

Anselm's Argument Reconsidered

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Anselm's ontological argument in *Proslogion* 2 has been discussed and criticized so much that it is hard for us today to see its basic structure. The philosophical consensus seems to be that the argument is hopeless: it either begs the question against the atheist or it is invalid. The case against it appears to be closed.¹

No doubt one reason many philosophers consider the ontological argument hopeless is that they assume it to be an argument from the idea or concept of God to God's existence. On such a construal the argument would be this:

- (i) The idea (or concept) of God is the idea or concept of something than which nothing greater can be conceived (or perhaps the idea or concept of a Perfect Being).
- (ii) The idea (or concept) of something than which nothing greater can be conceived (or the idea or concept of a Perfect Being) includes the idea (or concept) of existence.

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For an extensive survey of ontological arguments, see Graham Oppy, *Ontological Arguments and Belief in God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). For a recent tour de force, see Peter Millican, "The One Fatal Flaw in Anselm's Argument," *Mind*, 113, 2004, pp. 437-476. Millican argues that either that than which nothing can be greater does not exist in anybody's understanding, or else God is assumed to exist.

Therefore,

(iii) God exists.

However, disappointingly, all that follows from (i) and (ii) is this altogether uninteresting conclusion:

(iii*) If anything, x, fits the idea of (or satisfies the concept of), something than which nothing greater can be conceived (or the idea or concept of a Perfect Being), then x exists.

In our view, this argument is a travesty of Anselm. But if Anselm's argument in *Proslogion* 2 is not like this nonstarter, what is it?

Although Anselm, in his *Proslogion*, speaks of God's nature ('*natura*'), he also speaks of God as an individual ('*id*'). And Anselm reports the Fool as saying, literally, "God is not" ("*non est deus*").² So, we have good reason to think of Anselm's argument

² Gareth B. Matthews, "The Ontological Argument" in *The Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of Religion*, William E. Mann, ed. (Malden MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), pp. 81-102. Matthews translated this and emphasized that Anselm referred to God as an individual, not a nature, essence or concept. Addressing God, Anselm writes: 'We believe you to be something than which nothing greater can be thought [or conceived].' (*credimus te esse aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari possit*) Here 'something than which nothing greater can be thought' might well seem to be an indefinite, rather than a definite, description. However, according to the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, '*aliquid*' can also be used to refer to a "definite, but unspecified, thing." That Anselm has this in mind is indeed suggested by his second and third formulations of presumably the same idea. Thus he writes, later in this same chapter: 'If then it than which a greater cannot be thought is in the understanding alone, it itself than which a greater cannot be thought is (it) than

as pertaining to the existence of an individual and not a concept, essence or nature.³

To appreciate Anselm's argument, we must take note of an important feature of it that has gone largely unnoticed. Coming to appreciate that feature should give us cause to reassess the argument. In our view, Anselm's ontological argument can be formulated properly only by beings who have a certain cognitive ability. The cognitive ability on which the ontological argument depends is the ability to think of and refer to things quite independently of whether they exist in reality or not.

In this paper, we shall explore this cognitive ability and try to make clear the role it plays in the ontological argument. Then, we shall offer a new version of the ontological argument, which, we shall argue, is sound: it is valid, has true premises, and does not beg the question against the atheist. However, the new reconstruction of the argument falls short of Anselm's goal of producing "a single argument that would require no other for its proof than itself alone; and alone would suffice to demonstrate that God

which a greater can be thought. But certainly this cannot be.' (*Si ergo id quo maius cogitari non potest, est in solo intellectu: id ipsum quo maius cogitari non potest, est quo maius cogitari potest. Sed certe hoc esse non potest.*) By writing 'it than which a greater cannot be thought' and then 'it itself than which a greater cannot be thought' Anselm makes clear that his original 'something than which nothing greater can be thought' should be taken as a definite description of God.

³ Thus, Peter Millican is mistaken in holding that Anselm's argument concerns natures, which are "kinds, not individuals." (Millican 2004, pp. 446-49) He is also mistaken in taking greatness to be a "quality primarily of natures not individuals." (Millican 2004, p. 451)

truly exists.”⁴ The new reconstruction requires a subsidiary argument to show that God exists in the understanding. The subsidiary argument relies on premises that are both contingent and known a posteriori. However, the somewhat amplified argument, if it is sound, as we believe it to be, does show that God exists in reality.

Disagreement About Whether an Individual Exists. Ever since Parmenides, philosophers have been puzzled about nonexistence. How can it be that Santa Claus doesn't exist? What are we talking about when we talk about Santa Claus or the fountain of youth? In much of the 20th century, the predominant strategies for handling such questions were Russell's and Quine's. Russell treated proper names as descriptions, and then eliminated the descriptions in favor of quantified sentences. Quine proposed that instead of talking about things, we talk about words. For example, we may paraphrase 'There are wombats in Tasmania' by '“Wombat” is true of some creatures in Tasmania.'⁵

These strategies avoid the problem by changing the subject. Russellian elimination of reference does not do justice to what people think they are arguing or wondering about when they argue about or wonder whether God, say, exists. People seriously arguing about the existence of things they care about are not just talking about words. Semantic ascent and Russell's theory of descriptions are just ways to avoid taking seriously disagreement, uncertainty, or merely wondering about the existence of particular individuals.

We need a way to understand what is going on when people argue about the existence of individuals, or even wonder about their existence. Recent work in

⁴ Anselm's Preface to the *Proslogion* in *Readings in Medieval Philosophy*, Andrew B. Schoedinger, ed. (New York: Oxford, 1966), p. 36.

⁵ W.V.O. Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1960), p. 272.

metaphysics that allows descriptions to be genuine terms assures us that there is no incoherence in referring to nonexistent things.⁶ Although we do not take up the metaphysics of this recent and important work, we do assume that definite descriptions are genuine terms in no need of elimination. On that assumption, we take the phrase ‘that than which nothing greater can be conceived’ unambiguously to be another way of saying this: ‘the x such that, among the things that are either in reality or in the imagination, there is nothing conceivable, y, such that y is greater than x.’

If the ontological argument concerns whether or not an individual, God, exists in reality, then, if we are not to beg the question, we must be able to refer to God, independently of whether he exists in reality or not. This peculiar ability must be exercised in order to *formulate* the argument without begging the question of God’s existence in reality.

On Existence in Thought. In *Proslogion 2*, Anselm insists that God exists in the understanding—and more particularly, in the atheist’s understanding.⁷ To avoid begging the question against the atheist, Anselm must be able to suppose that God exists in the atheist’s understanding and be able to do that without thereby assuming that God exists in reality. Our discussion of existence in thought will show how Anselm is justified in

⁶ E.g., see Terence Parsons, *Nonexistent Objects* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980).

⁷ We are concerned only with *Proslogion 2*, which is not an argument for God’s necessary existence, only for his actual existence. The claim that if God possibly exists, then he necessarily exists is irrelevant to *Proslogion 2*. It could be argued that this claim is also irrelevant to *Proslogion 3*. See Gareth B. Matthews, “On Conceivability in Anselm and Malcolm,” *The Philosophical Review* 70 (1961), pp. 110-111.

claiming that God exists in the atheist's understanding. We shall use the term 'object of thought' to designate individual people, places and things that we talk about, think about and refer to, even when we wonder whether they exist or not.

It is an empirical fact that we human beings have the ability to think of, speak of, and refer to things whether they exist in reality or not, and even whether the thinker or speaker believes that they exist or not. Think, for example, of the Loch Ness Monster, or Johnny Appleseed, or Lady Macbeth. Positing things that are talked about and referred to, whether they exist or not does important philosophical work: It allows disputants to join the issue about whether something exists without begging any questions.

Suppose that A, an eliminativist about ordinary inanimate objects like chairs, says, "Ontologically speaking, chairs do not exist." And suppose that B retorts, "You are wrong; ontologically speaking, chairs do exist." How are we to understand this disagreement? It is not a semantic disagreement about how to use the word 'chair.' The disputants will agree about that. In fact, in order to disagree about whether chairs exist, A and B must be talking about the same things; otherwise, they are just talking past one another.⁸ Recognizing things that are talked about whether they exist or not provides a way to understand how it can be that B simply and directly denies A's claim. So, the first reason to posit things talked about whether they exist or not is to provide a framework for

⁸ It is not to the point to charge that, since we can resort to semantic ascent we do not need objects of thought to make sense of disagreement about what exists. Our claims are only these: (a) We have and routinely exercise an ability to refer to things that do not exist in reality and we call such things 'objects of thought'. (b) Appeal to objects of thought provides a straightforward way to construe arguments about what exists. (c) We cannot do justice to Anselm's argument in terms of semantic ascent.

ontological disputes generally—quite apart from questions about the existence of God.

A second reason to posit such objects of thought is to understand the phenomenon of referring to something, or someone, about whose existence one is in doubt. Consider Sarah, who is obsessed with the idea that she is being harrassed in her new apartment by a peeping-tom. A recognizable face keeps appearing at her windows late at night. She decides to document those appearances, first, by giving the man she thinks she sees a name, ‘Abner’, and second, by noting down the exact day and time at which the face of Abner appears. She eventually calls the police and tells them about her experiences. They are skeptical, but they agree to arrange a line-up of the boys in the fraternity house across the street from Sarah’s apartment. In fact, Sarah “identifies” Abner in the police line-up. Relevant to Sarah’s charge is evidence that the student she identified was in the library, or in a night class, or somewhere else at each of the times Sarah had recorded an appearance. Although there is some uncertainty in everyone’s mind, one police officer becomes convinced that the frat boy Sarah has picked out is Abner. Another remains skeptical. The skeptical officer thinks that Abner is just Sarah’s paranoid delusion. But they all succeed in referring to Abner (some by saying, derisively, “this Abner”)—whether Abner exists or not, and even whether they think Abner exists or not.⁹

A third reason to posit objects of thought is to understand social scientists who speak of God and other things believed in by groups of people without commitment to the existence of such things. For example, sociologists of religion speak of God

⁹ There are countless examples of referring to things whether they exist in reality or not. The psychiatrist hears accounts of someone who is following his patient, and asks questions about the person spoken of by the patient. The mother talks to her child about the child’s adventures with her imaginary playmates.

independently of whether he exists or not and independently of whether they believe in God or not. Since it is irrelevant to their sociological claims whether God exists or not, their talk of God can be straightforwardly understood as talk of something that may or may not exist.

The term ‘object of thought’ applies to any particular that is thought about or mentioned in conversation—you, Plato, Obama (who exist in reality) as well as Pegasus, Jeeves, and the tooth fairy (who do not exist in reality).¹⁰ Some objects of thought physically cannot exist in reality (e.g., the first perpetual motion machine), and some logically cannot exist in reality (e.g., the first impossible staircase that Escher drew). An object of thought, however, is *not a representation* of an object thought about or referred to, let alone a concept of such an object; rather, it is the very person or thing thought about or referred to, whether it exists in reality or not.

Some Features of Objects of Thought. Several features of objects of thought are important for the ontological argument. First, as we have already emphasized, we can refer to a thing whether it exists in reality or not. If Abner, the peeping-tom, really existed, then the object of Sarah’s thought was Abner, that very person, that actually existing individual.¹¹ If the peeping-tom was merely imagined or was a paranoid

¹⁰ ‘Objects of thought’ also applies to mythical beings, fictional characters, imaginary people, hallucinated people, and things thought to exist on the basis of false belief or false testimony.

¹¹ If we pick out an object of thought by ‘the peeping-tom’, and name him ‘Abner’, then what is picked out has the property of being a peeping-tom (and of whatever is entailed by the property of being a peeping-tom). If Abner the peeping-tom does not exist in reality, then it (the object of thought) has only the property of being a

delusion, then the object of thought is just a product of her thinking. We can say of such a thing that it exists in thought alone.¹²

Second, two people can refer to the *same* thing, whether it exists in reality or not. In order to disagree about whether a particular person or thing really exists, the disputants have to agree on a definite description to pick out the object of thought whose existence in reality is in dispute.¹³ For example, Sarah and the policemen can all refer to the same person whether he exists or not by ‘the peeping-tom at the window’; they can agree on the description and then consider whether there exists any such person in reality or not. Indeed, they must be able to refer to the same object of thought if they are to disagree peeping-tom and whatever is entailed by being a peeping-tom. If Abner does exist in reality, then he has not only properties entailed by being a peeping-tom, but also all the other properties that give him a full complement of properties.

¹² We are using ‘in thought alone’ to contrast with ‘in reality’. Something can be in thought alone (in this sense) and still be part of culture, myth, folklore, tradition, fiction, etc.

¹³ The issues that arise between (rigid) names and (nonrigid) definite descriptions do not arise in these examples; a made-up name (e.g. ‘Abner’) whose reference was fixed by ‘the peeping-tom at the window’ could possibly refer only to a peeping-tom at the window. The name and the definite description could not come apart as they do in Kripke’s ‘Gödel/Schmidt’ example. The situation is similar with respect to the name ‘God’. If God exists, he could not be other than that than which nothing greater can be conceived. If ‘that than which nothing greater can be conceived’ denotes anything in reality, it denotes God. Problems would arise only if the relevant definite description might have denoted something different from what it does denote.

about whether *he* exists in reality.¹⁴ Again: There is no disagreement unless there is agreement about what is being talked about. If one disputant says that the F exists and the other disputant denies that the G exists, there may be no disagreement at all.

Finally, there are two distinct ways for an object of thought to have a property: A property may be *had-in-reality* and a property may be *had-in-thought*. ('Had-in-thought' is elliptical. It could be completed by 'by someone,' 'in such-and-such tradition', 'in such-and-such story', etc.) Consider something we refer to that does not exist in reality—say, Pegasus, the winged horse captured by Bellerophon.¹⁵ He *has-in-thought* the property of being a horse. Since he does not exist in reality, he does not *have-in-reality* the property of being a horse. A property *had-in-thought* is a property had by an object

¹⁴ A problem could arise if the disputants were arguing about whether Plato existed. Suppose, as we know, that Plato did exist and was Socrates's most famous pupil and wrote many of the works attributed to him. Suppose also that he did not write the *Republic*; Xenophon wrote it. If the disputants chose to agree on the definite description 'the author of the *Republic*' to fix the reference of 'Plato', there would be a problem since the author of the *Republic* (in the imagined circumstances) is not Plato but Xenophon. But this problem is not relevant to the cases of interest here; it does not arise for objects of thought picked out by definite descriptions or by names whose references are fixed by definite descriptions of a property that the thing denoted has essentially.

¹⁵ As in note 13, nonexistent objects of thought also avoid the 'Gödel/Schmidt' phenomena. Since Pegasus did not exist in reality, but only in thought, being the winged horse captured by Bellerophon is an essential property of Pegasus. It is impossible that 'the winged horse captured by Bellerophon' denote some other horse that is not Pegasus. Hence, again, Kripke's 'Gödel/Schmidt' case does not arise.

of thought in virtue of being *thought of that way*. A property *had-in-reality* is a property that the object of thought has outside the context of being thought about. For example, the property of being the subject of many paintings is a property that Pegasus *has-in-reality*.¹⁶ As a general thing, the property of existing in reality will be of no interest unless it is had-in-reality. If someone attributes to the object of thought, Pegasus, the property of existing in reality, then Pegasus has-in-thought the property of existing in reality. But the property of existing in reality does not change the ontological status of Pegasus if the property is only had-in-thought by Pegasus.

An object that exists in reality (say, you or Plato) also has properties-in-thought as well as properties-in-reality. If we think of you as being shrewd, then you have that property-in-thought.¹⁷ If you really are shrewd, then you also have that property-in-reality. You have the property-in-reality of weighing such-and-such whether anyone

¹⁶ A sufficient condition for two people to refer to the same object of thought that does not exist in reality may be satisfied either by a description expressing a property *had-in-thought* ('winged horse captured by Bellerophon') or a by a description expressing a property *had-in-reality* ('the subject of paintings portraying a winged horse').

¹⁷ You, who exist in reality, may have-in-thought different (and contradictory) properties in different narratives. (Your attorney and the opposing attorney tell quite different stories about your character.) An object of thought that does not exist in reality (e.g., Vulcan) can also have-in-thought contradictory properties (being flung out of heaven because he was lame/ becoming lame as a result of being flung out of heaven), but an object cannot have-in-reality contradictory properties. For the contradictory properties of Vulcan, see *Bullfinch's Mythology*, Thomas Bullfinch (New York: Random House, The Modern Library, no date), pp. 10-11.

thinks that you have it or not. An object that exists in reality has-in-reality properties that are independent of thought, but *all* the properties of an object of thought that does not also exist in reality ultimately depend on thought—even those that the object of thought has-in-reality. The important point is this: An object of thought both has-in-reality properties and has-in-thought properties—whether the object exists in reality or not.

One difference between objects that exist in reality and those that do not exist in reality is that objects of thought that do not exist in reality have only an incomplete set of properties, whereas objects of thought that do exist in reality have a complete set of properties. Modulo vagueness, for any given property, an object that exists in reality either has-in-reality that property or it fails to have-it-in-reality. There is always a correct answer to the question: Do you weigh n kg?—whether you or anyone else knows it or not. However, there is no answer to the question: did Pegasus weigh n kg.? Thus any object of thought that does not exist in reality fails to have a complete complement of properties: There is no fact of the matter about whether Sherlock Holmes was born on a Wednesday, since Arthur Conan Doyle doesn't tell us.

We can illustrate this point: If what is described in the literature as Gaunilo's 'perfect island',¹⁸ were to be a counterexample to Anselm, the island would have to be an island such that no greater island can be conceived.¹⁹ Such an island is an object of

¹⁸ What Gaunilo actually offers as an example is “the lost island,” which is “blessed with all manner of priceless riches and delights in abundance.” (*Pro insipiente* 6)

¹⁹ Even if there could be an island such that no greater island could be conceived, an island would hardly be a candidate for being such that nothing greater could be conceived.

thought (whether it exists in reality or not); however, we can show that it cannot exist in reality. If it did exist in reality, it would be a complete object (with so-many palm trees, such dimensions, etc.). But then we could conceive of a greater island—one with another palm tree, or a little larger. But now we have a contradiction: we can conceive of an island greater than the island than which none greater can be conceived. Nothing that is the island than which no greater island can be conceived can exist in reality—on pain of contradiction.²⁰ So, although we can say that the perfect island exists in thought, we cannot say—on pain of contradiction—that the perfect island exists in reality. In that case, the perfect island is an incomplete object: There is no definite number of palm trees on it. The only properties it has-in-reality are properties like having been used by Gaunilo as a counterexample to Anselm.²¹

²⁰ Note that there is no assumption one way or the other that no island is unsurpassable in greatness. Nor is there any assumption that the island-in-reality that would be improved with the addition of a palm tree is the same object of thought as the greatest conceivable island. The point is that the greatest conceivable island (the object of thought) cannot exist in reality.

²¹ The significance of the contradiction derived from assuming that the “perfect island” exists in reality is that it shows that this example does not discredit Anselm’s argument. In the Gaunilo-inspired case, the contradiction arises from the supposition of being an island such that no greater island can be conceived and also of *existing* in reality. But, as we shall see, in Anselm’s argument, what leads to contradiction is a supposition of a different stripe: the supposition of being such that nothing greater can be conceived and also of *failing to exist* in reality. To derive a contradiction from being F and existing in reality hardly suffices to impugn Anselm’s argument that derives a

An object of thought that does not exist in reality has (in-thought or in-reality) the property by which the object is picked out and all the properties that it entails. But if the object of thought is, say, a fictional character, it has further properties supplied by the stories in which the character appears.²² If, in a relevant context, we used ‘the clever London detective who relied on logic’ to pick out Sherlock Holmes, Holmes has-in-thought not only the property of being the clever London detective, but also the other properties that the stories attributed to him. Holmes has-in-reality the property of being created by Conan Doyle, and he—the same object of thought—could be picked out by ‘the fictional character created by Conan Doyle’. So whether an object of thought that does not exist in reality has properties not entailed by the description used to pick it out depends on the kind of object of thought that it is. Stories about fictional or mythical characters provide additional properties had-in-thought by the fictional or mythical characters—properties that are not entailed by the description used to pick out the object of thought.

A Comparison with Meinongian Theories. Are objects of thought Meinongian objects? In the first place, we use ‘objects of thought’ not to apply to an ontological category, but as a cover term for people, places and things that are thought of and referred to, whether they exist in reality or not. By contrast, Meinongian objects make up their own ontological category. Second, Meinongians invoke comprehension principles that

contradiction from being G and failing to exist in reality.

²² The stories may attribute contradictory properties. (We’ve been told that the Sherlock Holmes stories contradict each other on the location of Watson’s war wound.) In that case, the fictional character has-in-thought contradictory properties.

take there to be at least one object correlated with any combination of properties.²³ We do not. Finally, there being Meinongian objects does not depend on the existence of any human ability. However, there being objects of thought that can be referred to whether they exist or not does depend on the existence of a human ability.

Edward Zalta represents Anselm's notion of "existence in the understanding" by ' $\exists y(y = x)$ ', which does not assert existence but only "being", and Anselm's notion of "existence in reality" by ' $E!x$ '.²⁴ Zalta's and Terence Parsons's metaphysical picture is analogous to Anselm's: Both pictures include "two realms of objects, one having a greater degree of reality than the other. In both pictures, an object can 'inhabit' both realms simultaneously."²⁵ The two ontological realms are of objects that exist in reality and objects that exist in the understanding.²⁶ One can "think about an object x , predicate things of x and quantify over x , regardless of whether x inhabits one or both realms."²⁷

²³ Parsons says, "For any set of nuclear properties, some object has all the properties in that set and no other nuclear properties." Nuclear properties are ordinary properties like *being gold* or *being a mountain*. Parsons 1980, p. 19.

²⁴ Paul E. Oppenheimer and Edward N. Zalta, "On the Logic of the Ontological Argument," in *Philosophical Perspectives 5: The Philosophy of Religion*, James E. Tomberlin, ed. (Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview Publishing Co., 1991): 515. (509-529)

²⁵ Oppenheimer and Zalta 1991, p. 516.

²⁶ Parsons 1980 and Zalta 1983. To explain the "two realms," Parsons distinguishes two kinds of properties (nuclear and extranuclear), and Zalta distinguishes two kinds of predication (exemplifying and encoding).

²⁷ Oppenheimer and Zalta 1991, p. 517.

This sounds like what we have been saying: there are objects that we can think of and talk about whether they exist in reality or not, but there are a couple of differences between the Meinongians and us. Meinongianism is a metaphysical theory. Meinongian nonexistent objects inhabit a distinct metaphysical realm. By contrast, our point is basically epistemological: There are things we can think about and refer to whether they exist in reality or not, and such things may be said to exist in the understanding. Second, the Meinongians' treatment of Anselm's argument is rooted in their logical and metaphysical systems. Our treatment of Anselm's argument, by contrast, is rooted in a human ability that is well confirmed—the human ability to think of and to refer to people, places and things whether they exist or not.

Neither Parsons' nor Zalta's treatment of Anselm's argument obviates the need for our formulation. A brief look at their treatments of the ontological argument will suggest the contribution that can be made by appeal to the idea of objects that we refer to, whether they exist or not.

Parsons suspects that Anselm's reasoning rests on an equivocation between *de dicto* and *de re* readings of 'that than which nothing greater can be imagined'. (Barnes' translation) Anselm begins by establishing that the Fool "imagines that than which nothing greater can be imagined" on a *de dicto* reading that does not entail that the denoting phrase has a referent.²⁸ Then, according to Parsons, Anselm illicitly switches to a *de re* reading according to which there is an object imagined by the Fool. (On our

²⁸ Parsons is explicit that not all denoting phrases refer. (p. 48) Although there is an object corresponding to any combination of nuclear properties, intentional properties or predicates like 'conceive' or 'imagine' or 'believe' are extranuclear. See Parsons 1980, p. 23.

reconstruction, de dicto readings do not enter the picture.) Oppenheimer and Zalta, like us, think that Anselm did not commit a de dicto/de re fallacy, and that Parsons' objection is better seen as directed toward Anselm's subargument for his first premise—namely, that “there is a conceivable thing which is such that nothing greater can be conceived.”

The subargument has two premises:

P1: Anyone, even a Fool, can understand the phrase ‘that than which nothing greater can be conceived.’

P2: If anyone, even a Fool, can understand the phrase ‘that than which nothing greater can be conceived’, there is something in the understanding such that none greater can be conceived.

Oppenheimer and Zalta point out that P1 and P2 entail the first premise of Anselm's main argument. Whether or not Parsons' (redirected) criticism succeeds depends, say Oppenheimer and Zalta, “on one's analysis of the intentionality of directed mental states and the intensionality of denoting phrases.”²⁹ Although Anselm has views on these matters, Zalta and Oppenheimer do not pursue the matter.

Oppenheimer and Zalta offer a formal reconstruction of Anselm's argument in *Proslogion 2* that is valid.³⁰ After writing “On the Logic of the Ontological Argument,” however, they too find fault with Anselm's subargument for Premise 1—that “there is a conceivable thing which is such that nothing greater can be conceived”.³¹ If Premise 1 is

²⁹ Oppenheimer and Zalta 1991, p. 528, n. 25.

³⁰ Oppenheimer and Zalta 1991, pp. 517-521.

³¹ Paul E. Oppenheimer and Edward N. Zalta, “Reflections on the Logic of the Ontological Argument,” *Studia Neoscholastica* 4 (2007), pp. 28-35.

<http://philpapers.org/rec/OPPROT-2> (accessed July 3, 2010).

revised to be clearly true, according to them, the argument is sound but does not support the conclusion that Anselm wants. The revised Premise 1 is this:

Premise 1*: There is an abstract object that encodes all and only the properties implied by the property of being a conceivable thing such that nothing greater can be conceived.

On Zalta's theory of abstract objects, there are two modes of predication: whereas nonexistent objects "encode" the properties with which they are correlated, existent objects "exemplify" their properties.³² Thus, according to this view, the round square encodes roundness and squareness, but does not exemplify them.

From Premise 1*, all that follows is that understanding the definite description 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived' entails that there is an intentional object that *encodes* the property of being such that nothing greater can be conceived. What does not follow—but what is needed to show what Anselm wants—is that the intentional object in the understanding *exemplifies* the property of being such that nothing greater can be conceived. If God only encodes the property of being such that nothing greater can be conceived, then the conclusion that follows is only that God encodes the property of existing. However, if God exists in reality, he exemplifies the property of existing. Hence, the argument that Oppenheimer and Zalta constructed from Proslogion 2—valid, and even sound—does not prove that God exists in reality.³³

The difficulty for Anselm, according both to Parsons' redirected criticism and to Oppenheimer and Zalta's "Afterthoughts", lies in the defense of Anselm's first premise. Our use of the notion of referring to things whether they exist or not may be taken to be a

³² Zalta 1983.

³³ Compare the 'nonstarter' argument at the beginning of this paper.

new defense of the first premise of Zalta's version of Anselm's argument and also to save Anselm from Parsons' charge of equivocation. We hope to present a sound argument for the conclusion that Anselm sought in *Proslogion* 2.

Relevance of Objects of Thought to the Ontological Argument. As we have argued, the following is an empirical datum: There are people, places and things that are talked about and referred to whether they exist in reality or not. This empirical observation is not the result of an (illicit) inference from 'People talk about the F' to 'The F is something that people are talking about.' Rather, if we overhear a fragment of a conversation (—"What were you referring to?"—"The Garden of Eden"), we immediately know that it is the Garden of Eden that the speaker is talking about. We have called objects so referred to 'objects of thought'.

God, whether he exists in reality or not, is talked about, thought about, and referred to; hence, he is an object of thought. There is ample evidence that that God is, and has been, worshipped by millions of believers in Judaism, Christianity and Islam—whether or not God exists in reality—for millenia.³⁴ They talk about, refer to, and

³⁴ This point is made by Matthews 2005 as evidence that there is a common object of worship in the three monotheistic traditions, who is a being (in the understanding or in reality) than which nothing greater can be thought. If the point is correct, then Aquinas's suggestion in the *Summa Contra Gentiles* 1.11 that "for any given thing, either in reality or in the understanding, something greater can be conceived" does not defeat Anselm. Anselm's argument shows that for anything that exists in the understanding, it is contradictory to hold both that it is that than which nothing greater can be conceived and it does not exist in reality. Matthews 2005, p. 94.

worship something that they believe exists in reality, whether it does or not.

Someone may try to derail the ontological argument by claiming that the object of thought denoted by ‘that than which nothing greater can be conceived’ does not even possibly exist in reality. However, in the absence of an argument that demonstrated that there could not exist in reality that than which nothing greater can be conceived, such an objection would have no weight. In contrast to the “perfect island” case—in which we *showed* that a contradiction follows from the assumption that the described object of thought exists in reality—no one, in our opinion, has succeeded in demonstrating that there could not exist in reality an object of thought denoted by ‘that than which nothing greater can be conceived.’³⁵

According to two Psalms (14 and 52), “the Fool has said in his heart, ‘There is no God.’” In his ontological argument in *Proslogion 2*, Anselm, a theist, aims to show that the Fool, an atheist, has contradicted himself in denying the existence of God.

In order to disagree, Anselm and the Fool (the atheist) must refer to the same thing (whether or not it exists in reality). That than which nothing greater can be conceived is in both the Fool’s and Anselm’s understanding by dint of the Fool’s and Anselm’s talking about and referring to that than which nothing greater can be conceived. If Anselm is right, then the Fool is unwittingly referring to something that exists in reality; if the Fool is right, then Anselm is unwittingly referring to something that exists

³⁵ Plantinga seems to have been successful at countering attempts to derive a contradiction from the assumption that God exists. See Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), Ch. 9. Moreover, in *Proslogion 2*, Anselm is not trying to vindicate God’s possible existence; his concern there is solely with actual existence.

only in the understanding, and not in reality.

What Anselm and the Fool disagree about is whether the thing picked out by the expression ‘that than which nothing greater can be conceived’ exists in reality or not; they disagree about the *ontological status* of the object they talk about and refer to.

The difference in ontological status between an object of thought that exists in reality and one that does not exist in reality can be illustrated by a principle needed for the ontological argument—a great-making principle. We need a principle that allows comparison, with respect to greatness, of an object that exists only in thought and an otherwise exact same object that exists in reality as well. If something exists only in thought, then it is an incomplete object. So, we must interpret “an otherwise exact same thing” to accommodate comparison of incomplete objects with complete objects. We can do this as follows:

If x exists merely in thought, then any y that exists in thought and in reality and has-in-reality all of the properties that x has-in-thought, is *an otherwise exact same thing* as x.³⁶

³⁶ So, y’s being an otherwise exact same thing as x is not a one-one relation. Since x exists merely in thought (i.e., in thought and not in reality), x is incomplete (in the way explained earlier); in this case, y will have many more properties than x and $y \neq x$. Being an otherwise exact same thing is not identity. We have only a sufficient condition for being an otherwise exact same thing as x, which yields an ordered pair—one of which exists in thought but not in reality, and the other of which exists both in thought and in reality. But that is all that is needed for the operative principle (G) as defined in the text.

With this understanding of ‘an otherwise exact same thing’, we have a great-making principle:

- (G) For anything x that existed only in thought, an otherwise same thing that existed both in thought and in reality would be greater (not just greater in thought) than x.³⁷

To see the truth of (G), consider an analogy with Pegasus: Pegasus exists only in thought. Pretend that we do not know whether or not he exists in reality. Would an otherwise same thing as Pegasus that did exist in reality be greater than Pegasus? There is a clear answer in terms of causal powers. An otherwise same thing as Pegasus that existed in reality (and not just in the understanding) would have had-in-reality unmediated causal powers: causal powers on his own, so to speak, without dependence on anyone else’s thought (e.g., when flying, he could change the air current). By contrast, all the causal powers that an object of thought that does not exist in reality has-in-reality are mediated by someone’s thought. Thus if the object of thought, God, does not exist in reality, he still has-in-reality mediated causal powers through the thoughts of believers, but no causal powers on his own, such as the power to create the universe.

(G) is vindicated by the fact that something’s having-in-reality unmediated causal powers is greater than an otherwise same thing’s having-in-reality only mediated causal powers that depend on thoughts of people who exist in reality. As we said earlier, “a property had-in-reality is a property that the object of thought has outside the context of

³⁷ (G) is a modified version of principle (G3) in Matthews 2005. Although Anselm did not actually state the principle, Matthews notes that Anselm did say, “For if it is in the understanding alone, it can be conceived to be in reality as well, which is greater.” Matthews 2005, p. 91.

being thought about.” Since being greater than y is a (relational) property that is had outside the context of being thought about, the property of being greater than y is one that is had-in-reality. There is no ambiguity here between greatness-in-thought and greatness-in-reality. *Greatness-in-reality is the only way of having greatness that is relevant to the ontological argument.*

Now, finally, let us turn to the ontological argument itself.

The Ontological Argument. The question is this: Is there an object in reality (outside thought) denoted by ‘that than which nothing greater can be conceived’? The ontological argument provides an affirmative answer by means of a *reductio ad absurdum*.

The non-question-begging character of the argument depends on the fact that the atheist and the theist can both refer to the same object of thought without regard to whether or not it exists in reality. Using the same words, ‘that than which nothing greater can be conceived’, the theist and the atheist refer to the same object; the theist says of it that it exists in reality, and the atheist says of it that it does not exist in reality. We can make this pragmatic foundation of the ontological argument explicit by adding premises at the beginning of the traditional argument:

- a. The theist and the atheist refer to the same object with the words, ‘that than which nothing greater can be conceived.’

Therefore,

- b. That than which nothing greater can be conceived is an object that exists in both the theist’s and atheist’s understanding. [by (a) and the meaning of ‘existing in the understanding’]

Let S be the object that exists in the theist's and atheist's understanding and that is such that nothing greater can be conceived.³⁸ So,

c. S is the object that exists in the theist's and atheist's understanding and that is such that nothing greater can be conceived.

[(b) and stipulation of 'S']

Therefore,

d. S exists in thought. [(c) and stipulation 'exists in the understanding' = 'exists in thought']

Lines (a) – (d) are crucial to the argument in *Proslogion* 2, because they show how both the theist and the atheist can use the constant 'S' to name an object of thought, without commitment to the existence in reality of S. At the outset, we do not know whether S has the property of being such that nothing greater can be conceived in-reality or just in-thought. If S does not exist in reality, then S only has-in-thought the property of being such that nothing conceivable is greater; if S does exist in reality, then S has-in-reality the property of being such that nothing conceivable is greater (along with other properties such as being creator of the universe). Thus, the question is not begged against the

³⁸ Note that it is irrelevant to our argument which great-making properties (goodness, omnipotence, etc.) S has. Our only use of the idea of great-making is as a relation, given by (G). One way to interpret the ontological argument is as showing this: If the property of being that than which nothing greater can be conceived is such that if S has it in-thought and not in-reality, then there's a contradiction. So, pace Millican 2004, p. 466, there is no sliding from properties had-in-thought to properties had-in-reality. See also Peter Millican, "Ontological Arguments and the Superiority of Existence: Reply to Nagasawa," *Mind* 116, 2007, pp. 1041-1053, especially p. 1046.

atheist (or against the theist). Now comes the main argument:

1. S exists in thought and S does not exist in reality [premise for reductio ad absurdum]
2. An otherwise exact same thing as S that existed both in thought and in reality is conceivable. [Premise from Anselm³⁹]
3. If S exists in thought and not in reality and an otherwise exact same thing as S that existed both in thought and in reality is conceivable, then an otherwise exact same thing as S that existed both in thought and in reality would be greater than S.⁴⁰ [by 1 and Principle (G)]
4. An otherwise exact same thing as S that existed both in thought and in reality would be greater than S. [1,2, conjunction, 3, modus ponens]
5. If an otherwise exact same thing as S that existed both in thought and in reality and is conceivable would be greater than S, then there can be a conceivable object that is greater than S. [namely, an otherwise exact same thing as S that also existed in reality]⁴¹

³⁹ What Anselm writes is actually stronger: *Si enim vel in solo intellectu est, potest cogitari esse et in re*, [If it even exists only in thought, it can be conceived to exist in reality . . .] We take it that the weaker claim, Premise 2, follows from Anselm's stronger claim.

⁴⁰ As mentioned above, the only way to show that there could not be an otherwise exact same thing as S that existed both in thought and in reality would be to show that the description 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived' harbors a contradiction.

⁴¹ Note that an otherwise exact same thing as S does not have to be thought of as existing in reality or as being greater than S is. See discussion at the end of the argument.

Therefore,

6. There can be a conceivable object that is greater than S.⁴² [4,5 modus ponens]
7. There can be no conceivable object that is greater than S. [line (c) above]
8. There can be a conceivable object that is greater than S, and there can be no conceivable object that is greater than S. [6,7 conjunction] Contradiction!

Therefore,

9. It is not the case that: S exists in thought and S does not exist in reality. [1-8, reductio ad absurdum]

Therefore,

10. S does exist in reality. [9, DeMorgan's rule; line (d); disjunctive syllogism]

Now we can see how important the “pragmatic” aspect (a) – (d) of the argument is.

Without (d), the conclusion is only the negation of the premise for the reductio ad absurdum—that it is not the case both that S exists in thought and that S does not exist in reality. This is consistent with the claim that S exists neither in thought nor in reality, and leaves it open to the atheist to reject the claim that S exists in thought. But (d) blocks that move and licenses the conclusion that S exists in reality.

Someone may object: “An otherwise exact same thing as S that existed in reality would be greater than S is, but it does not follow that anyone can *conceive* of anything greater than S. If we conceive of S as an otherwise exact same thing that exists in reality, then S (or an otherwise exact same thing as S) only has-in-thought the property of existing in reality; neither S nor an otherwise exact same thing as S has-in-reality the property of existing in reality.”

The objection misfires. As we said earlier with respect to Pegasus, we agree that

⁴² By ‘can’ throughout, we mean ‘is metaphysically possible that’.

conceiving of something as existing in reality is irrelevant to whether it does exist in reality. But the ontological argument does not need any assumption that S (or an otherwise exact same thing as S) is conceived of as existing in reality or is conceived of as being greater than S is. What is needed is only that the theist and atheist agree on the conception of S as that than which nothing greater can be conceived. The question is: Does S so conceived exist in reality or not?

Nobody needs to conceive of S *as* greater than S is; all that is needed for the contradiction is that some conceivable object can exist that *is* greater than S is. We can conceive of something that is greater than S is without conceiving of it as being greater than S is. Likewise, we can conceive of something that exists in reality without conceiving of it *as* existing in reality. So, the objection does not succeed.

We can think of the ontological argument as built on a conditional: If the expression ‘that than which nothing greater can be thought’ denotes an object that exists in thought, then God exists in reality.⁴³ Lines (a) – (d) show that the antecedent is true. Given that the antecedent is true, lines (1) – (10) show that the consequent is true. So, the argument appears to be sound, and the existence of God is proved.

Even if, as we believe, the argument is sound, it falls short of Anselm’s aspirations. Lines (a) – (d) are critical to showing that ‘that than which nothing greater can be conceived’ denotes an object of thought, whether it exists in reality or not. And lines (a) – (d) are grounded in our human ability to think of, and refer to, things that do not exist. We gave ample empirical evidence for our having and exercising this ability.

⁴³ We have already argued that ‘S exists in thought’ does not lead to contradiction if conjoined with ‘S exists in reality.’ See the paragraph to which footnote 35 is appended.

But this means that the premises on which (d) is based are contingent and known a posteriori; if Anselm's goal was to have a proof of the existence of God based wholly on principles that are necessary and known a priori, our reconstruction falls short. However, even if this new version falls short of Anselm's goal, it is as a sound and non-question-begging argument for the existence of God.

Now let us illustrate the power of this pragmatic approach by showing how it meets a recent challenge to the ontological argument by Peter Millican.

A Reply to Millican. Peter Millican has recently argued that Anselm's ontological argument has a simple, fatal flaw.⁴⁴ To see that our pragmatic version does not share this flaw, consider Millican's generalization of his argument.

According to Millican, all ontological arguments for the existence of God proceed in two stages. At Stage I, reference is made to "some nature (essence, concept, type of thing, or whatever), which is taken to be an appropriate characterization of God." Stage I is intended to establish "that there is such a nature to be thought of." At Stage II, it is argued that the nature thus referred to "must be instantiated in reality also."⁴⁵

Millican thinks that no argument of this form can prove the existence of God. (We agree.) The argument cannot succeed at Stage II, Millican claims, unless the nature referred to at Stage I is assumed really to exist. But if the nature referred to at Stage I is assumed really to exist, then the question is begged against the atheist "by purporting to make reference to something whose existence [the atheist] denies."⁴⁶ All the atheist need

⁴⁴ Millican 2004 and Millican 2007.

⁴⁵ Millican 2007, p. 1044

⁴⁶ Millican, 2007, p. 1044.

do is to “simply insist” that the “nature (essence, concept, type of thing, or whatever)” referred to at Stage I does not exist. There is no such nature to be thought of.⁴⁷

Alternatively, if the question is not begged against the atheist, then the (merely thought-of) nature will not guarantee the existence of God in reality.⁴⁸ Either way, Millican says, the argument fails.

Let us, first, put our version into a somewhat analogous two-part scheme, (suitably modified for objects of thought instead of natures) and then show that our version neither begs the question against the atheist, nor fails to guarantee the existence of God.

Stage I: Reference is made to an object of thought that is denoted by ‘that than which nothing greater can be thought’.

Stage II: It is argued that the object of thought in question must exist in reality as well.

Our version of the argument does not fail at either stage.

Stage I: Lines (a) – (e) of our proof correspond to Stage I. We explained at length how we can refer to an object of thought without supposing that it exists in reality and how this ability is central to the prospect of success with the ontological argument. We must be able to refer to that than which nothing greater can be thought *without assuming it to exist in reality*. It either does or does not exist in reality independently of

⁴⁷ Millican 2007, p. 1048. Millican is not just claiming that a nature than which nothing greater can be conceived fails to be instantiated in reality. The claim is stronger: There is no such nature. To suppose otherwise, Millican says, is to beg the question against the atheist.

⁴⁸ Millican 2004, pp. 468-9, and 2007, p. 1045.

how we think of it. To decide whether it is correct to claim that it exists without begging the question requires the disputants to be neutral about its existence in reality.

It is therefore not accurate to say that the theist “purport[s] to make reference to something whose existence [the atheist] denies.”⁴⁹ Both theist and atheist refer to an object of thought considered apart from whether it exists in reality or not. They pick out the same object of thought by ‘that than which nothing greater can be thought’, and argue about whether it has the property of existing in reality. Neither need assume that it does or that it does not exist in reality. What the theist argues is that the property of being that than which nothing greater can be thought and the property of existing only in thought (and therefore not in reality) are not compossible. No object of thought can have both.

Anyone who argues about whether a particular object exists—Pegasus, Homer, God—must not assume from the start either that it does or does not exist in reality. But there is still the fact of the matter (perhaps unknown or bracketed by the disputants) about whether the object exists in reality, nonetheless. Since theist and atheist refer to the same object of thought, one of them is mistaken about a property that the (shared) object of thought has or lacks; indeed, one is mistaken about the ontological status of the object of thought.⁵⁰ The point of the ontological argument is to show that the claim that that than

⁴⁹ Millican, 2007, p. 1044.

⁵⁰ Of course, if God exists in reality, then the atheist’s object of thought exists in reality; and if God does not exist in reality, then the theist’s object of thought does not exist in reality. This logical truth is consistent with the claim that the objects of thought of the theist and the atheist satisfy the ‘otherwise same thing’ relation. See footnote 36 and the text to which it is appended.

which none greater can be thought does not exist in reality leads to contradiction.

Stage II: Lines (1) – (9) correspond to Stage II. The argument is valid, and the only premise is the reductio-premise. Except for standard logical principles, the only substantive principle is (G)—the great-making principle, for which we argued.

Millican seems to have overlooked the possibility that both theist and atheist may refer to the same object in thought independently of whether it exists in reality or not. Of course, that object either does or does not exist in reality. But that tautology is misreported by saying that the theist “purport[s] to make reference to something whose existence [the atheist] denies.”⁵¹ Both theist and atheist refer to an object of thought—the object picked out by ‘that than which nothing greater can be thought’—independently of whether it exists in reality. Anselm’s discovery is that denial of existence in reality to such an object of thought leads to contradiction. In any case, our new pragmatic version of the ontological argument does not fall to Millican’s criticism of ontological arguments.

Conclusion. This pragmatic version of the ontological argument depends for its soundness on our ability to think of objects that may or may not exist, and on construing such objects nonreductively as objects of thought. This ability is admittedly not well understood, but it is one that we obviously have. As the examples show, we exercise this ability routinely. We thus have independent reason—quite apart from any theological interest—to suppose that we can refer to objects of thought whether they exist in reality or not. Since we can do this, we have a sound argument for the existence of God.⁵²

⁵¹ Millican, 2007, p. 1044.

⁵² An earlier version of this paper was presented by Baker at the Conference on

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