

St. ANSELM'S
ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT FOR GOD'S EXISTENCE

1. St. Anselm (1033-1109) in *Proslogion* argues that God by definition is “that than which none greater can be conceived.” This is quite a mouthful so we will shorten it by calling God the GCB (or, greatest conceivable being). Whenever Anselm uses his formulation, you will find it useful to substitute GCB.
2. Anselm argues that even the atheist (he calls him “the fool”) has the idea of a GCB in his understanding when he denies that the GCB exists. If this were not so, then the atheist would not be thinking about anything and so there would be no point in deny that “it” existed. There would be no such it.
3. If the GCB only existed in the understanding, then one could think of something greater than this, namely, a GCB that also existed in external reality. However, existing both in reality and in the understanding is greater than only existing in the understanding. Therefore, if the GCB only existed in the understanding, then one could conceive of something greater (that exists both in the understanding and in reality). This, though, is self-contradictory since by definition nothing can be greater in conceivability than the GCB. Therefore, God who is the GCB must exist both in the understanding and in reality. Hence, God exists.
4. Then, in Chapter III, Anselm proves not only that God exists, but also that it is inconceivable that God could not exist. As Anselm puts it, “This so truly is that it is impossible to think of it as not existing.”
5. The reason why it is inconceivable to imagine God = GCB as not existing is because if you do, then Anselm claims you are not really thinking of God, but of some other being. What are his reasons for believing this?
6. His main reason for believing that the non-existence of God is inconceivable results from his arguing that God must have necessary existence. The definition of *necessary existence* is “existing in all possible universes” (or what philosophers call possible worlds). It is not possible for a necessarily existing entity to fail to exist. On the other hand, any being where it is possible for that being to not exist has only *contingent existence*. Virtually all objects that we are acquainted with have only contingent existence since it is possible for these objects to not exist.
7. Since God, by definition, has necessary existence (if he had only contingent existence then you could conceive of a greater being, namely, a God with necessary existence and existing in *all* possible worlds is greater than existing in only *some* possible worlds) if you imagine God as not existing then you are attributing contingent existence to God, but then you are not conceiving of God. Hence, this seems to prove the title of Chapter III: That it is impossible to conceive that God is not.

8. But if it is impossible to even conceive of God as not existing and God has necessary existence then doesn't this succeed in proving that God must exist in the actual world and therefore that God exists period?
9. A contemporary of Anselm named Gaunilo argued that if Anselm's reasoning worked to prove that God exists, then it should also work to prove that any "Greatest Conceivable X" must exist. Gaunilo's example is that of a Greatest Conceivable Island (or the GCI). Gaunilo reasons as follows: If the GCI only existed in the understanding, then we could conceive of a greater one, namely, the GCI that exists in reality. Since existing in *both* reality and the understanding is greater, it cannot be that the GCI only exists in the understanding or there would be a contradiction. Hence, the GCI must exist. Nevertheless, no one thinks that the GCI does exist, so therefore there must be something wrong with Anselm's reasoning.
10. Anselm can reply to Gaunilo by arguing that the concept of a perfect island is self-contradictory. There can be no such thing as a perfect island. By virtue of being an island, an object must be finite. However, the concept of 'greatest' requires that we tend to go to infinity in the properties attributable to such an island. However, this is contradictory because nothing can be an infinite finite object. This is not a problem in the case of God since God is not a finite object so he can have infinite properties like omnipotence and omniscience without contradiction.
11. Ring argues that Anselm's ontological argument doesn't prove what Anselm claims it proves. Anselm claims it proves that God exists. All that the argument actually establishes is that God is the kind of being that must have *necessary* existence. What Anselm has not proven, according to Ring, is that *there exists* anything with necessary existence. Just like in the case of Fred, the necessarily existing toaster, Fred must have the property of necessary existence by definition but it doesn't follow from only this that Fred exists.