THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT
AND QUESTION-BEGGING[1]

It is perhaps best to think of the Ontological Argument not as a single argument but as a family of arguments each member of which begins a concept of God and by appealing only to *a priori* principles endeavors to establish that God actually exists. Within this family of arguments the most important historically is the argument set forth by Anselm in the second chapter of his *Proslogium*.[2] In what follows I shall set forth Anselm's argument in step-by-step fashion and develop the thesis that at least this version of the Ontological Argument may be rejected on the grounds that it begs the question.

In presenting Anselm's argument I shall use the term 'God' in place of the longer phrase 'the being than which none greater is possible'—wherever the term 'God' appears we are to think of it as simply an abbreviation of the longer phrase.

1. God exists in the understanding.

On Anselm's view anyone who hears of the being than which none greater is possible is committed to premise (1).

2. God might have existed in reality (God is a possible being).

Anselm, I think, assumes the truth of (2) without making it explicit in his reasoning. By asserting (2) I do not mean to imply that God does not exist in reality. All that is meant is that unlike the round square God is a possible being.

3. If something exists only in the understanding and might have existed in reality then it might have been greater than it is.

This is the key idea in Anselm's Ontological Argument. It is intended as a general principle true of anything whatever.

Steps (1)-(3) constitute the basic premises of Anselm's Ontological Argument. From these three items it follows, so Anselm believes, that God exists in reality. But how does Anselm propose to convince us that if we accept (1)-(3) we are commited by the rules of logic to accept his conclusion that God exists in reality? Anselm's procedure is to offer what is called a *reductio ad absurdum* proof of his conclusion. Instead of showing directly that the existence of God follows from (1)-(3), Anselm invites us to *suppose* that God does not exist (that is, that the conclusion he wants to establish is false) and then shows how this supposition when conjoined with (1)-(3) leads to an absurd result, a result that couldn't possibly be true because it is contradictory. In short, with the help of (1)-(3), Anselm shows that the supposition that God does not exist reduces to an absurdity. Since the supposition that God does not exist leads to an absurdity that supposition must be rejected in favor of the conclusion that God does exist.

Let's follow the steps in his reasoning.

4. Suppose God exists only in the understanding.

This supposition is Anselm's way of expressing the belief that God does not exist.

5. God might have been greater than He is. (2, 4, and 3)

(5) follows from steps (2), (4), and (3). Since (3), if true, is true of anything whatever it will be true of God. (3), therefore, implies that if God exists only in the understanding and might have existed in reality then God might have been greater than He is. If so, then given (2) and (4), (5) must be true. For what (3) says when applied to God is that given (2) and (4) it follows that (5).

6. God is a being than which a greater is possible. (5)

Surely if God is such that He logically might have been greater, then He is such than which a greater is possible.

We're now in a position to appreciate Anselm's *reductio* argument. He has shown us that if we accept (1)-(4) we must accept (6). But (6) is unacceptable; it is the absurdity Anselm was after. For replacing 'God' in (6) with the longer phrase it abbreviates we see that (6) amounts to the absurd assertion:

7. The being than which none greater is possible is a being than
    which a greater is possible.

Now since (1)-(4) have led us to an obviously false conclusion,
if we accept Anselm's basic premises (1)-(3) as true, (4), the
supposition that God exists only in the understanding, must be
rejected as false. Thus we have shown that

8. It is false that God exists only in the understanding.

But since premise (1) tells us that God does exist in the under-
standing and (8) tells us that God does not exist only there, we
may infer that

9. God exists in reality as well as in the understanding. (1, 8)

The thesis that Anselm's argument begs the question can best be
developed by considering a possible response to an attempt to prove
God's existence by definition. Suppose someone says:

> I propose to define the term 'God' as *an existing, wholly perfect
> being*. Now since it can't be true that an existing, wholly
> perfect being does not exist, it can't be true that God, as I've
> defined Him, does not exist. Therefore, God must exist.

His argument appears to be a very simple Ontological Argument.
It begins with a particular idea or concept of God and ends by con-
cluding that God, so conceived, must exist. What can we say in res-
ponse? We might start by objecting to his definition, claiming (1)
that only predicates can be used to define a term, and (2) that exis-
tence is not a predicate. But suppose he is not impressed by this
response either because he thinks that no one has fully explained
what a predicate is or proved that existence isn't one, or because
he thinks that anyone can define a word in whatever way he pleases.
Can we allow him to define the word 'God' in any way he pleases
and still hope to convince him that it will not follow from that de-
finition that there actually exists something to which his concept of
God applies? I think we can. Let's first invite him, however, to con-
sider some concepts other than his peculiar concept of God.

We shall say that the term 'magician' may be applied both to Hou-
dini and Merlin, even though the former existed whereas the latter
did not. Noting that our friend has used 'existing' as part of his
definition of 'God', suppose we agree with him that we can de-

fine a word in any way we please, and, accordingly, introduce the
following words with the following definitions:

'a magican' is defined as *an existing magician.*
'a magico' is defined as *a non-existing magician.*

Here we have introduced two words and used 'existing' or 'non-
existing' in their definitions. Now something of interest follows
from the fact that 'existing' is part of our definition of 'a magican'.
For while it's true that Merlin was a *magician* it isn't true that
Merlin was a *magican*. And something of interest follows from our
including 'non-existing' in the definition of 'a magico.' For while
it's true that Houdini was a *magician* it isn't true that Houdini was a
magico. Houdini was a *magician* and a *magican,* but not a *magico;*
whereas, Merlin was a *magician* and a *magico,* but not a *magican.*

What we have just seen is that introducing 'existing' or 'non-
existing' into the definition of a concept has a very important im-
plication. If we introduce 'existing' into the definition of a concept
it follows that no non-existing thing can exemplify that concept.
And if we introduce 'non-existing' into the definition of a concept
it follows that no existing thing can exemplify that concept. No non-
existing thing can be a *magican,* and no existing thing can be a
magico.

But must some existing thing exemplify the concept 'magican'?
No! From the fact that 'existing' is included in the definition of
'magican' it does not follow that some existing thing is a *magican-*
-all that follows is that no non-existing thing is a *magican.* If there
were no magicians in existence there would be nothing to which
the term 'magican' would apply. This being so, it clearly does not
follow merely from our definition of 'magican' that some existing
thing is a magican. Only if magicians exist will it be true that some
existing thing is a *magican.*

We are now in a position to help our friend see that from the
mere fact that 'God' is defined as an existing, wholly perfect being
it will not follow that some existing being is God. Something of
interest does follow from his definition; namely, that no non-exis-
ting being can be God. But whether some existing thing is God
will depend entirely on whether some existing thing is a wholly
perfect being. If no wholly perfect being exists there will be nothing
to which his concept of God can apply. This being so, it clearly
does not follow merely from his definition of 'God' that some exis-

ting thing is God. Only if a wholly perfect being exists will it be true that God, as he conceives of Him, exists.

The implications of these considerations for Anselm's ingenious argument can now be traced. Anselm conceives of God as a being than which none greater is possible. He then claims that existence is a great-making quality; something that has it is greater than it would have been had it lacked existence. Clearly then, no non-existing thing can exemplify Anselm's concept of God. For if we suppose that some non-existing thing exemplifies Anselm's concept of God and also suppose that that non-existing thing might have existed in reality (is a possible thing) then we are supposing that that non-existing thing (1) might have been a greater thing, and (2) is, nevertheless, a thing than which a greater is not possible. Thus far Anselm's reasoning is, I believe, impeccable. But what follows from it? All that follows from it is that no non-existing thing can be God (as Anselm conceives of God). All that follows is that given Anselm's concept of God the proposition 'Some non-existing thing is God' cannot be true. But, as we saw earlier, this is also the case with the proposition 'Some non-existing thing is a *magican*'. What remains to be shown is that some existing thing exemplifies Anselm's concept of God. What really does follow from his reasoning is that the only thing that logically could exemplify his concept of God is something which actually exists. And this conclusion is not without interest. But from the mere fact that nothing but an existing thing could exemplify Anselm's concept of God it does not follow that some existing thing actually does exemplify his concept of God—no more than it follows from the mere fact that no non-existing thing can be a *magican* that some existing thing is a magican.[3]

There is, however, one major difficulty in this critique of Anselm's argument. This difficulty arises when we take into account Anselm's implicit claim that God is a possible thing. To see just what this difficulty is let's consider the idea of a possible thing. A possible thing is any thing that either exists or does not exist but logically might have existed. Possible things, then, will be all those things that, unlike the round square, are not impossible things. Suppose we concede to Anselm that God, as he conceives of Him, is a possible thing. Now, of course, the mere knowledge that something

[3] An argument along the lines just presented may be found in J. Shaffer's illuminating essay "Existence, Predication and the Ontological Argument," *Mind* 71 (1962), 307-325.

is a possible thing doesn't enable us to conclude that that thing is an existing thing. For many possible things, like the Fountain of Youth, do not exist. But if something is a possible thing then it is either an existing thing or a non-existing thing. The set of possible things can be exhaustively divided into those possible things which actually exist and those possible things which do not exist. Therefore, if Anselm's God is a possible thing it is either an existing thing or a non-existing thing. We have concluded, however, that no non-existing thing can be Anselm's God, therefore, it seems we must conclude with Anselm that some actually existing thing does exemplify his concept of God.

To see the solution to this major difficulty we need to return to an earlier example. Let's consider again the idea of a 'magican', an existing magician. It so happens that some magicians have existed—Houdini, The Great Blackstone, etc. But, of course, it might have been otherwise. Suppose, for the moment, that no magicians have ever existed. The concept 'magician' would still have application. For it would still be true that Merlin was a magician. But what about the concept of *a magican*? Would any possible object be picked out by that concept? No! For no non-existing thing could exemplify the concept 'magican'. And on the supposition that no magicians ever existed, no existing thing would exemplify the concept 'magican.'[4] We then would have a coherent concept 'magican' which would not be exemplified by any possible object at all. For if all the possible objects which are magicians are non-existing things none of them would be a *magican*, and, since no possible objects which exist are magicians, none of them would be a magican. Put in this way our result seems paradoxical. For we are inclined to think that only contradictory concepts like 'the round square' are not exemplified by any possible things. The truth is, however, that when 'existing' is included in or implied by a certain concept it may be the case that no possible object does in fact exemplify that concept. For no possible object that doesn't exist will exemplify a concept like 'magican' in which 'existing' is included; and if there are no existing things which exemplify the other features included in the concept—for example, 'being a magician' in the

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[4] I am indebted to Professor William Wainwright for bringing this point to my attention.

case of the concept 'magican'—then no possible object that exists will exemplify the concept. Put in its simplest terms, if we ask whether any possible thing is a *magican* the answer will depend entirely on whether any existing thing is a magician. If no existing things are magicians then no possible things are magicans. Some possible object is a magican just in case some actually existing thing is a magician.

Applying these considerations to Anselm's argument we can find the solution to our major difficulty. Given Anselm's concept of God and his principle that existence is a great-making quality it really does follow that the only thing that logically could exemplify his concept of God is something which actually exists. But, we argued, it doesn't follow from these considerations alone that God actually exists, that some existing thing exemplifies Anselm's concept of God. The difficulty we fell into, however, is that when we add the premise that God is a possible thing, that some possible object exemplifies his concept of God, it really does follow that God actually exists, that some actually existing thing exemplifies Anselm's concept of God. For if some possible object exemplifies his concept of God that object is either an existing thing or a non-existing thing. But since no non-existing thing could exemplify Anselm's concept of God, it follows that the possible object which exemplifies his concept of God must be a possible object that actually exists. Therefore, given (1) Anselm's concept of God, (2) his principle that existence is a great-making quality, and (3) the premise that God, as conceived by Anselm, is a possible thing, it really does follow that Anselm's God actually exists. But I think we now can see that in granting Anselm the premise that God is a possible thing we have granted far more than we intended to grant. All we thought we were granting is that Anselm's concept of God, unlike the concept of a round-square, is not contradictory or incoherent. But without realizing it we were in fact granting much more than this, as became apparent when we considered the idea of a *magican*. There is nothing contradictory in the idea of a magican, an existing magician. But in asserting that a magican is a possible thing we are, as we saw, directly implying that some existing thing is a magician. For if no existing thing is a magician the concept of a magican will apply to no possible object whatever. The same point holds with respect to Anselm's God. Since Anselm's concept of God logically cannot apply to some non-existing thing, the only possible objects to which it could apply are possible

objects which actually exist. Therefore, in granting that Anselm's God is a possible thing we are granting far more than that his idea of God isn't incoherent or contradictory. Suppose, for example, that every existing being has some defect which it might not have had. Without realizing it we were denying this when we granted that Anselm's God is a possible being. For if every existing being has a defect it might not have had then every existing being might have been greater. But if every existing being might have been greater then Anselm's concept of God will apply to no possible object whatever. Therefore, if we allow Anselm his concept of God and his principle that existence is a great-making quality, then in granting that God, as Anselm conceives of Him, is a possible being we will be granting much more than that his concept of God is not contradictory. We will be granting, for example, that some existing thing is as perfect as it can be. For the plain fact is that Anselm's God is a possible thing only if some *existing* thing is as perfect as it can be.

Our final critique of Anselm's argument is simply this. In granting that Anselm's God is a possible thing we are in fact granting that Anselm's God actually exists. But since the purpose of the argument is to prove to us that Anselm's God exists we cannot be asked to grant as a premise a statement which is virtually equivalent to the conclusion that is to be proved. Anselm's concept of God may be coherent and his principle that existence is a great-making quality may be true. But all that follows from this is that no non-existing thing can be Anselm's God. If we add to all of this the premise that God is a possible thing it will follow that God actually exists. But the additional premise claims more than that Anselm's concept of God isn't incoherent or contradictory. It amounts to the assertion that some existing being is supremely great. And since this is, in part, the point the argument endeavors to prove the argument begs the question, it assumes the point it is supposed to prove.

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