

A New Interpretation of the Argument in *Proslogium* 3*

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In this paper, I suggest a new interpretation of the argument given in *Proslogium* 3 which can be derived from the passage. My suggestion is that the argument in *Proslogium* 3 can be read as a sub-argument for the premise (3) of the ontological argument given in *Proslogium* 2. This premise says God can be conceived to exist in reality. But the fool might refuse to accept this premise by claiming that perhaps God is a logically impossible object, and thus it cannot be conceived to exist in reality. My new interpretation is that the argument in *Proslogium* 3 is to support premise (3) of the ontological argument by showing that God can be conceived to exist in reality, that it is not a logically impossible object. After suggesting a new interpretation of the argument, I defend it against two possible objections.

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In his famous proof for the existence of God in *Proslogium* 2, Anselm attempts to show that the atheist's position is inconsistent.

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The atheist, “the fool”, says that he understands the meaning of the word “God” which is defined as a being than which none greater can be conceived, but he denies that God exists. To this fool, Anselm gives the following ontological argument:

Argument I

- (1) Suppose that God exists in the understanding alone.
- (2) Given our definition, this means that a being than which no greater can be conceived exists in the understanding alone.
- (3) But this being (God) can be conceived to exist in reality.
- (4) But it is greater for a thing to exist in reality than for it to exist in the understanding alone.
- (5) Hence a being than which no greater can be conceived can be conceived to be greater than it is.
- (6) But this is absurd.
- (7) Therefore, (1) must be false. God must exist in reality as well as in the understanding.

There have been discussions about the argument given in *Proslogium* 2 and the relationship between the argument given in *Proslogium* 2 and the one in *Proslogium* 3. Traditionally, there have been two interpretations of the argument in *Proslogium* 3. One is that in *Proslogium* 3 Anselm does not give an independent argument for the existence of God, but discovers one of the attributes of God whose existence has been proved in the previous chapter, that the kind of existence which God has is necessary existence.²⁾

The other interpretation is that in *Proslogium* 3 Anselm presents

another, independent argument for the existence of God as follows:³⁾

Argument II

- (i) Suppose God can be conceived not to exist.
- (ii) We can conceive a being which cannot be conceived not to exist.
- (iii) A thing which cannot be conceived not to exist is greater than a thing which can be conceived not to exist.
- (iv) We can conceive a being which is greater than God.
- (v) But this means that a being than which none greater can be conceived is not a being than which none greater can be conceived.
- (vi) But this is absurd.
- (vii) Hence, (i) must be false. God cannot be conceived not to exist.
- (viii) Hence, it is not possible that God does not exist.
- (ix) Hence, necessarily, God exists.
- (x) Therefore, God exists.

In order to get (viii) from (vii), we have to assume the following principle:

- (C) If it is possible that P then it is conceivable that P.⁴⁾

This enables us to get (viii) from (vii), which ultimately implies (x).

2) For example, D. P. Henry, *The Logic of Saint Anselm* (Oxford:Clarendon Press), 1967, pp.143-149.

3) For example, Norman Malcolm, "Anselm's Ontological Arguments", *Philosophical Review*, 69 (1960), pp.41-62.

4) See G. Englebretsen, "Anselm's Second Argument", *Sophia*, 23 (1984), pp.34-37. Here, he talks about a stronger principle: "It is conceivable that P if and only if it is possible that P". See below.

Those who present this second interpretation, when faced with the objection that it's not plausible to think that Anselm himself intends to provide an independent argument for the existence of God in *Proslogium* 3, usually reply that they present it as an argument which can be derived from the passage, not as what Anselm intends to provide.

By the same token, I would like to suggest another possible interpretation of the argument given in *Proslogium* 3 which can be derived from the passage. That is, I do not suggest the following interpretation as what Anselm intends to provide.

My suggestion is that the argument in *Proslogium* 3 can be read as a sub-argument for the premise (3) of the ontological argument given in *Proslogium* 2. Premise (3) says God can be conceived to exist in reality. But the fool might refuse to accept this premise by objecting as follows. Consider the word "the largest number".⁵⁾ We certainly understand the meaning of the word "the largest number". If we didn't understand the meaning of this word, we would not understand the claim that there is no such thing as the largest number, nor would we be able to prove that it is impossible for it to exist.⁶⁾ However, it is not clear that we can conceive of the largest number as existing in reality. After all, the largest number is a logically impossible object, so it seems that the largest number cannot be conceived to exist in reality. Thus, from the fact that we understand the meaning of a certain word, it doesn't follow that we can conceive of its referent as existing in reality. So, the objection goes, even if we can accept premise (1), the move from (1) to (3) is illegitimate. The fool might claim that perhaps God is a logically impossible object, and thus it cannot be conceived

5) This example was given by Gideon Rosen. I thank him for a helpful discussion about this.

6) I thank an anonymous referee of *Philosophical Analysis* for pointing this out.

to exist in reality.⁷⁾

Now the ontological argument would not go through for this fool. It's possible to think, then, that the argument in *Proslogium* 3 is given to support premise (3) of the ontological argument, anticipating the fool's resistance to this premise. That is, the argument in *Proslogium* 3 is to show that God can be conceived to exist in reality, that it is not a logically impossible object.

The possible sub-argument for premise (3) that can be derived from the passage is as follows:

Argument III

- (i)* Suppose God can be conceived not to exist in reality.
- (ii)* We can conceive a being which cannot be conceived not to exist in reality.
- (iii)* A thing which cannot be conceived not to exist in reality is greater than a thing which can be conceived not to exist in reality.
- (iv)* We can conceive a being which is greater than God.
- (v)* But this means that a being than which none greater can be conceived is not a being than which none greater can be conceived.
- (vi)* But this is absurd.
- (vii)* Hence, (i)* must be false. God cannot be conceived not to exist in reality.
- (viii)* Therefore, God can be conceived to exist in reality.

7) I think there are indeed people who think that God is a logically impossible object. Recall the paradox of omnipotence.

The conclusion of this argument is precisely premise (3) of the ontological argument given in *Proslogium* 2.

One might wonder why the argument does not start with the negation of (3), which is “Suppose God cannot be conceived to exist in reality”, and then proves its falsity by *reductio*.⁸⁾ That is, one might wonder why the argument does not look as follows:

Argument IV

- (i)** Suppose God cannot be conceived to exist in reality.
- (ii)** We can conceive a being which cannot be conceived not to exist in reality.
- (iii)** A thing which cannot be conceived not to exist in reality is greater than a thing which cannot be conceived to exist in reality.
- (iv)** We can conceive a being which is greater than God.
- (v)** But this means that a being than which none greater can be conceived is not a being than which none greater can be conceived.
- (vi)** But this is absurd.
- (vii)** Hence, (i)** must be false.
- (viii)** Therefore, God can be conceived to exist in reality

Unfortunately, argument IV does not fit with the text. If we look at *Proslogium* 3, Anselm explicitly says the following:

- (a) God cannot be conceived not to exist.

8) This question was raised by an anonymous referee of *Philosophical Analysis*.

- (b) If that, than which nothing greater can be conceived, can be conceived not to exist, it is not that than which nothing greater can be conceived.

Now, while argument III does reflect these – (vii)* and (i)* respectively –, argument IV does not. Thus, argument IV cannot be a correct interpretation of the argument in Proslogium 3.

There might be another objection to argument III. One might object that the conclusion does not follow from (vii)*. In order to get (viii)* from (vii)*, we have to assume the following principle:

- (C)* If something cannot be conceived not to be P, then it must be the case that it can be conceived to be P.

But, the objection goes, it's not always the case that if something cannot be conceived not to be P, then it must be the case that it can be conceived to be P. For example, if I cannot conceive of a round square not being red, does that mean that it must be conceivable for a round square to be red? It seems that in this case, a round square can neither be conceived to be red nor be conceived to be not red; that is, it is simply beyond conceivability either way. Perhaps God is this kind of entity. Then, the conclusion does not follow.⁹⁾

I agree that it's not always the case that if something cannot be conceived not to be P, then it must be the case that it can be conceived to be P, because logically impossible objects (like a round square) seem beyond conceivability either way.

However, I think the principle in question – that if something cannot be conceived not to be P, then it must be the case that it can

9) I thank Alan Baker for pointing this out.

be conceived to be P – does hold when we replace P with “existence”. Or more precisely, argument III does not require this principle in order to go through. We cannot apply this principle to “existence”, because “exists” is not a predicate. From the fact that something cannot be conceived not to exist (in reality), it does follow that it can be conceived to exist (in reality). Also from the fact that something cannot be conceived to exist (in reality), it follows that it can be conceived not to exist (in reality).

To see this, consider a round square again. We have seen that it seems that a round square can neither be conceived to be red nor be conceived to be not red; that is, it is simply beyond conceivability either way. Why? It is because it is logically impossible for a round square to exist (in reality) in the first place. But is it the case that a round square can neither be conceived to exist nor be conceived not to exist? No. It cannot be conceived to exist (in reality), because it is a logically impossible object, and *therefore* it can be conceived not to exist (in reality)! On the other hand, if something is a necessary object, then it can be conceived to exist (in reality), because it cannot be conceived not to exist (in reality).

This can be explained by appealing to the following principle:

(C)** It is conceivable that P if and only if it is possible that P.¹⁰⁾

It is impossible that a round square exists (in reality). Thus, it is necessary that a round square does not exist (in reality). It follows that it is not possible that a round square is red and also it is not possible that a round square is not red (that is, of a different color), because in order to have some color, it has to exist in the first place

10) See n.3.

but it cannot. Hence, applying (C)**, a round square can neither be conceived to be red nor be conceived to be not red.

But let's consider "exists" which is not a predicate instead of "red" which is a predicate. It is impossible that a round square exists (in reality). Thus, it is necessary that a round square does not exist (in reality). It follows that it is not possible that a round square exists (in reality). But it also follows that it is possible that a round square does not exist.¹¹⁾ Hence, applying (C)**, a round square cannot be conceived to exist (in reality), but it can be conceived not to exist. It is not beyond conceivability either way. It can be conceived not to exist (in reality), precisely because it cannot be conceived to exist (in reality).

Now, premise (vii)* says that God cannot be conceived not to exist in reality. Applying (C)**, it is impossible that God does not exist. It follows that it is necessary that God exist. It follows that it is possible that God exist. Applying (C)**, God can be conceived to exist in reality, and we have the conclusion (viii)*.

Interpreted in this way, the argument in *Proslogium* 3 does support premise (3) of the ontological argument by showing that God can be conceived to exist in reality, that it is not a logically impossible object.

11) $\Box P$ implies $\Diamond P$.

References

- G. Englebretsen, "Anselm's Second Argument", *Sophia*, 23 (1984), pp. 34-37.
- D. P. Henry, *The Logic of Saint Anselm* (Oxford:Clarendon Press), 1967, pp.143-149.
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