

# A Misconception of Anselm's Ontological Argument in the Medieval Era

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## ANSELMUS'UN ONTOLOJİK ORTAÇAĞDA YANLIŞ ANLAŞILMASI

### Özet

Bu makalede amaçlanan Anselmus'un ontolojik delili hakkında klasik bir yanlış anlama ve betimlemeyi izah etmektir. Anselmus'un yürüttüğü akla yanıt veren bir rahip, söz konusu delilin yanlış anlaşılmasına yol açan, kendi ifadesi olan her şeyden daha büyük bir şey'in kendisinden daha büyüğü düşünülmemeyen bir şey ifadesinin yerini alabileceğini düşünmekle çok önemli bir hata yapmıştır. Gaunilo delilin en can alıcı yerini gözden kaçırıyor ve bunu oldukça açık bir şekilde delili kendine özgü yorumlamasında gösteriyor. Anselmus kendisinden daha büyüğü düşünülmemeyen bir şey derken, Gaunilo her şeyden daha büyük bir şey diyor. Kısaca, Gaunilo anahtar cümleyi yanlış anlamıştır; bu yüzden Anselmus Gaunilo'nun ontolojik delili yorumunu kabul etmiyor. Demek ki, eğer anahtar cümle değiştirilirse, akıl yürütme de değiştirilecektir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** kendisinden daha büyüğü düşünülmemeyen şey, her şeyden daha büyük bir şey, zorunlu varlık.

### Abstract

In this paper I aim to explain a classical misunderstanding and misrepresentation of Anselm's ontological argument. A monk who replied to Anselm's reasoning made the mistake of thinking he could substitute for "something than which nothing greater can be conceived" his own simplified formula, "that which is greater than everything," resulting in a fatal misconception of the argument in question. In my opinion, Gaunilo simply

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misses the most crucial aspect of the argument and shows this quite blatantly in his own characterization of it. Gaunilo says "that than which is greater than everything," while Anselm says "that than which a greater cannot be thought." In a word, Gaunilo has the key phrase wrong, hence Anselm does not accept the Gaunilo's version of the argument. That is to say, if the key phrase is altered, so is the procedure.

**Key Words:** that than which a greater cannot be thought, that which is greater than everything, necessary existence.

### **Introduction**

Let me begin by summarizing Anselm's argument given in chapter II of the *Proslogion* so that I can show how Gaunilo got Anselm's argument wrong. The second chapter of the *Proslogion* begins by asserting that it is a matter of faith that God is understood to be a being than which nothing greater can be conceived. Even the fool who denies God's existence understands the expression a being than which a greater cannot be conceived when he hears it. And what he understands is in his understanding. So a being than which a greater cannot be conceived exists in his understanding. But such a being cannot exist only in the understanding, for, if it exists in the understanding, it can be conceived to exist also in reality; and, since a being is greater if it exists in the understanding and in reality than if it exists only in the understanding, if it existed only in the understanding we could then conceive of a greater being, which is not possible. Hence a being than which a greater cannot be conceived exists both in the understanding and in reality.

Now it is time to look into Gaunilo's misstatement of Anselm's argument\*. Anselm is believed to have said that just because one is doubtful and denies this being, it shows that he already has it in his understanding, for "in hearing it spoken of he understands what is spoken of."(Anselm, 1962:303). This would be proved "by the fact that what he understands must exist not only in his understanding but in reality also.(Anselm, 1962:303). A further proof for the above premise, viz., that what one understands must exist not only in the understanding but in reality also, is presented on the ground that, "it is a greater thing to exist both in the understanding and in reality than to be in the understanding alone."(Anselm, 1962:303). For if this being were to be in the under-

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\* See Gregory Schufreider's article called *A Classical Misunderstanding of Anselm's Argument*, *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* LXVI, No.4 (Autumn 1992)

\*Gaunilo was the first critic of the ontological argument. In his *On Behalf of the Fool*, he undertakes to refute Anselm's proof and thereby anticipates certain of the objections raised later by Kant and Malcolm. However, Gaunilo's misinterpretation is the result of his altering the key phrase, which is that than which nothing greater can be thought. Doing so Gaunilo must not only alter the form of the argument, but his version must also include a premise that actually defeats the main virtue of Anselm's original strategy.

standing alone, then whatever existed in reality, even in the past as in the present, would be greater than this being, thus making this “greater than all beings” less than some other being, which is an obvious contradiction. Hence, Gaunilo says, Anselm concludes that, “that which is greater than all, already proved to be in the understanding, must exist not only in the understanding, but also in reality: for otherwise it would not be greater than all other beings.”(Anselm, 1962:303).

In short, Gaunilo accuses Anselm of trying “to demonstrate the existence of God merely from the notion of a being greater than all other beings.”(Bonansea, 1979:118). Anselm refuses Gaunilo’s charge by saying that, “nowhere in all my writings is such a demonstration found. For the real existence of a being which is said to be greater than all other beings cannot be demonstrated in the same way with the real existence of one that is said to be a being than which a greater cannot be conceived.”(Anselm, 1962:320). Anselm goes on by saying that;

If one were to say that a being than which a greater cannot be conceived has no real existence, or that it is possible for it not to exist, or even that it can be conceived not to exist, this can be easily rejected. For whatever can be conceived not to exist, if it exists, is not a being than which a greater cannot be conceived; but if it does not exist, it would not, even if it existed, be a being than which a greater cannot be conceived. However it cannot be said that a being than which a greater is inconceivable, if it exists, is not a being than which a greater is inconceivable; or that if it existed, it would not be a being than which a greater is inconceivable. It is evident, then, that neither is it non-existent, nor is it possible that it does not exist, nor can it be conceived not to exist.(Anselm, 1962:320).

In a few words, a being than which a greater cannot be conceived, is a being that exists eternally and everywhere, without a beginning or an end, for if it existed in any other way, then it would not be a being than which a greater is conceivable.

Now, Anselm says, this is not true with regard to a being greater than all other beings, as Gaunilo asserts him to have said. The reason for this is that it is not all together clear or certain that a supreme being must exist merely because it is greater than all other beings, since it is always possible, at least in theory, to think of its non-existence without contradiction. Thus this very possibility would seem to make it inferior to a being whose non-existence is absolutely inconceivable. For, Anselm reasons, suppose that there is a being greater than all other beings, and that this being can be conceived either not to exist, or that a being greater than it can be conceived to exist, then can we

still maintain that this being is greater than all other beings without adding some other kind of premise to it?

According to Professor Schufreider, Gaunilo misunderstood Anselm's argument in *Proslogion II* because he altered the key phrase from "something than which nothing greater can be thought" to "that which is greater than everything," clearly not noticing that in doing so, he must change the form of the argument as well. (Schufreider, 1992:489). Schufreider says that Gaunilo cannot substitute "that which is greater than everything" for "something than which a greater cannot be thought." If he does so, says Schufreider, he must import a further premise into the argument because it is simply not the case that because something greater can be thought than what exists in the understanding alone, there would be something greater than that which is greater than everything. In a world in which everything else failed to exist, that which is greater than everything could itself fail to exist. Then, there is nothing contradictory about claiming that that which is greater than everything does not exist in reality as long as nothing else does. (Schufreider, 1992:491-492).

I agree with Schufreider because in the case of this argument, there is a special relation of form to content; so one cannot alter the content of the key phrase without altering the form of the argument. As Schufreider said it is clear that "that which is greater than everything" lacks the "can be thought," that is, these key words are omitted from Gaunilo's phrase and are also omitted from his argument. Then, since Gaunilo got rid of these key words, he will have to alter the argument in order to fit with "that which is greater than everything" rather than with "something than which nothing greater can be thought." Such a change has essential bearing upon the argument and the result is that Gaunilo offers a version of the argument which altogether misses the subtlety of Anselm's own reasoning. The matter is one of the strange relationship of form to content with respect to the way in which the key phrase affords a method of arguing. A change in the content of this phrase necessitates a change in the form of the argument. And this change in the form of the argument turns out to mean nothing less than an entirely different argument. (Schufreider, 1978:16-17).

Anselm then goes on to say: "in my argument, on the other hand, there is no need of any other premise than this very predication, a being than which a greater cannot be conceived." (Anselm, 1962:321). He further adds that if the same proof which he has presented with regard to "a being than which no greater can be conceived," cannot be applied to "a being greater than all other beings," so as to get the same conclusion that God exists both in the understanding and in reality, then Gaunilo has "unjustly censured me for saying what I did not say; since his predication differs so greatly from that which I actually made." (Anselm, 1962:321).

In other words, Anselm argues that while a cogent argument for the existence of God

can be built on the idea of a being than which no greater is conceivable, no such argument is possible in the case of a being that is simply greater than all other beings. In point of fact, he adds, it is not difficult to see that the former will also be the latter; the reverse position, however, need not necessarily be true.

In the final analyses, As I have tried to show Gaunilo got the line of the argument wrong because he substituted the definition, "a being greater than all other beings" for the definition "a being than which nothing greater can be thought." Nowhere has Anselm said that he undertook to prove the existence of a being greater than all others. Because while it is easy to show that a being than which nothing greater can be thought, must necessarily exist because its non-existence is impossible, it is far from easy to prove as much for a being greater than all others. To affirm non-existence of this being involves no readily apparent contradiction. The fact that it is greater than all other beings does not prove its necessary existence. Thus appeal can be made to the principle of contradiction in order to prove God's existence, only if God can be said as the being than which nothing greater can be conceived. As Schufreider stated the extent to which the phrase "something than nothing greater can be thought" provides the key to Anselm's argument is precisely the extent which it supplies him with a certain argumentative strategy. This is true not only in Proslogion II, but in the Proslogion as a whole. The question of whether any feature applies to something than which nothing greater can be thought will be determined by showing that if it lacked that feature, something greater could be thought. In that event, however, any change in the content of the key phrase will require a change in the pattern of the argument. In the case in point, the change in content is quite critical, since what Gaunilo omits from Anselm's own phrase is the "can be thought." This means that at any point in Anselm's reasoning at which what "can be thought" figures into its formal strategy, Gaunilo will have to change the argument. (Schufreider, 1992:489).

What Gaunilo's own argument says is this: if it exists in the understanding alone, whatever existed also in reality would be greater than it, and thus that which is greater than everything would be less than something and would not be greater than everything, which is obviously contradictory. Schufreider goes on to say that "Gaunilo would seem to be turning Anselm's ontological argument into something more like cosmological argument. What he is claiming is that if that which is greater than everything existed in the understanding alone it would be less than whatever exists in reality, in which case, it would not be greater than everything. This contradiction, however, would only arise if something else, as a matter of fact, existed in reality." (Schufreider, 1992:489).

In other words, there is nothing contradictory about claiming that that which is greater than everything does not exist in reality, just provided that nothing else does. Then, Gaunilo's version of the argument requires the inclusion of the factual premise

that something exists in reality. This makes the contradiction it generates, and hence the conclusion which follows from it, a contingent matter. As a result, Gaunilo does not claim what Anselm's own argument does, to wit, that the being at issue "cannot exist in the understanding alone." For as Professor Schufreider said, the most Gaunilo can claim is that it does not. For while that which is greater than everything may, in fact, not exist in the understanding alone, as a matter of logic, it definitely can. It is neither impossible nor inconceivable that it exists in the understanding alone, but only a matter of fact that it does not, given that something else exists. (Schufreider, 1992:492).

On the contrary, that than which a greater cannot be thought presumably cannot exist in the understanding alone not just as a matter of fact, but as a matter of logic, since if anything else, in fact, exists, something can be thought to exist in reality, in which case, if it is greater to exist than not to exist, something greater presumably can be thought than something than which nothing greater can be thought existing in the understanding alone. This is all Anselm seems to need to generate his contradiction. (Schufreider, 1992:492).

In a word, the power of the strategy of Proslogion II, the strategy the phrase something than which nothing greater can be thought alone makes possible, is that the issue can apparently be resolved at the level of what can be thought without any appeal to matters of fact. As Schufreider stated the reductio of Anselm's argument can generate the needed contradiction without regard to any facts about the world, and it is precisely this distinctive characteristic of Anselm's argument that Gaunilo misses in his misstatement of it.

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