
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES TO ANSELM'S ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

Eugene Victoriano De Guzman¹

ABSTRACT

The Ontological argument for the existence of God is an age-old argument. But it still has power and is debated in contemporary times. This article will review the debate concerning maximality in relation to the Monk Guanilo's parody of Anselm's argument with his example of the "perfect island." Alvin Plantinga attempted to defend Anselm and the validity of the Ontological argument by showing that maximality does not apply to existing entities but to God alone. Brian Garrett defends the objection of Guanilo by defending the idea of the maximal in relation to an island. Finally, Edgar Danielyan, defended Plantinga against Garrett. The author shall stand on behalf of Anselm's defenders to reiterate the coherence and validity of the argument. The "something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be thought," or God, cannot be replaced or substituted by any worldly existing entities, for example, the perfect Island.

Keywords: maximal properties; ontological argument; proof for the existence of God

The arguments for the existence of a Divine Being is a perennial topic of philosophical theology. The topic has echoed from the Medieval Ages up to contemporary times. The last few years have seen a revival of interest in the subject.² Saint Anselm of Canterbury's ontological argument for the existence of God is one of the notable and prominent arguments among others. It has even been one of the central topics of some debates and dialectics particularly on the matter of its logical, metaphysical and epistemological structure and coherence. These concerns paved an avenue for some intellectuals to furnish their reservations and criticisms. So far, the most clangorous and central debates centers around Gaunilo's parody of Anselm's Ontological Argument. Namely, between Brian Garrett's defense of Gaunilo in his essay *On behalf of Gaunilo* and Anselm's enthusiast defender Alvin Plantinga.

This article will review the debate concerning maximality in relation to the Monk Gaunilo's parody of Anselm's argument with his example of the "perfect island." Alvin Plantinga attempted to defend Anselm and the validity of the Ontological argument by showing that maximality does not apply to existing entities but to God alone. Brian Garrett defends the objection of Gaunilo by defending the idea of the maximal in relation to an island. Finally, Edgar Danielyan, defended Plantinga against Garrett. The author shall stand on behalf of Anselm's defenders to reiterate the coherence and validity of the argument. The "something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be thought," or God, cannot be replaced or substituted by any worldly existing entities, for example, the perfect Island.

The ontological argument for God's existence is Anselm of Canterbury's most famous contribution to the history of Western philosophy. The argument begins with the claim is that God is something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be thought. He directs the argument to the "fool" mentioned in the Psalms, who in his heart, believes that there is no God above. Anselm points out that in order to deny God requires that you understand what you are denying. Thus, even the fool can 'understand' the definition of God. Therefore, God exists as an idea in the understanding.

The proof goes on to show that the very idea of God also implies God's existence. So even the fool must accept the existence of God. Anselm's argument may be formulated as follows:

- (a) I have, within my understanding, an idea of God.
- (b) This idea of God is the idea of a being that is the greatest that can be conceived or something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be thought.
- (c) A being is greater if it exists in reality than if it exists only in the understanding.
- (d) If God (the greatest conceivable being) exists in the understanding alone, then a greater being can be conceived, namely one that also exists in reality.
- (e) But premise (d) is a contradiction, for it says I can conceive of a greater being than the greatest conceivable being.
- (f) So, if I have an idea of the greatest conceivable being such a being must exist both in my understanding and in reality.
- (g) Therefore, God exists in reality.

Anselm provides another version of the argument in *Proslogium* chapter III. The argument repeats the first two premises as the preceding argument, but then takes a different direction. Instead of talking about existence as such, it focuses on the property of necessary existence. This version of the proof argues that necessary existence must be attributed to a being that is perfect to the maximal degree.³

- (a) I have an idea of God
- (b) This idea of God is the idea of a being, which is the greatest that can be conceived.
- (c) A being whose nonexistence is impossible is greater than a being whose existence is possible.

- (d) Thus, if the greatest possible being's nonexistence is rationally conceivable, then he is not the greatest possible being.
- (e) But the premise (d) is a contradiction.
- (f) So, the nonexistence of the greatest possible being cannot be rationally conceived.
- (g) Therefore, God necessarily exists.

Both versions of Anselm's argument attempt to deduce God's existence from his essence. Unlike the other traditional account on God's existence, which begin with empirical facts and proceed to the conclusion that God's existence alone can satisfactorily explain the empirical world, the ontological argument makes no appeal to the empirical world at all. Instead, it attempts to demonstrate that God's existence is necessary. By His essence, his existence logically follows.⁴ Anselm's main critic at the time was named Gaunilo who had parodied Anselm's argument with the legend of an Island that possesses an incomparable abundance.⁵ His point is that if God's maximal essence implies his existence, shouldn't the example of a maximal island imply its existence?

“You cannot any more doubt that this island that is more excellent than all other islands truly exists somewhere in reality than you can doubt that it is in your mind; and since it is more excellent to exist not only in the mind alone but also in reality, therefore it must needs be that it exists. For if it did not exist, any other island existing in reality would be more excellent than it, and so this island, already conceived by you to be more excellent than others, will not be more excellent.”⁶

Since such an argument is seemingly unsound, Anselm's argument must be unsound too? Anselm himself replies to Gaunilo by simply stating that it is only for God that existence follows essence. But in contemporary times, Alvin Plantinga points out that Gaunilo's parody fails because it is not analogous to Anselm's argument because of God's great-making

qualities, or omni-properties, are maximal. The maximal is a quality that cannot be possessed to a greater degree. On the other hand, the great-making qualities of an 'ideal island' are non-maximal, or they can always be possessed to a greater degree. Meanwhile, Brian Garrett in his essay titled *On behalf of Gaunilo* attempts to defend that the qualities of the Island can be considered maximal.⁷ He writes:

“But are the great-making qualities of an island non-maximal? It is good for an island to have coconuts, but not too many. A warm sea can always be hotter, but not consistently with still being warm. There is an upper limit to warmth (similarly for sunnyness). Whiteness also seems to be maximal. It is implausible that for every white shade there is a whiter one. Properly understood, the great-making qualities of an island are maximal. We can make this explicit by defining the perfect island as the island of ideal size, possessing the ideal number of coconuts, ideally white sand, ideal sea and air temperature, etc. Since these qualities are intrinsically maximal, Plantinga’s riposte to Gaunilo’s parody collapses.”⁸

As this debate continues, Edgar Danielyan in his essay entitled *On behalf of St. Anselm* tries to refute Garrett’s declaration that the ‘ideal qualities that describe that perfect island can be considered maximal. By asserting that:

“Gaunilo’s island by way of ‘ideal’ attributes does not save it from the peril of incoherence and thus Plantinga’s riposte stands. Garrett accepts that ‘Without the assumption that there is exactly one ideal size for an island [emphasis added], there would, for example, be no absolute ideal number of coconuts, just different numbers for different-sized islands.’ It is therefore enough to refute Garrett’s argument by showing that either there is not exactly one ideal size for an island or that the concept of ideal size of an island is incoherent, circular or empty. Garrett provides

no justification for assumption that there is exactly one ideal size for an island despite accepting that the whole argument hinges on such assumption. Ergo, there is not exactly one ideal size for an island. Ergo, there is not exactly one ideal size for an Island. Therefore, Plantinga’s assertion that the great-making of an island are non-maximal remains justified and that the ‘greatest conceivable island’ is an incoherent concept stands.”⁹

Having laid out the existing debate on Anselm’s ontological argument, I would like to defend Anselm’s ontological argument and affirm Edgar Danielyan’s reply through these points (i) Gaunilo’s Lost Ideal Island is not maximal in opposition to Brian Garrett’s claim. (ii) The “something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be thought”; God cannot be replaced or substituted by any worldly existing entity.

Reflecting on these points, any material or conceptual entities that exist aside from “something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought” [God] possess non-maximal qualities. Due to the reason that these qualities are relative and quantitative compared to the maximal qualities of God, which is objective and qualitative in nature as Plantinga. Another thing is that, non-maximal qualities are *a posteriori* to human understanding, and maximal qualities of God are *a priori* to human faculty of mind—he is the very definition of perfection [omni-properties]. The Maximal qualities of God necessitate His existence (Premises d-e). In order to be “something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought” entails actual existence and not only in the mind.¹⁰ Meanwhile, non-maximal qualities of material entities do not furnish necessary existence but mere contingent existence.

God is something than which nothing greater can be thought.

If this is so, He must exist both in mind and actual realm.

Therefore, God exists.

Whereas,

Let say X Island is an ideal island a man can think of.
To be an ideal Island does not necessary to exist in actual world, it can exist only in mind. Thus, X can either exist or not.

These formulations above summarized the author's point and reply to Garrett's defense of Gaunilo's objection to Anselm's ontological argument. This article also argues that defining Gaunilo's Island by way of "ideal" attributes given by Brian Garrett does not save it from incoherence and Plantinga's riposte stands.¹¹ The something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought cannot be parodically substituted to any human material entities due to gap between non-maximal and maximal qualities.

ENDNOTES

¹ Eugene Victoriano De Guzman is a MA student at De La Salle University and a lecturer at Mindoro State University, Philippines

² Johnson O. "God and St. Anselm." *The Journal of Religion* 45: 362-334, 1965.

³ Lawhead W. *The Voyage of Discovery: A Historical Introduction to Philosophy Fourth Edition*. United States of America: Stamford, Cengage Learning, 2015, p. 165-166.

⁴ Johnson "God and St. Anselm,".

⁵ Brian Garrett. "On behalf of Gaunilo." *Analysis* 73: 481-482, 2013.

⁶ Gaunilo, 1965, 163-65

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Garrett, 482

⁹ Edgar Danielyan, "On behalf of St. Anselm," *Analysis* 75: 405-407, 2015.

¹⁰ Charlesworth MJ. St. Anselm's Argument. In: *Sophia Studies in Cross-cultural Philosophy of Traditions and Cultures vol 30*. Switzerland, Springer, 2019, p. 105-114.

¹¹ Danielyan, "On behalf of St. Anselm,"

REFERENCES

- Charlesworth Max. J. St. “Anselm’s Argument.” In: *Sophia Studies in Cross-cultural Philosophy of Traditions and Cultures vol 30*. Switzerland, Springer, 2019, p. 105-114.
- Danielyan, Edgar. “On behalf of St. Anselm.” *Analysis* 75 p. 405-407, 2015.
- Garrett, Brian. “On behalf of Gaunilo.” *Analysis* 73 p. 48-482, 2013.
- _____. “Some comments on a modal ontological argument” *Prajñā Vihāra* 5:2 p. 1-5, 2004.
- Johnson, Oliver. “God and St. Anselm.” *The Journal of Religion* 45: 362-334, 1965.
- Lawhead, William. *The Voyage of Discovery: A Historical Introduction to Philosophy*. Fourth Edition. United States of America: Stamford, Cengage Learning, 2015, p. 165-166.