

CLASSIC PHILOSOPHICAL QUESTIONS

TWELFTH EDITION

Edited by

JAMES A. GOULD
University of South Florida

ROBERT J. MULVANEY
University of South Carolina



Upper Saddle River, New Jersey 07458

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Classic philosophical questions / edited by James A. Gould, Robert J. Mulvaney.—12th ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-13-194961-6

1. Philosophy—Introductions. 2. Philosophy. I. Gould, James A., II. Mulvaney, Robert J.

BD21.C594 2007

100—dc22

2005034623

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Full-Service Project Management: Penny Walker/TechBooks/GTS

Printer/Binder: The Courier Companies

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
ISBN 0-13-194961-6



Can We Prove That God Exists?

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The Ontological Argument

St. Anselm (1033–1109) of Canterbury was born in Aosta, Italy. In 1093 he was made Archbishop of Canterbury. During his years in the abbey he wrote the two works for which he is best known, The Monologium and The Proslogium. Anselm's name will forever be associated with the ontological argument for God's existence, which holds that the idea of God in one's mind is evidence of a genuinely existing being.

Philosophy and religion have always had a close but uneasy relationship. For some, the two mean practically the same thing, since the concept of a way of life seems essential to both of them. Both religion and philosophy seem to share the aim of searching for the key to living well. On the other hand, many have argued that philosophy has no need of a special revelation, or even of the concept of a supreme being, whereas religion seems to require both. And some claim that philosophy is regulated by canons of logical procedure, whereas many religions are based sheerly on emotion and feeling. As you think through your own conception of religion, you will want to consider two ways in which philosophers have always thought they could add something to religion. The first of these is a consideration of arguments for God's existence, and the other is a treatment of the definition or nature of God, particularly as it concerns the great problem of human evil and suffering.

Most people believe that God exists, and many have attempted to give rational arguments or proofs for his existence. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) said that there are only three possible bases on which to prove God's existence: no experience, many experiences, and one experience. He called the first of these the *ontological* argument, the second the *cosmological* argument, and the third the *teleological* argument. The ontological argument was first given

From St. Anselm, *Proslogium*, trans. Sidney Norton Deane (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1903).

by St. Anselm, who claims that once we understand the nature of God as a “being than which nothing greater can be conceived,” we realize that his essence implies his existence. One might put the argument in other words and argue that God is a perfect being, and it is an imperfection not to exist. Hence, since God is perfect, he must exist.

In the following selections Anselm’s extended argument for God’s existence is presented along with a counterargument by a certain monk named Gaunilo, who claimed that, if Anselm is correct, then we must conclude the existence of a perfect island, or indeed a perfect anything at all. If it is greater to exist than not to exist, then there must be a greatest member of any class of beings whatsoever. Anselm’s response focuses on his position that God alone cannot be conceived not to exist. Anything else can be so conceived. Therefore the argument works only in the case of God.

To Study

1. What is St. Anselm’s conception of God?
2. What argument does St. Anselm offer as proof that this God exists? State it in a formal manner.
3. According to St. Anselm, in what way may God be conceived not to exist?
4. State Gaunilo’s criticism. What is Anselm’s reply?

... Lord, I acknowledge and I thank thee that thou has created me in this, thine image, in order that I may be mindful of thee, may conceive of thee, and love thee; but that image has been so consumed and wasted away by vices, and obscured by the smoke of wrong-doing, that it cannot achieve that for which it was made, except thou renew it, and create it anew. I do not endeavor, O Lord, to penetrate thy sublimity, for in no wise do I compare my understanding with that; but I long to understand in some degree thy truth, which my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand. For this also I believe—that unless I believed, I should not understand. . . .

And so, Lord, do thou, who dost give understanding to faith, give me, so far as thou knowest it to be profitable, to understand that thou art as we believe; and that thou art that which we believe. And, indeed, we believe that thou art a being than which nothing greater can be conceived. Or is there no such nature, since the fool hath said in his heart, there is no God? . . . But, at any rate, this very fool, when he hears of this being of which I speak—a being than which nothing greater can be conceived—understands what he hears, and what he understands is in his understanding; although he does not understand it to exist.

For, it is one thing for an object to be in the understanding, and another to understand that the object exists. When a painter first conceives of what he will afterwards

perform, he has it in his understanding, but he does not yet understand it to be, because he has not yet performed it. But after he has made the painting, he both has it in his understanding, and he understands that it exists, because he has made it.

Hence, even the fool is convinced that something exists in the understanding, at least, than which nothing greater can be conceived. For, when he hears of this, he understands it. And whatever is understood exists in the understanding. And assuredly that than which nothing greater can be conceived cannot exist in the understanding alone. For, suppose it exists in the understanding alone: then it can be conceived to exist in reality; which is greater.

Therefore, if that than which nothing greater can be conceived exists in the understanding alone, the very being than which nothing greater can be conceived is one than which a greater can be conceived. But obviously this is impossible. Hence, there is no doubt that there exists a being than which nothing greater can be conceived, and it exists both in the understanding and in reality.

And it assuredly exists so truly that it cannot be conceived not to exist. For, it is possible to conceive of a being which cannot be conceived not to exist; and this is greater than one which can be conceived not to exist. Hence, if that than which nothing greater can be conceived can be conceived not to exist, it is not that than which nothing greater can be conceived. But this is an irreconcilable contradiction. There is, then, so truly a being than which nothing greater can be conceived to exist, that it cannot even be conceived not to exist; and this being thou art, O Lord, our God.

So truly, therefore, dost thou exist, O Lord, my God, that thou canst not be conceived not to exist; and rightly. For, if a mind could conceive of a being better than thee, the creature would rise above the Creator; and this is most absurd. And, indeed, whatever else there is, except thee alone, can be conceived not to exist. To thee alone, therefore, it belongs to exist more truly than all other beings, and hence in a higher degree than all others. For, whatever else exists does not exist so truly, and hence in a less degree it belongs to it to exist. Why, then, has the fool said in his heart, there is no God . . . since it is so evident, to a rational mind, that thou dost exist in the highest degree of all? Why, except that he is dull and a fool?

But how has the fool said in his heart what he could not conceive; or how is it that he could not conceive what he said in his heart? Since it is the same to say in the heart, and to conceive.

But, if really, nay, since really, he both conceived, because he said in his heart, and did not say in his heart, because he could not conceive, there is more than one way in which a thing is said in the heart or conceived. For, in one sense, an object is conceived when the word signifying it is conceived; and in another, when the very entity which the object is, is understood.

In the former sense, then, God can be conceived not to exist; but in the latter, not at all. For no one who understands what fire and water are can conceive fire to be water, in accordance with the nature of the facts themselves, although this is possible according to the words. So, then, no one who understands what God is can conceive that God does not exist; although he says these words in his heart, either without any, or with some, foreign signification. For, God is that than which a greater cannot be

conceived. And he who thoroughly understands this assuredly understands that this being so truly exists, that not even in concept can it be non-existent. Therefore, he who understands that God so exists cannot conceive that he does not exist.

I thank thee, gracious Lord, I thank thee; because what I formerly believed by thy bounty, I now so understand by thine illumination, that if I were unwilling to believe that thou dost exist, I should not be able not to understand this to be true.

GAUNILLO'S CRITICISM

For example: it is said that somewhere in the ocean is an island, which, because of the difficulty, or rather the impossibility, of discovering what does not exist, is called the lost island. And they say that this island has an inestimable wealth of all manner of riches and delicacies in greater abundance than is told of the Islands of the Blest; and that having no owner or inhabitant, it is more excellent than all other countries, which are inhabited by mankind, in the abundance with which it is stored.

Now if some one should tell me that there is such an island, I should easily understand his words, in which there is no difficulty. But suppose that he went on to say, as if by a logical inference: "You can no longer doubt that this island which is more excellent than all lands exists somewhere, since you have no doubt that it is in your understanding. And since it is more excellent not to be in the understanding alone, but to exist both in the understanding and in reality, for this reason it must exist. For if it does not exist, any land which really exists will be more excellent than it; and so the island already understood by you to be more excellent will not be more excellent."

If a man should try to prove to me by such reasoning that this island truly exists, and that its existence should no longer be doubted, either I should believe that he was jesting, or I know not which I ought to regard as the greater fool: myself, supposing that I should allow this proof; or him, if he should suppose that he had established with any certainty the existence of this island. For he ought to show first that the hypothetical excellence of this island exists as a real and indubitable fact, and in no wise as any unreal object, or one whose existence is uncertain, in my understanding.

ST. ANSELM'S REJOINER

A criticism of Gaunilo's example, in which he tries to show that in this way the real existence of a lost island might be inferred from the fact of its being conceived.

But, you say, it is as if one should suppose an island in the ocean, which surpasses all lands in its fertility, and which, because of the difficulty, or rather the impossibility, of discovering what does not exist, is called a lost island; and should say that there can be no doubt that this island truly exists in reality, for this reason, that one who hears it described easily understands what he hears.

Now I promise confidently that if any man shall devise anything existing either in reality or in concept alone (except that than which a greater cannot be conceived) to which he can adapt the sequence of my reasoning, I will discover that thing, and will give him lost island, not to be lost again.

But it now appears that this being than which a greater is inconceivable cannot be conceived not to be, because it exists on so assured a ground of truth; for otherwise it would not exist at all.

Hence, if any one says that he conceives this being not to exist, I say that at the time when he conceives of this either he conceives of a being than which a greater is inconceivable, or he does not conceive at all. If he does not conceive, he does not conceive of the non-existence of that of which he does not conceive. But if he does conceive, he certainly conceives of a being which cannot be conceived not to exist. For if it could be conceived not to exist, it could be conceived to have a beginning and an end. But this is impossible.

He, then, who conceives of this being conceives of a being which cannot be even conceived not to exist; but he who conceives of this being does not conceive that it does not exist; else he conceives what is inconceivable. The non-existence, then, of that than which a greater cannot be conceived is inconceivable.


To Think About



1. “Is not the God of the Jewish and Christian scriptures a God profoundly involved in humanity’s struggle to the point where God not merely affects but is affected by the struggle?” *Charles Hartshorne*
2. “A great temptation is to say that there is only one way to practice any religion. That may sound benign . . . because it simplifies things, but it really leads to ban the books, change the faculties in the seminaries and universities and, at the limit, mount a crusade.” *James Gould*
3. An anti-God argument from *James Rachels*:
 - a. If any being is God, he must be a fitting object of worship.
 - b. No being could possibly be a fitting object of worship, since worship requires the abandonment of one’s role as an autonomous moral agent.
 - c. Therefore, there cannot be any being who is God.
4. “Father’s criticism of Billy Sunday, the evangelist, was, ‘He preaches against the sins of the poor, not of the rich.’” *Charles Hartshorne*
5. *Norman Malcolm’s* ontological argument:

*God is an unlimited being.
 The existence of an unlimited being is either impossible or necessary.
 The concept of an unlimited being is not self-contradictory, so such a being is not impossible.
 Therefore such a being is necessary.*

6. “If one is prepared to concede that something—God—can exist without an external cause, why go that far along the chain? Why can’t the universe exist without an external cause? Does it require any greater suspension of

disbelief to suppose that the universe causes itself than to suppose that God causes himself?" *Paol Davis*

7. "I think that it is a mistake to think that God is interested only or even chiefly in religion." *William Temple*
8. "John Calvin's creed is not about sex; it is about God's infinite glory and absolute authority and our utter dependence upon his free grace rather than on our own phony virtue for salvation. True, regulating sexual behavior is almost the last remaining concern of contemporary American religion. But that has little to do with real Christianity—or Judaism or Islam or Buddhism either. When religious conservatives again show serious interest in feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless, tending the sick . . . (Matthew 25:35–36), perhaps they will be given power to speak to us again with authority about sex. Until then, condemning physical expressions of love will only drive more people out of church." *A. Hugh Jones*
9. "I wish however, to emphasize my conviction that my chief contentions about the ontological argument can be put, and to some extent evaluated, informally. For one thing, this argument is not by itself the chief, or even one of the chief, reasons for theistic belief. My two primary reasons for belief are the arguments: (1) without God we cannot understand how cosmic order as such is possible; and (2) without God as recipient and objective immortalizer of our achievements, 'all experience is a passing whiff of insignificance,' considering our mortality and other basic aspects of animal life." *Charles Hartshorne*
10. "If religion is a delusion due to wishes (Freud) or bad society (Marx) can't the same be said of atheism?" *Unknown*
11. "Another fundamental error [is] . . . the unnatural distinction Christianity makes between man and the animal world to which he really belongs. It sets up man as all important, and looks upon animals as merely things. . . . Christianity contains in fact a great and essential imperfection in limiting its precepts to man, and in refusing rights to the entire animal world." *Arthur Schopenhauer*

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