

Anselm's Sleight-of-Hand

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I. Introduction

Many who read Anselm's ontological argument for the existence of God recognize its flawed nature intuitively. The argument endeavors to prove the existence of God through an analysis of a characterization of God as "something than which a greater cannot be thought."

It is clear to many that it is not possible to *deduce* the existence of something on the basis of a mere analysis of a verbal phrase. To prove the existence of something one must first *posit* the existence of something, and then show that the existence of the latter thing entails the existence of the former. But Anselm's argument does not posit the existence of anything. Thus, Anselm's argument would appear to be a non-starter from the get-go.

Nevertheless, the argument seems to follow logically from premise to conclusion. The challenge for any who would wish to grasp the nature of Anselm's argument, then, is to say how, while being fallacious, it nevertheless can give the appearance of a logically sound argument.

In the following, I will argue that Anselm's argument achieves its apparent cogency through what may be thought of as the verbal equivalent of a magician's "sleight-of-hand." Anselm switches the meaning of a key term in the middle of his argument in a way that is difficult to detect.

In technical terms, the argument commits the informal fallacy of equivocation; it uses the same word in two different senses. It is through this equivocation that Anselm is able to import into a mere analysis of the meaning of a phrase ("something than which a greater cannot be thought") a claim about the actual existence of that to which the phrase refers.

II. The Meaning of "Greater"

In particular, Anselm equivocates with respect to the meaning of the term "greater."

Specifically, he switches, in the middle of the argument, from using "greater" to mean "greater in conceived value" to using it to mean "greater in actual value." Since only things that actually exist have actual value, Anselm is now able to argue that the phrase "something than which a *greater* cannot be thought" must refer to something that actually exists.

This is the way Anselm is able to make an existential claim on the basis of a mere analysis of a phrase.

To see this, we must get clear about the difference between "conceived value" and "actual value."

Let us say that by “*conceived value*” we mean whatever value we conceive of something to have when we think of it. For instance, when we think of five dollars we conceive of it as having the value of five dollars. Thus, we would say, even an *imagined* five dollars has the *conceived value* of five dollars.

Let us say that a thing has *actual value*, however, only to the extent that it actually has some value in reality. For instance, although a merely imagined five dollars has a *conceived value* of five dollars, it has an *actual value* of nothing. You can’t spend an imagined five dollars, but only an actual five dollars.

Anselm’s argument works, or, rather, appears to work, by conflating these two senses of value in the single term “greater” and then shifting from one sense to the other.

Let’s look at how he does this.

III. Anselm’s Argument

Anselm begins his argument by saying that God is believed to be “something than which nothing greater can be thought.” He then raises the question of whether there is, indeed, such a “nature,” because, as he writes (quoting Psalm 14:1): “the Fool has said in his heart that God does not exist.” Nevertheless, says Anselm, “when the Fool hears the words ‘something than which nothing greater can be thought’ he understands what he hears. And what he understands is in his understanding.”

In this passage, Anselm is clearly using the term ‘greater’ in the sense of conceived value. Our conception of God is of a being of greatest conceived value. This is why we speak of God as holy, supreme, and highest; this is why the Bible tells us that we are to love God with “all our heart, soul, and might” (Dt. 6:5). Even the religious skeptic (“the Fool”), who has said in his heart that God does not exist, will concede that this is what is meant by God, says Anselm.

And so, of course, will we, Anselm’s readers.

“So even the Fool,” says Anselm, “is convinced that something than which nothing greater can be thought is at least in the understanding; for when he hears of this, he understands it, and whatever is understood is in the understanding.”

Anselm now discusses how it is possible for something to be “in the understanding” and yet not “in reality.” A painter, for instance, before he has produced his painting, has the idea of the painting in his understanding, though the painting is not yet in reality.

All this is quite clear and up to this point Anselm’s argument is unobjectionable.

But Anselm next goes on to write: “But surely that than which a greater cannot be thought cannot be only in the understanding. For if it were only in the understanding, it could be thought to exist also in reality, which is greater.”

We need to look at this passage very carefully, for it is in the phrase “which is greater” that Anselm’s “sleight-of-hand” takes place.

We have to ask: greater in what respect? Is Anselm saying, greater in respect to *conceived* value or greater in respect to *actual* value?

Up until now, Anselm has been using the term “greater” to mean “greater in conceived value.” But if the “greater” in the phrase “which is greater” refers to “greater in conceived value,” then Anselm’s statement is simply false.

The actual existence of something does not in any way affect its conceived value. An imagined five dollars has the very same conceived value as an actual five dollars. So it is simply not true that ‘that than which a greater cannot be thought’ would be greater were it to exist both in the understanding and in reality than were it to exist only in the understanding; that is, if “greater” is understood in the sense of “greater in *conceived* value.”

But this passage *is* true if the “greater” in the phrase “which is greater” is taken to mean “greater in *actual* value.” An *actual* five dollars has greater actual value than a merely imagined five dollars. Likewise, ‘that than which a greater cannot be thought’ would be greater (in actual value) if it were actually to exist than if it were not.

So it is here that Anselm makes his switch. This is where the “sleight-of-hand” takes place. The undiscerning reader will be inclined to affirm the truth of the sentence because it *is* true so long as actual, rather than conceived, value is being referred to, and will just fail to notice that Anselm has changed the meaning of the term “greater.”

And now Anselm will continue using “greater” in the sense of greater *actual* value until the end of the argument.

Anselm now writes: “Therefore, if that than which a greater cannot be thought were only in the understanding, then that than which a greater cannot be thought would be that than which a greater can be thought. But surely this is impossible.”

Again, this is only true to the extent that we are now understanding “greater” to mean “greater in actual value.” If we understand “greater” to mean “greater in conceived value” then the sentence is simply untrue, since there is no difference in conceived value between something merely in the understanding and something both in the understanding and in reality.

Anselm now concludes: “Hence, without a doubt, something than which a greater cannot be thought exists both in the understanding and in reality.”

Since Anselm began by designating God as “something than which a greater cannot be thought” he seems to have now proven that God exists. But in fact he has done nothing of the sort, because the phrase “something than which a greater cannot be thought” does not mean the same thing at the end of the argument as it meant at the beginning of the argument. At the beginning

of the argument, it refers to the greatest thing we can *conceive*. At the end of the argument, it refers to the greatest thing that *exists*.

These two, obviously, are not the same. The greatest thing we can *conceive* might have all the attributes we traditionally associate with God – omnipotence, omniscience, omnibenevolence, eternity, etc. – whereas the greatest thing that *exists* might fall well short of this.

But it might be asserted that Anselm has at least shown that anything that would qualify as “something than which a greater cannot be thought (in actual value)” must exist.

Yes, but this is an altogether trivial observation. Only things that actually exist can have actual value. So, if we understand the term “greater” in the above phrase to mean greater in *actual* value, then the phrase simply refers to whatever among existent things we take to be greatest. The religious skeptic, who denies that God *is* among existent things, will now simply deny that this phrase, understood in this way, refers to God at all.

IV. Conclusion

So, to summarize, the “trick” of the argument involves getting the Fool (or the religious skeptic) to concede that by God is meant “something than which a greater cannot be thought” on the grounds that by “greater” is meant “greater in conceived value,” and then, in the middle of the argument, switching the meaning of “greater” to “greater in actual value” and then asserting that (since whatever is greatest in actual value must actually exist) “something than which a greater cannot be thought” must actually exist.

Did Anselm construct the argument in this way intentionally to deceive? Was he being deliberately “tricky”? It’s possible, but more likely (and more charitably), we might imagine that Anselm’s religious enthusiasm obstructed him from recognizing the fallacious nature of his own reasoning.