists; and in this case the thought has an additional property—“had-in-reality.” An incomplete thought has two of the three properties, whereas the complete thought has the three, indicating that the thought refers to more than just the thinker; it refers to a reality existing outside of the thought.

To contradict Anselm’s claim that God exists, the Fool has to understand the properties of Anselm’s thought of God as “that than which nothing greater can be conceived,” that is, its “property-in-thought” and “property-in-reality,” but his point is that it is an incomplete thought, lacking a “had-in-reality” property. The Fool and Anselm refer to the same object of thought but differ on whether the thought of God has the property of “had-in-reality.” The Fool believes he knows something that falsifies Anselm’s idea of God, since he shows that Anselm’s idea of God cannot be about a reality that exists independent of the thought of God.

#### **Section IV**

What does the Fool know that falsifies the attribution of “property-in-reality” to the object of thought, which claims “that than which nothing greater can be conceived” is also “had-in-reality”?

For the Fool to refute Anselm’s idea of God, he has to say that he can give a sufficient explanation of the greatest existing thing without appealing to God as “that than which nothing greater can be conceived” and, in fact, according to the Fool, if we appeal to God to help give a sufficient explanation of such a reality, then we could not give a sufficient explanation of it. The Fool would have to maintain that his ability to give a sufficient explanation of what can exist as the greatest reality rejects outright any reality that can be greater than that reality, for instance, an

unsurpassable being called God.<sup>11</sup> In other words, the Fool believes that there is no reality that can surpass in greatness what he knows to be the unsurpassable reality, and thus he knows something so unsurpassable that its reality shows that Anselm's idea of God as the unsurpassable reality cannot be about anything in reality.

The Fool claims more than that he has the necessary explanation of reality of which God cannot be part. He is not merely saying that he can give an account of reality without God. He is saying that, because of his particular knowledge of reality, and hence how he can explain it, there cannot be a God. This is an important point for the Fool. What he knows does not just rule out the relevance of appealing to God to account for what he knows about the world; rather, because of what he knows, God cannot exist. The Fool has to contend that he can explain the greatest conceivable reality in a way that makes it impossible for the idea of God to be about something in reality, and thus his sufficient explanation is so complete that it makes incomplete Anselm's idea of God.

Insisting that the Fool has to be so thorough in his rejection of the possibility of God may seem to be stretching his point, but we need to keep in mind what it is the Fool says (within the context of Anselm's proof) does not exist—"that than which nothing greater can be conceived." He does not have to show the nonexistence of the greatest conceivable island, of unicorns, or of square circles. These things by definition do not pretend to be the unsurpassable being, but the idea of God is about an unsurpassable being, and for the Fool to mean that God does not exist, he has to make the far-ranging claim that he knows a reality that God cannot be greater than. Furthermore, since God by Anselm's definition has to be greater than what the Fool knows, and the Fool knows that nothing is greater than the reality to which his idea refers, the Fool knows that God does not exist. He cannot mean anything less.

If the above rightly lays out the conflict between Anselm and the Fool, then it settles whether what is often called the "alethic modality argument" is the correct way to interpret Anselm's proof. It reasons, "if God exists as a perfect being, then God must exist necessarily; and if something exists necessarily, it must exist."<sup>12</sup> This approach takes the bite out of Anselm's argument. We are not committed to the actual existence of God but to the hypothesis that, if God

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<sup>11</sup> The notion of a sufficient explanation is vague. It is often associated with the phrase "necessary explanation," which means that for us to explain X, we must know Y. We can know Y and not necessarily explain X, but if we explain X, we must know Y. Y might be necessary also to know Z, for instance, and it may be the case that other characteristics with Y are needed to know X. In this case, though Y is a necessary explanation for X, we could know Y and still not explain X. However, if Y is a sufficient explanation for X, then if we know Y, we can explain X without relying on other characteristics.

<sup>12</sup> Dale Jacquette, in "Conceivability, Intensionality, and the Logic of Anselm's Modal Argument for the Existence of God," *The International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 42, no. 3 (December 1997): 169, attributes the "alethic modality argument" to Charles Hartshorne. Though Hartshorne may in places analyze this way, his project in *Anselm's Discovery* is far bigger and more ambitious than what the "alethic modality argument" captures. In light of what he believes to be Anselm's discovery that there can be the connection between conceptual and real existence, Hartshorne reasons that we can conceive of God's necessary existence entailing contingent actualities as well; see Charles Hartshorne, *Anselm's Discovery: A Re-Examination of the Ontological Proof for God's Existence* (LaSalle, Ill: Open Court, 1965), especially Part One, chapters 1, 3, 5, and 6.

exists, then God exists necessarily. Frankly, the Fool could agree with the argument as long as it stayed a hypothesis, though he would find it irrelevant and probably uninteresting. His denial is an ontological claim, and the trajectory of Anselm's argument is to address it directly by stating the actuality of God's existence as "that than which nothing greater can be conceived." Thus, we are not left with trying to affirm the antecedent to the hypothesis in order to understand God's necessary existence; rather, we must set out to affirm the conjunction that God exists and exists necessarily as the unsurpassable being. In denying the first conjunct, the Fool thinks he has invalidated the whole conjunction.

## Section V

To make his case, the Fool could use David Hume's critique in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* of Demea's *a priori* argument for God's existence. Of course, Hume is 600 years after the Fool of *Proslogion*, but if we were to take on the Fool's position as laid out above, we would find Hume a kindred spirit. He claims in the *Dialogues* to give a sufficient explanation of experience that rules out God's existence .

In Parts VIII and IX, Hume, through the voice of Philo, tries to show not only the irrelevance of Demea's argument, but also the absurdity of thinking that there must be a necessary existing being. Demea contends that matter cannot acquire motion without a voluntary agent or first mover.<sup>13</sup> It is more convincing, according to Philo, to agree with the Epicurean hypothesis that, since we know only contingent, moving material things, matter has always been moving. "The beginning of motion in matter itself is as conceivable *a priori* as its communication from mind and intelligence."<sup>14</sup> Philo modifies Epicurus' claim to say that matter is infinite, so that we do not have to worry about an infinite regress. With it Philo believes he can sufficiently explain the world—there is an economy of "continual motion of matter" at work, in that "[e]very individual is perpetually changing, and every part of every individual; and yet the whole remains, in appearance, the same."<sup>15</sup> In fact, there would not be an orderly world if there were not such an economy, and there is an orderly world: thus, "some regular form immediately lays claim to this corrupted matter; and if it were not so, could the world subsist?"<sup>16</sup> Putting aside the claim's merits, we should note that Philo believes Epicurean naturalism is true because it is a sufficient explanation for the order and cause of contingent, moving things.

Philo is saying more than that he has a better explanation than Demea for the cause of motion. For Philo, the idea of God is vapid, because it is an archetypal, not ectypal, idea. As he says, "In all instances which we have ever seen, ideas are copied from real objects, and are ectypal, not archetypal, to express myself in learned terms. You reverse this order and give

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<sup>13</sup> According to J. C. A. Gaskin, Hume uses the voice of Demea to express Samuel Clarke's well-known argument for God's existence published in 1704 as *A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God*. See J. C. A. Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, Second Edition (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press International, 1988), 74.

<sup>14</sup> David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (New York: Hafner, 1948), 53.

<sup>15</sup> Hume, *Dialogues*, 53 and 54.

<sup>16</sup> Hume, *Dialogues*, 55.



thought the precedence. In all instances which we have ever seen, thought has no influence upon matter except where that matter is so conjoined with it as to have an equal reciprocal influence on it.”<sup>17</sup> The formation of the idea of God skews any possibly true knowledge. The bare bones of Demea’s argument, according to Philo, show this vapidly: first, what moves must have a cause; second, the causal link of movers cannot be infinite; third, an uncaused mover must cause motion in matter; and, thus, there must be a necessary being to cause motion. From contingent reality, Demea reasons to God’s necessary existence. For Philo, Demea’s argument is both irrelevant to explaining the world and vacuous of any connection to reality.

In his mind the modified Epicurean hypothesis is credible, because it is based on experience. Its bare-bones claim is this: first, we only know contingent things to be real things; second, ideas about things must come from experience; third, the idea of the modified Epicurean hypothesis is from experience; and, therefore, motion comes from matter itself (in Part IX, he will say this is also an *a priori* claim). From the empirical claim that matter moves, Philo concludes matter moves itself.

Furthermore, Philo contends that it is absurd to say that there is a demonstrable being whose non-existence is impossible. All we know and can possibly know are existing things that can be accounted for by the Epicurean hypothesis. “Whatever we conceive as existent, we can also conceive as non-existent. There is no being, therefore, whose non-existence implies a contradiction. Consequently there is no being whose existence is demonstrable. I propose this argument is entirely decisive, and am willing to rest the whole controversy upon it.”<sup>18</sup> This is entirely decisive because Philo has the sufficient explanation for what can exist in reality, and a demonstrable being as a necessary existing God would be impossible. This is a logical outcome of Hume’s fork, which divides what we can know between matters of facts and relations of idea, and his rejection of an *a priori* argument for a necessary being is built into his empiricism.

From Hume’s point of view, the “material universe” is to the Epicurean hypothesis what the necessary existent Being is to Demea’s hypothesis. For Demea, God is the first and ultimate cause of the world; for the Epicureans, the “material universe” is in truth that first and ultimate cause. Hume says, “Why may not the material universe be the necessarily existent Being, according to this pretended explication of necessity?”<sup>19</sup> If what we know as matters of fact are only empirical realities and the material world is the necessary existent Being, then there cannot be a God. If Philo is right, Demea must be wrong.

At the end of Part IX, Hume says, “Other people, even of good sense and best inclined to religion, feel always some deficiency in such arguments [i.e., Demea’s], though they are not perhaps able to explain distinctly where it lies—a certain proof, that men ever did and ever will, derive their religion from other sources than from this species of reasoning.”<sup>20</sup> The *a priori*

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<sup>17</sup> Hume, *Dialogues*, 56.

<sup>18</sup> Hume, *Dialogues*, 58.

<sup>19</sup> Hume, *Dialogues*, 59.

<sup>20</sup> Hume, *Dialogues*, 60.

argument fails because, based on the truth of his modified Epicurean hypothesis, there cannot be a God to which any idea could refer.<sup>21</sup> Hume not only does not leave Demea (and anyone else) with a good reason for believing in a God who could be the first and ultimate cause of the world; his trajectory denies the possibility of God's existence. An *a priori* argument for God's existence cannot be true because, lacking any empirical basis, its idea of God includes, to use an earlier term, a false "property-in-reality." According to Hume's contention, Philo's Epicurean hypothesis is a complete thought, and Demea's thought of God as a demonstrable being is incomplete.

Hume believes that he has undermined theism. In the next to last paragraph of Part IX, he says, "So dangerous is it to introduce this idea of necessity into the present question! And so naturally does it afford an inference directly opposite to the religious hypothesis!"<sup>22</sup> The Fool would naturally gravitate to Hume's Philo.

## Section VI

However, Philo's critique of Demea's *a priori* argument rests on a confusion. He makes the claim that we only know contingent realities—"what is may not be"—and due to this claim, he concludes that there cannot be a demonstrable argument for the existence of a necessary being. However, he claims that instead of relying upon God as the necessary being to account for motion in the world, "why may not the material universe be the necessarily existent Being."<sup>23</sup> Though Hume's empiricism rests on the assertion that "what is may not be," the logic of Philo's argument leads us to think that it is improbable that the "material universe" is not its own necessary cause for existence and motion.

Yet, here is the confusion—how can Philo be both an empiricist and maintain that the "material universe" is a necessary existent Being? If empiricism rules out any demonstrable being, the material world cannot also be such a being. Even if we grant Hume that empiricism can give a sufficient explanation of things that move, his empiricism makes his second claim that the "material universe" is its own necessary cause problematic.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> In a bit more restrained way, Gaskin makes the same point: "To this position [i.e., the *a priori* argument] nothing more can be added either by pure reason ('the argument *a priori*' is a failure) or, as we shall now see, by any exercise of the understanding ('our line is too short to fathom such immense abysses')" [Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, 93].

<sup>22</sup> Hume, *Dialogues*, 60.

<sup>23</sup> Hume, *Dialogues*, 59.

<sup>24</sup> Gaskin is reluctant to admit the serious undermining effect of this inconsistency in Hume's empiricism. He thinks that Hume's rejection of an *a priori* argument for a demonstrable being is built into his empiricism, but believes that the force of Hume's empiricism should offset challenges to Hume's critique of the *a priori* argument. "The sheer weight of authority and usage in favour of *something* like Hume's distinction between demonstrations and matters of fact sheds doubt on the suggestion that the distinction is arbitrary. If it is arbitrary the onus of showing it to be so must rest upon those who maintain such an unconventional position" (Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, 78). Frankly, Charles Hartshorne sees more clearly than Gaskin the serious undermining effect of this inconsistency. Moreover, the unqualified validity of empiricism cannot itself be an empirical truth. So Hume is simply appealing to his own *a priori*, against the religious *a priori*. It is his "say so" against that of theistically religious mankind. He

Maybe the confusion is due to an equivocation with the word “necessary” in his argument. The word “necessary” can refer, first of all, to a valid inference in a deductive argument—that is, the conclusion is necessarily true. This sense of “necessary” is strictly logical, and if Philo means that we cannot infer contingent reality from necessarily true premises, then it is platitudinous and misses Demea’s argument. Demea is not arguing that in light of necessarily true premises, we should conclude that God as a contingent reality exists.

Second, it could be that Philo uses the word “necessary” to refer to a being that does not depend upon another cause than its own self-cause to exist. Such a reality would be a necessary, existent Being. He criticizes Demea for using the word in this sense and thinks that, because Demea is wrong to appeal to a God to account for motion, he can appeal to the “material universe” itself to account for motion. His empiricism may successfully account for what can be experienced in the world, but to refute Demea it has to rely on the *a priori* claim that the world is self-caused and self-moving to account for motion in the world. To win, Philo has to do more than show the success of his empiricism. He has to show that what can be known, can be known only through empiricism, and, furthermore, that what empiricism knows, i.e., the world, is the reality than which a God cannot be greater. According to Hume, we cannot reason to a necessary existent Being from matters of fact, but this is what Philo has done to reject Demea’s argument.

Furthermore, the confusion gets deeper. The notion of the “material universe” is extremely vague, but for Philo’s argument to succeed, it cannot be vague because, since the cause of the world’s existence and motion, according to Philo, is the *a priori* necessary existent Being of the “material universe,” it must be demonstrably clear that its nonexistence is impossible to conceive.

The first impression of its vagueness occurs early in Part VIII. Philo believes he successfully refutes Demea’s idea of God as the cause of motion by saying that matter is the “finite number of particles”<sup>25</sup> that move eternally, producing and destroying the world endlessly. However, this is too glib of an equation of “material universe” with the “finite number of particles.” He speaks of the “material universe” as though it is a unity but explains how it can sufficiently account for motion by describing it as a “finite number of particles.”

It makes good sense to say that particles move other particles, but the notion of the “material universe” as the “finite number of particles” does not make sense. If by equating the “material universe” with the “finite number of particles” he believes we can say what is true of the latter (i.e., that they move endlessly) is also true of the former, the argument will not work, because he would be treating the “material universe” as though it were a particle. For the notion of the “material universe” to work in Hume’s argument, it cannot be an object separable from

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posits as an *a priori* truth that what is distinguishable is separable, but this cannot be empirical; “for no fact can show something to be absolutely impossible” (Hartshorne, *Anselm’s Discovery*, 206).

<sup>25</sup> Hume, *Dialogues*, 52.

other objects or a finite number of separable objects, because objects move other objects and are moved by objects, and if the “material universe” were a separable object, as would be a particle, then its cause of motion would be external to it. Something would have to move the “material universe.” However, for Hume, the “material universe” is the necessary self-caused and self-moving reality, and this would, thus, rule out it being a separable object or all “finite number of particles” of the universe.

Moreover, Philo cannot clear up the vagueness by saying that the “material universe” is the sum of all the finite particles. The notion of a sum of objects is an abstraction, not a reality, and it would be incoherent to claim that an abstraction is a necessary self-causing reality. But, for Philo, because the insight that motion begins in matter “is as conceivable *a priori* as its communication from mind and intelligence,”<sup>26</sup> we cannot be wrong in thinking that matter moves itself; otherwise, it would not be *a priori*. Yet, it is not clear at all how a sum of particles can be its own self-cause. While the notion of a sum of objects may enable us to group the objects, we are not entitled to postulate that the sum indicates a distinct reality from the collection; and for the sum to be a self-causing and self-moving being, it would have to have substantial existence greater than the collection of the particles. The sum of all particles is a mental construct, and if the notion of the “material universe” as such a sum is this construct, then we are no clearer than we were in the preceding paragraph on why Demea’s argument must be wrong.<sup>27</sup>

To try to be as charitable as we can with Philo, maybe he means that the “material universe” is matter itself. This may be what is implied in such phrases as “the whole remains,” “the necessarily existent Being,” and “the whole economy of the universe.”<sup>28</sup> These phrases indicate a single substance, which would be the same substance of every particle in the world and would exist necessarily. However, to say that matter in this sense is self-caused and self-moving is also vague and, hence, cannot clearly show that God does not exist.

For instance, since for Philo, the initial motion does not depend upon a separable object (like God) moving the “material universe,” motion must evolve from the materiality of all separable objects amenable to empirical explanation. However, the notion of matter as a substance distinct from individual particles but contained in all particles of the universe is as much an abstraction as we saw above with the notion that the “material universe” is the sum of all the particles. If matter exists *per se* as the “material universe” and it is not a separable object

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<sup>26</sup> Hume, *Dialogues*, 53.

<sup>27</sup> Dale Jacquette’s complicated claim that Anselm’s proof is deductively invalid because its intensional modality denotes a singular descriptor and modally these cannot be identified fits more accurately my criticism of Hume at this point. Hume wants an *a priori* necessary matter to be identified with empirical realities, and these are not modally identical. However, this critique would not pertain to Anselm if we thought of God’s singularity not as a part or even the sum of parts but as the whole of existence, or perhaps as the “ground of being,” which would be greater than the sum of the parts; see Jacquette, “Conceivability, Intensionality, and the Modality of Anselm’s Argument for the Existence of God,” 170.

<sup>28</sup> Hume, *Dialogues*, 54, 59, and 60.

from the particles of the universe, then we do not know it empirically, because it would lack sensibility and, thus, we could not quantify it. But matter as a self-causing and self-moving substance is obviously not sensible and quantifiable and thus is not a “matter of fact.”

Furthermore, matter *per se* would not fit what Hume elsewhere calls a “relation of ideas,” such as math and logic, though he wants to treat it with the same kind of certainty by describing it as an *a priori*, necessary, existent Being, and even claims that its non-existence is impossible. Math and logic are *a priori* claims as pure reason, but they are not substantive realities, whereas for matter to cause the universe to exist and to move, it has to be a substantive reality. Thus, when Philo claims the “material universe” is an *a priori*, existent Being, he cannot mean it to be a relation of ideas in the same way that math and logic are. Thus Philo must be intending matter to be a necessary reality of which we cannot think its nonexistence.

However, it is at this point that we have to stop Hume, because this claim is something he flatly says we cannot do when applied to God.<sup>29</sup> Hume is not playing fair. What he says about matter, he prohibits Demea, in principle, from saying about God—the impossibility of the non-existence of a necessary being. Matter for Philo plays the same role toward explaining the world of motion as God does for Demea’s *a priori* argument. Yet, by Hume’s logic we could say that Philo’s claim (i.e., matter is self-caused and self-moving) is as arbitrary as Demea’s claim that God is the first cause of motion because both rely upon the mistaken idea that the non-existence of a demonstrable being is impossible, an idea that Hume adamantly rejects. If he has to reject Demea’s argument because it rests on this mistaken idea, then to stay consistent Hume has to reject Philo’s argument, since it rests on the same mistaken idea.

For Philo to refute Demea with the notion of the “material universe” as its own *a priori*, demonstrable self-cause, he has to be inconsistent with his empirical claim of “what is may not be,” and his justification for rejecting Demea is based on his empirical claim that a demonstrable being is impossible. Hume cannot have it both ways: an empiricism that denies even the possibility of Demea relying on a necessary existent Being, and a necessary self-caused “material universe” to refute Demea’s argument that God caused it.

Moreover, if we reject Philo’s *a priori* argument, his argument against Demea severely weakens, because his contention that he can give a sufficient explanation of motion rests on it, and if it is wrong, the most Hume can say is that God is irrelevant to an empirical explanation of what can be explained empirically. But he wants to say more, and for that he relies on the *a priori* argument. The irony is that to defeat Demea, Philo has to create an internal contradiction,

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<sup>29</sup> D. C. Stove also sees this problem in Hume. He shows the contradictions among paragraphs 6, 7, and 10 in Part IX and concludes: “It is an inconsistency between the philosophy which Hume published in his lifetime, according to which ‘Whatever *is* may *not be*’, and the thesis, which is at least strongly suggested in Hume’s only mature work of philosophy, and which is even . . . of central importance in that work, that the material universe exists necessarily. Part IX of the *Dialogues* is inconsistent, then, simply because it is a place where divergent stages of Hume’s metaphysical opinions lie side by side.” D. C. Stove, “Part IX of Hume’s *Dialogues*,” *The Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 28, no. 113 (October 1978): 309.

and if he removes it, he cannot falsify Demea's notion of God as a demonstrable being, because he would not have shown that he knows something so clearly that due to its certainty, we can be certain that God does not exist.

## Section VII

If the Fool adopts Philo's argument to give content to his denial of Anselm's idea of God, he would fail. First, the "property-in-reality" of Philo's Epicurean naturalism is internally inconsistent. He claims that the "material universe" as the necessary self-causing and self-moving reality exists in reality. However, his empiricism contradicts the *a priori* demonstrable claim of what must necessarily exist, and his *a priori* claim that the "material universe" is the necessary self-causing and self-moving reality contradicts his empirical maxim "what is may not be." Frankly, because of this inconsistency, the "property-in-reality" of Philo's idea about reality and how it is known is incoherent.

Second, even if we grant the "material universe" as a necessary existent Being, it is unclear due to its own vagueness how it could also be the unsurpassable reality, which would make God's existence impossible. The Fool, like Philo, begs the question why we should treat the "material universe" as an unsurpassable reality just because it is a necessary notion to explain empirical particles. From Anselm's point of view, there still can be an unsurpassable reality to the world even if Hume's empiricism gives a sufficient explanation of temporal and spatial, moving objects. Why cannot there be two necessary beings? Even if empiricism can explain the cause of moving objects, it is still possible that Anselm's claim could be true.

Because the notion of the "material universe" as a demonstrable being is extremely nebulous, we cannot imagine how knowledge of it as an unsurpassable reality would be so clear to us that we would be driven to say that God's existence is impossible. To use the earlier terms, its "property-in-reality" is too incoherent to indicate a "had-in-reality" with existential import that could clearly falsify Anselm's idea of God as the unsurpassable reality.

The best the Fool can do using Hume's Philo is to show that theism may be irrelevant in explaining what empiricism can explain. But this was never Anselm's point, and consequently, the Fool's challenge to God's existence fails, that is, if we understand God's existence as "that than which nothing greater can be conceived."

Probably, there are other ways to think of the content of the Fool's denial of God's existence, but if he takes up Philo's criticism of Demea's *a priori* argument to be that content, then he will not successfully contradict Anselm's idea of God.