

The Ontological Argument Simplified

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The ontological argument in Anselm's *Proslogion* II continues to generate a remarkable store of sophisticated commentary and criticism. However, in our opinion, much of this literature ignores or misrepresents the elegant simplicity of the original argument. The dialogue below seeks to restore that simplicity, with one important modification. Like the original, it retains the form of a *reductio*, which we think is essential to the argument's great genius. However, it seeks to skirt the difficult question of whether 'exists' is a genuine predicate by appealing instead to a distinction between having only *mediated causal powers* and having *unmediated causal powers*. Pegasus has no unmediated causal powers, but he has mediated causal powers through the thoughts, depictions, and literature in which he figures. By contrast, those people who think about Pegasus, portray him in paintings and sculptures, and write stories about him themselves have unmediated causal powers.

The Argument

Anselm (in prayer): You, O God, are something than which nothing greater can be conceived.

Fool (i.e., atheist, who has overheard Anselm's prayer): God is just an object of the imagination.

Anselm: So you agree

that the something than which nothing greater can be conceived is at least an object of the imagination; it is therefore something conceivable.

Fool: All right, it is conceivable. But it isn't real. It has been conceived to provide an ideal object of worship. It doesn't exist in reality.

Anselm: Would it be greater to have unmediated causal powers than it would be to have only mediated causal powers?

Fool: Of course it would be greater to have unmediated causal powers; but God doesn't have any. Being just an idea made up to provide, as I have just said, an appropriate object of worship, God has only mediated causal powers, that is, powers through the believers in God. They do all sorts of things in the belief that they are fulfilling God's will. However, in and of himself, God has no causal powers whatsoever.

Anselm: So, according to you, something than which nothing greater can be conceived is only an idea in people's minds and therefore has only mediated causal powers.

Fool: You got it right.

Anselm: But then a greater than God can be conceived, namely, something than which nothing greater can be conceived that actually has unmediated causal powers. According to you, something than which nothing greater can be conceived, by having only mediated causal powers, is something than which a greater can be conceived. By contradicting yourself in this way you have offered an indirect proof, that is, a *reductio ad absurdum*, that God, i.e., something than which nothing greater can be conceived, actually exists.

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