

# Descriptions of God: A Critique of Anselm's Ontological Argument

**ABSTRACT:** This paper uses the lessons gathered from a brief consideration of the workings of substantive descriptive phrases to develop two objections to Anselm's ontological proof of God's existence. First, one's understanding of the definition of God does not, as Anselm claims, guarantee that God exists in one's understanding. Second, the proof depends on a flawed interpretation of the denial of God's existence. The paper concludes by discussing the broader significance of this second objection.



**John Woodlee**  
Mercer University  
John Woodlee is a senior at Mercer University in Macon, Georgia. His majors are philosophy and English; and after completing his B.A., he plans to attend law school. His philosophical interests include ethics, philosophy of language, and early modern epistemology.

St. Anselm is most famous for originating what is known as the ontological proof of God's existence.<sup>1</sup> The proof, as Anselm presents it, stipulates a definition of God and then purports to show that, given that definition, the denial of God's existence entails a contradiction. This argument strikes many people as unconvincing, but difficult to refute. In this paper I attempt to show that Anselm's proof fails by elucidating the workings of substantive descriptive phrases, and showing how these linguistic considerations are fatal to it. I begin, in section I, by explicating the proof in more detail and indicating where two problems lie. In section II, I introduce the linguistic issues relevant to these problems. Thereafter, in sections III and IV, I engage Anselm's proof directly, examining in each of these sections one of the problems introduced in section I. Finally, in section V, I show how the problem discussed in section IV may have more general philosophical significance.

## I.

I will set forth the interpretation of the proof that will be used throughout this discussion and indicate where in the argument the problems are found. Anselm's argument begins with the assertions that "the fool" wants to deny God's existence and that God is "something than which nothing greater can be thought." The rest of Anselm's argument, as he presents it, goes as follows:

But when this same fool hears me which a greater cannot be thought cannot exist only in the understanding. For if it exists only in the understanding, it can be thought to exist in reality as well, which is greater. So if that than which a greater cannot be thought exists only in the understanding, then that than which a greater cannot be thought is that than which a greater

can be thought. But that is clearly impossible. Therefore, there is no doubt that something than which a greater cannot be thought exists both in the understanding and in reality.<sup>2</sup>

I will lay out the argument in a different form. Anselm attributes to the fool the following proposition:

(1) Something than which nothing greater can be thought does not exist in reality.

To this Anselm conjoins another proposition, which, he claims, the fool must admit if he understands the expression "something than which nothing greater can be thought":

(2) Something than which nothing greater can be thought exists in the understanding.

From this proposition, Anselm thinks, follows another:

(3) Something than which nothing greater can be thought can be thought to exist both in the understanding and in reality.

Finally, Anselm adds another proposition he believes to be undeniable:

(4) It is greater to exist both in the understanding and in reality than to exist only in the understanding.

Proposition (1) denies the property of existence in reality to an object described as something than which nothing greater can be thought. But it follows from (2)–(4) that this description entails that property: if that object does not exist in reality, then something can be thought to be greater than it. So the conjunction of (1)–(4) entails the following contradiction:

(5) Something can be thought to be greater than something than which nothing greater can be thought.

Anselm believes that (2), (3), and (4) are so certain that the fool can escape this contradiction only by withdrawing (1) and admitting that something than which nothing greater can be thought—God—exists in reality.

Two difficulties plague this argument. First, Anselm does not offer sufficient support for (2). He claims in the passage above that if the fool admits to understanding the expression "something than which nothing greater can be thought," (2) follows necessarily. As we will see, this claim is incorrect. Second, (1) is ambiguous. Above, I gave an interpretation congenial to Anselm's purposes, according to which (1) describes an object in a certain way and denies that a certain property belongs to this object. But there is another possible interpretation of (1), and this alternative interpretation will prove to be debilitating to Anselm's argument.

1. Anselm, *Proslogion: with the Replies of Gaunilo and Anselm*, trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001).

2. Anselm, 7.

**II.**

To develop these objections, it will first be necessary to consider the workings of descriptions. A description, as I will use the word, is a substantive phrase that refers to some object, if any, by picking out some of its properties. A description specifies some set of properties and refers to whichever object, if any, has that set of properties. For example, the description "the tallest boy in the classroom" specifies the properties of being a boy, being in the classroom, and being taller than any other boy in that classroom, and refers to whichever object has these properties. I will speak of any object that is referred to by a description in virtue of having the set of properties it specifies as an object that satisfies that description.

At this point, three remarks that will be useful to this discussion of Anselm's ontological proof may be made. First, an indicative sentence with a description as its subject typically assumes that some object satisfies that description and asserts something about that object. For example, the sentence "The tallest boy in the classroom has brown hair" is true if, and only if, some object is a boy, is in the classroom, and is taller than any other boy in the classroom, and this object has brown hair.<sup>3</sup>

Second, understanding a description does not necessarily involve the knowing of an object that satisfies it.<sup>4</sup> This claim is confirmed by the observation that I may understand the description "the tallest boy in the classroom" even before I have compared the boys in the classroom to determine who is tallest. This observation is explained by the fact that understanding a description is a matter of understanding the properties it specifies. Understanding what it would mean to be a boy, to be in the classroom, and to be taller than any other boy in the classroom is sufficient for understanding the description "the tallest boy in the classroom," but it does not guarantee knowledge of an object that has these properties: it does not guarantee knowledge of the tallest boy in the classroom. To put the point in Anselm's terminology, my understanding of the expression "the tallest boy in the classroom" does not ensure that the tallest boy in the classroom exists in my understanding.

From the reasoning supporting the second remark follows a third: a description does not have to refer to any object to have a meaning capable of being understood. This claim is confirmed by the observation that the description "the tallest boy in the classroom" would be significant and comprehensible even if there were no boys in the classroom. This observation is explained by the fact that understanding a description is a matter of understanding the properties it specifies, along with the fact that the possibility of enumerating a set of properties does not depend on whether any object has all of those properties. It is intelligible to speak of being a boy, being in the classroom, and being taller than any other boy in the classroom even if no object has all three of these properties; therefore the description "the tallest boy in the classroom" is intelligible even if it is not satisfied.

**III.**

These remarks about descriptions shed light on Anselm's proof. The expression "something than which nothing greater can be thought" is a description: if it refers to an object, it does so by picking out the property of being as great as anything that can be thought. So the

remarks of the previous section may illuminate its function in the argument. Consider proposition (2). Applying the first remark, we see that (2) may be analyzed into the following:

(2a) There is an object that satisfies the description "something than which nothing greater can be thought."

(2b) This object exists in the understanding.

Proposition (2) is true if, and only if, the conjunction of (2a) and (2b) is true.

Applying the second and third remarks, we see that the reasons Anselm offers for accepting (2) are insufficient. Consider the second remark. Anselm maintains that something than which nothing greater can be thought must exist in the fool's understanding because "when this same fool hears me say 'something than which nothing greater can be thought,' he surely understands what he hears," and because "what he understands exists in his understanding."<sup>5</sup> But we saw in discussion of the second remark that understanding a description is a matter of understanding the properties it specifies and that understanding a set of properties does not guarantee knowledge of an object that has those properties. So, it would be more appropriate to say that the property of being as great as anything that can be thought exists in the fool's understanding; it does not follow from Anselm's remarks that any object with this property exists in the fool's understanding. So, the fool's understanding of the expression "something than which nothing greater can be thought" is not a reason to accept (2b).

Now consider the third remark. The description "something than which nothing greater can be thought" can be comprehensible to the fool without there being any object that satisfies that description. The possibility of understanding the property of being as great as anything that can be thought does not depend on there being an object that has that property. So, the fool's understanding of the expression "something than which nothing greater can be thought" is not a reason to accept (2a) either.

So, (2) is not established by anything Anselm says on the subject. Furthermore, since (3) seems to depend on (2) for support,<sup>6</sup> there is no reason to hold onto it if (2) is rejected. Proposition (1), the fool's denial of God's existence, is no longer the only one in doubt. There are now two options open to the fool if he wants to avoid contradiction. Since the conjunction of (2)–(4) does not entail a contradiction, he may accept those propositions and, as Anselm suggests, withdraw (1) and admit the existence of God. But since Anselm's argument does not establish (2) and (3), he may instead withdraw those propositions. In that case, he may hold onto (1) and continue to deny the existence of God, since the conjunction of (1) and (4) does not entail a contradiction. Propositions (2) and (3) are necessary, in Anselm's proof, to show that the fool's denial of God's existence entails a contradiction. Because Anselm's argument fails to establish these propositions, it fails to prove the existence of God.

3. Compare with Bertrand Russell's interpretation of "[T]he author of Waverley was a man" as "One and only one entity wrote Waverley, and that one was a man" in Bertrand Russell, "On Denoting," in *Mind* 14, no. 56 (1905): 488.

4. Russell makes a similar point when he says that "we do not necessarily have acquaintance with the objects denoted by phrases composed of words with whose meanings we are acquainted," Russell, 479-80. One can know the meaning of a description, he suggests, without knowing anything about what it refers to, as long as one knows the meanings of its constituent terms.

5. Anselm, 7.

6. Anselm's argument for (3) makes use of the claim that "if it exists only in the understanding, it can be thought to exist in reality as well," *ibid.* The thought seems to be that an object's existence in the understanding is what makes it possible to imagine its existence in reality.

IV.

Another problem with the proof remains to be addressed. I mentioned in section I that (1), the proof's expression of the denial of God's existence, poses an interpretive problem. I remarked in section II that an indicative sentence with a description as its subject typically assumes that some object satisfies that description and asserts something about that object. If we interpret (1) according to this rule of thumb, it affirms this proposition:

(1a) There is an object that satisfies the description "something than which nothing greater can be thought."

And it denies this one:

(1b) This object exists in reality.

On this interpretation, (1) is true if, and only if, the conjunction of (1a) and the denial of (1b) is true. On this interpretation, the conjunction of (1)–(4) entails a contradiction. The contradiction arises because if (1) is taken to affirm (1a) and to deny (1b), then it denies to an object a property which, according to (2)–(4), is entailed by the description it gives to that same object.

This construal of (1) may be a natural one. But it should be rejected because, on this interpretation, showing that (1), when conjoined with (2)–(4), entails a contradiction is not sufficient to establish the proof's intended conclusion. The goal of the proof is to demonstrate that something than which nothing greater can be thought exists in reality by showing that the denial of this proposition entails a contradiction. So, if showing that (1), when conjoined with (2)–(4), entails a contradiction is to establish the intended conclusion that something than which nothing greater can be thought exists in reality, (1) must express a strict denial of this proposition.

But consider what the denial of this proposition would mean. According to the rule of thumb given by the first remark of section II, the proposition that something than which nothing greater can be thought exists in reality assumes that some object satisfies the description "something than which nothing greater can be thought" and asserts that this object exists in reality: it is true if, and only if, the conjunction of (1a) and (1b) is true. So, the proof must show that the denial of the conjunction of (1a) and (1b) entails a contradiction. Consequently, (1) must be construed not as the conjunction of (1a) and the denial of (1b) but as the denial of the conjunction of (1a) and (1b).

But on this interpretation, the conjunction of (1)–(4) does not entail a contradiction in the same way. On the first interpretation, a contradiction arose because (1) denied to an object a property, which according to (2)–(4), is entailed by the description it gave to that same object. But on this interpretation, (1) does not imply that any object satisfies the description "something than which nothing greater can be thought": (1) is true if an object satisfies that description but does not exist in reality or if nothing satisfies that description. Consequently, it is not open to the charge that it gives that description to an object but denies to that object a property entailed by that description. Nothing (2)–(4) might assert about what that description entails could produce any contradiction between those propositions and (1). So proper interpretation of (1) thwarts the proof's strategy of demonstrating that the denial of

God's existence entails a contradiction by setting forth propositions (2)–(4) to show that the definition of God entails existence in reality.<sup>7</sup>

V.

There is a more general lesson to be learned. My analysis in section III frees the fool to deny God's existence without contradiction by showing that nothing Anselm says gives sufficient reason to accept (2) and (3). But (1) and (4), the propositions left untouched by that analysis, can easily be reformulated, without being unfaithful to the spirit of Anselm's argument, so that their conjunction entails a contradiction. Someone who wanted to resuscitate the proof might begin by redefining God as the being with all perfections. Proposition (1), the denial of God's existence, could then be recast as the following:

(1') The being with all perfections does not exist.

The defender of the proof might then replace (4) with the following principle:

(4') Existence is a perfection.

From (1') and (4') a contradiction something like (5) appears to follow:

(5') The being with all perfections lacks at least one perfection.

We seem to be forced to withdraw (1').<sup>8</sup> A proof much like Anselm's can circumvent the problems raised by my analysis of (2) and (3) in section III. This sort of circumvention is possible because that analysis leaves open the general strategy of demonstrating that the denial of God's existence entails a contradiction by showing that some definition of God entails existence. It only shows the failure of a particular attempt to show that a particular definition of God entails existence.

But the objection developed in section IV is as decisive against this new version of the proof as it is against the original version. Proposition (1'), just as much as (1), poses an interpretive problem. On the interpretation dictated by the first remark of section II, (1') affirms this proposition:

(1'a) There is an object that satisfies the description "the being with all perfections."

7. As we saw in section III, Anselm's proof requires the assumption that an object satisfies the description "something than which nothing greater can be thought" for the truth of (2) as well as for the more serviceable interpretation of (1). Consequently, the fool would have to reject (2) to avoid applying that description to any object in order to hold onto the construal of (1) that I have said thwarts the proof. (And he may, since Anselm does not give sufficient reason to accept (2), as we saw in section III). In spite of this connection, I have chosen to deal with (1) and (2) separately because the problem of the interpretation of (1) has a more general philosophical significance that is explored on its own in section V.

8. Descartes formulates a version of the proof essentially the same as this one when he argues that "it is no less contradictory to think of God (that is, a supremely perfect being) lacking existence (that is, lacking some perfection) than it is to think of a mountain without a valley," in René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald A. Cress, 4th ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998): 89.

### ***Descriptions of God: A Critique of Anselm's Ontological Argument***

And it denies this one:

(1'b) This object exists.

On this construal, (1') denies to an object a property, which according to (4'), is entailed by the description it gives to that same object. This construal of (1'), when conjoined with (4'), entails a contradiction.

But this interpretation, like the first interpretation given of (1), is inadequate. The goal of this new proof is to demonstrate that the being with all perfections exists by showing that the denial of that proposition entails a contradiction. The proposition that the being with all perfections exists is true if and only if the conjunction of (1'a) and (1'b) is true. So, (1'), the denial of the existence of the being with all perfections, must be construed as the denial of the conjunction of (1'a) and (1'b). But because (1'), on this interpretation, does not give the description "the being with all perfections" to any object, it cannot be claimed that it gives that description to an object and then denies to that object a property entailed by that description. So, the new version of the proof fails because the proper construal of (1') does not entail a contradiction when conjoined with (4').

An important lesson can be drawn from this discussion of this new version of the proof. Both versions of the proof attempt to demonstrate that the denial of God's existence entails a contradiction by showing that some definition of God entails existence. The lesson is that the problem of the interpretation of the denial of God's existence is equally fatal to any proof that employs this strategy.

Let me explain why in general terms. As the discussion of this and the previous section illustrates, this strategy requires an interpretation of the denial of God's existence according to which some object satisfies the definition of God and this object does not exist: propositions showing that anything that satisfies the definition must exist contradict the denial of God's existence if, and only if, the denial of God's existence is given this sort of interpretation. But this sort of interpretation is not correct. Since the proposition that God exists is true if, and only if, some object satisfies the definition of God and this object exists, the denial of God's existence is true if, and only if, it is false that some object satisfies the definition of God and this object exists. So, the denial of God's existence does not assume that any object satisfies the definition of God. And if the denial of God's existence does not make this assumption, then it is not inconsistent with any proposition asserting that existence is required by the definition of God. So, any attempt to demonstrate that the denial of God's existence entails a contradiction by showing that some definition of God entails existence is bound to fail.

By paying careful attention to the workings of descriptions, we have learned a great deal about the weaknesses in Anselm's ontological proof of God's existence. We understand now that Anselm fails to support his claim that something than which nothing greater can be thought exists in the understanding. We also understand that the proof depends on a flawed interpretation of the denial that something than which nothing greater can be thought exists in reality. Most importantly, we understand that this second type of problem is fatal to any proof that purports to demonstrate that the denial of God's existence entails a contradiction by showing that the definition of God entails existence. ■