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Gaunilo's Contributions to the Onto(theo)logical** Argument of St. Anselm

Abstract

As soon as Anselm's Proslogion appeared, Gaunilo attacked and severely criticized Anselm's famous onto(theo)logical argument in a short reply On Behalf of the Fool (Pro Insipiente). Gaunilo's objections and criticisms of Anselm's argument, to which are actually contributions, are very crucial not only to the modern reader seeing in it a first example of the endless criticisms of which the argument has been the subject down to the present day, but also to Anselm, since it provided him with the opportunity for developing his argument further and making certain points cleared in his proof that had either been left incomplete or obscure. In this paper, I aim to set forth the debate between Anselm and Gaunilo so as to clarify the most crucial aspects of the *onto(theo)logical argument*.

Key Terms

The onto(theo)logical argument, Objections, Criticisms, Proof, Crucial aspects, Contributions.

Anselmus'un Onto(teo)lojik Kanıtlamasına Gaunilo'nun Yaptığı Katkılar

Özet

Anselmus'un Proslogion adlı yapıtına, On Behalf of the Fool (Pro Insipiente) adlı çalışmasıyla yanıt veren Gaunilo Anselmus'un onto(téo)lojik kanıtlamasına çok ciddi eleştiriler yönelmiştir. Gaunilo'nun Anselmus'un kanıtlamasına yönelttiği eleştiriler; ki bunlar aslında söz konusu argümana yapılan katkılardır, çok önemlidir; çünkü bunlar Anselmus'un kanıtlamasındaki belirsiz ve eksik kalmış yönlerin tamamlanmasına ve açığa kavuşturulmasına olanak sağlamanın yanı sıra, günümüze kadar devam etmiş olan ve bitmek bilmeyen tartışma ve eleştirileri de okuyucunun dikkatine sunmuştur. Bu çalışma onto(teo)lojik kanıtlamanın can alıcı noktalarına ışık tutabilmek için Gaunilo'nun eleştirilerini ve Anselmus'un yanıtlarını ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır.

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** I offer the term onto(theo)logical rather than ontological, since the argument is set forth as a matter of faith by Anselm.

Anahtar Terimler

Onto(teo)lojik kanıtlama, İtirazlar, Eleştiriler, İspat, Canalcı yanlar, Katkılar.

Introduction

St. Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) is famous for his distinctive method, namely, "faith seeking understanding". Better suited to philosophy and contemplation than to politics, Anselm possessed a subtlety and originality, ranking him among the most penetrating medieval thinkers and explain the perennial fascination with his ideas (Honderich 1995: 37). Much influenced by Augustine, Anselm sought "necessary reasons" for religious belief. In addition to this, Anselm's philosophical and theological talents are so impressive that he has been called by some the 'Father of Scholasticism'. And his careful, painstaking methods and the emphasis he puts on the importance of reason to the life of faith are very crucial especially in Medieval Philosophy. His writings are composed of a number of short works, almost all devoted to the philosophical investigation of a specific topic. According to Reese, Anselm held that mere belief was not enough; hence, the task imposed by belief was to illustrate that one's beliefs were rational. According to Anselm, there cannot be any genuine conflict between Christian faith and the findings of reason. As has been mentioned above, Augustinian in orientation and approach, Anselm is best known for his formulation of a distinctive and celebrated argument for God, i.e., the Ontological Argument (Reese 1995: 16). It seems that the ontological argument aims to prove simply from the concept of God as the supreme being, that God's existence cannot rationally be doubted by anyone having such a concept of "Him". Thus, it is a purely a priori argument in a sense, that is to say, one who does not appeal to any facts of experience, but is concerned solely with the implications of concepts; of course in this case the concept of God. Yet, there have been different contexts in which the ontological argument for the existence of God has been illustrated as valid and refuted as invalid. Some critics have considered it hardly more than a play upon words, while others rejecting the argument have nevertheless treated it with the profoundest respect considering it a credit to the wisdom and philosophical penetration of its inventor. In other words, Anselm's attempt to prove the existence of God has attracted the most attention. In Cahn's point of view, the ontological argument has been scorned by some philosophers as the most naive of verbal conjuring tricks, and praised by others as sound. For instance, Gaunilo, Aquinas, Hume and Kant rejected it, while Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz and Hegel accepted it. A number of contemporary philosophers can be found on both sides. It is hard to think of any philosophical argument exciting and agitating thinkers more than this one. Anselm claims that the existence of God can be demonstrated easily by following out the logical implications of a certain characterization of God. Consequently, if Anselm's argument works, atheism does not just happen to be false; it is a logically impossible position as well (Cahn 1990: 363-64).

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Let me first summarise the general structure of Anselm's famous argument briefly so that we can figure out clearly what the objections and replies made by Gaunilo and Anselm are. If I am not mistaken, Anselm's argument in Chapter II of the *Proslogion*

can be stated as follows. Anselm, by referring to God, says that “we believe that you are a being than which nothing greater can be conceived” (Anselm 1962: 53). Even the fool of the *psalms* rejecting the existence of God understands the statement 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 thought 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 out of the question. Hence a being than which a greater cannot be conceived exists both in the understanding and in reality (Anselm 1962: 54). The fool’s failure to see this rests on the distinction between having something in the mind and knowing that something exists in reality. In order to clarify this point, Anselm introduces the example of the painter. When the painter plans beforehand what he is going to execute, he has the picture in his mind, but he does not yet think that it actually exists because he has not yet executed it. However, when he has actually painted it, then he both has it in his mind and understands that it exists because he has now made it (Schufreider 1994: 324). It strikes me that through the illustration of the painter, Anselm wishes to set forth that what does not exist in reality can nevertheless be in the understanding. Like the painter who conceives creation only in his mind until (s)he performs the act itself, the believer has less than an actual concept of God in his primitive concept of “a being than which nothing greater can be conceived”. This concept must be activated by the reflective process, just as the painter’s concept must be actualized.

According to Schufreider, we can formulate the reasoning of Proslogion II, to wit, Anselm’s famous argument as follows:

1. God is something than which nothing greater can be thought.
2. “Something than which nothing greater can be thought” is understood when it is heard.
3. Whatever is understood exists in the understanding.
4. Whatever exists in the understanding either exists in the understanding alone or exists both in the understanding and in reality.
5. That than which a greater cannot be thought cannot exist in the understanding alone.
 - Assume it exists in the understanding alone.
 - Then it can be thought to exist in reality also, which is greater.
 - Thus, if it exists in the understanding alone, it is that than which a greater can be thought.
 - But then, that than which a greater cannot be thought is that than which a greater can be thought; which is absurd.
 - So premise 5 is shown.

6. Therefore, without doubt, something than which a greater cannot be thought exists both in the understanding and in reality (Schufreider 1994: 127).

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Now it is time to examine the criticisms of Gaunilo directed to the ontological argument for the existence of God and Anselm's replies to him.

I. Gaunilo tells Anselm that he is not able to form the concept of a being "which is greater than all which can be conceived, and which, it is said, can be none other than God himself" (Anselm 1962: 306). Indeed, he is a little able to conceive of this being when he hears of it, or to have it in his understanding, as he is able to think of God himself. It is for this reason, Gaunilo adds that he can conceive of God as not existing, because he does not know the reality which God is, nor can he form a supposition of that reality from some other similar reality. Gaunilo tells Anselm "for you yourself assert that this reality is such that there can be nothing else like it" (Anselm 1962: 306). It seems that Gaunilo appears to have misconceived Anselm, because in *Proslogion* XVII, Anselm is clearly sounding off on the very opposite, when he writes, "for thou hast these attributes in thyself, Lord God, after thine ineffable manner, who hast given them to objects created by thee, after their sensible manner" (Anselm, 1962: 69). Also in his *Monologion*, Anselm gets into great detail to tell us how creatures can be more or less like their creator (Anselm 1962: 137-38). Gaunilo, then, states that he can conceive of an unknown or strange man when he hears of him, through some general or specific knowledge by which he knows what man is. Thus, he can think of the man in accordance with the fact that is real and familiar to him: but of God, or a being greater than all others, he could not conceive at all, except merely according to the word. And an object can hardly or never be conceived according to the word alone (Anselm 1962: 306-07). Anselm argues that,

"It was a fool against whom the argument of my *Proslogion* was directed. Seeing, however that the author of these objections is by no means a fool, and is a catholic, speaking in behalf of the fool, I think it sufficient that I answer the catholic" (Anselm 1962: 311).

Anselm states that if a being than which a greater is inconceivable is not understood or thought, and is not in the understanding or in concept, then either God is not a being than which a greater is inconceivable, or else he is not understood or thought, and is not in the understanding or in concept (Anselm 1962: 312). Yet Anselm calls on the faith and conscience of Gaunilo to testify that this cannot be the case with a view to illustrating that his reasoning is not justifiable because it is dependent logically on faulty grounds.

Anselm attempts to show Gaunilo that a being than which a greater is not conceivable can be thought, and insofar as it is thought, it exists (Anselm 1962: 315). As a matter of fact, when a fool hears mentioned a being that which a greater is not conceivable, he understands what he hears. "For, if one does not understand what is told him in a familiar language, he either has no understanding at all or is very numb. Now, if this being is understood at all, then it is in the understanding. How could it be

otherwise if this being has been proved necessarily to exist in reality?" (Anselm 1962: 315).

Moreover, if Gaunilo insists that even if the being is in the understanding, it does not come out of that it is understood, Anselm gives as a further response that "the fact of its being understood does necessitate its being in the understanding... for what is understood by understanding, as it is understood, so is in the understanding" (Anselm 1962: 315). Anselm also wants Gaunilo to be cautious to refrain from stating that this being may be only partially understood, or is not thoroughly understood, because to hold this is like saying that, "a man who cannot face the direct rays of the sun, does not see the light of day, which is none other than the sunlight" (Anselm 1962: 314). Hence Anselm draws the conclusion that "a being than which a greater cannot be conceived exists, and is in the understanding, at least to this extent... these statements regarding it are understood" (Anselm 1962: 314).

Anselm next displays that we can have the idea of this being by departing from a lesser to a greater good. It appears to me that Anselm makes a very important point here against Gaunilo's criticism that when he hears of "a being than which a greater is not conceivable", he is not able to think of it in terms of any real object known to him either specifically or generally; and consequently, he is not able to have it in his understanding. Anselm says that this obviously is false, because "everything that is less good insofar as it is good, is like the greater good. It is, therefore, evident to any rational mind, that by ascending from the lesser good to the greater, we can form a considerable notion of a being than which a greater is inconceivable" (Anselm 1962: 325). Anselm goes on by illustrating an example that "who... supposing that there is some good which has a beginning and an end, cannot conceive that a good is much better, which if it begins, does not cease to be?" (Anselm 1962: 325). Now a good is even better if it has neither a beginning nor an end, even though, it is ever passing from the past through the present to the future. And, much better than this, if it exists as a being demanding no change or motion. Is not such a being conceivable, Anselm asks Gaunilo, is this not a case of forming a notion from objects than which a greater is conceivable, of the being than which a greater cannot be conceived (Anselm 1962: 325-26).

In a nut shell, still referring to the first criticism of Gaunilo, Anselm responds to him that even if it were true that a being than which a greater is not conceivable cannot be conceived or understood, yet it would be true to say that the meaning of such a being is conceivable and intelligible. Anselm continues by stating that whoever denies the existence of a being than which a greater cannot be conceived, at least understands and thinks of the denial that he makes. But, this man cannot stick to this denial without understanding all the terms in the statement, and since one of the terms in the statement is a being than which a greater cannot be conceived, it follows that whoever makes this denial, understands and conceives of that than which a greater is inconceivable (Anselm 1962: 327).

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II. Gaunilo's second criticism of Anselm can be set forth as follows: This being is said to be in my mind already, only because I see what is said. But, the fool could have in his mind all kinds of unreal objects which have no existence in themselves. Hence, Anselm should prove that this being is of such a nature that it cannot be held in concept

like all unreal objects, and that it cannot be thought of in any other way than by understanding it, i.e., by comprehending its existence in reality through knowledge (Anselm 1962: 304). If this is not exhibited, then Gaunilo says there will be no time difference between (1) having the object in the understanding and (2) the understanding that the object exists, as in the example of the painting which first exists in the mind of the painter and also later in his work. Anselm should also prove that,

“this being so exists that it cannot be perceived by an understanding convinced of its own indubitable existence, unless this being is afterwards conceived of... this should be proved to me by an indisputable argument, but not by that which you have advanced: namely, that what I understand, when I hear it, is already in my understanding. For thus in my understanding, as I still think, could be all sorts of things whose existence is uncertain, or which do not exist at all, if one whose words I should understand mentioned them” (Anselm 1962: 304-305).

It seems that if Anselm cannot show this, the fool's status would be all the more justified, because he could be misled about these things which he is alleged to figure out. Anselm replies that the way to understanding both real and unreal beings is the same. I think that Anselm's main point made against Gaunilo's objection here is the following: there is no reason to assume that the being which Anselm spoke of is understood differently from those beings which are unreal, because the way in both examples is the same. For, Anselm argues that “if unreal objects, or objects whose existence is not certain are in the understanding, because, when they are spoken of, the hearer figures out what the speaker means, then there is no reason why that being of which we spoke of should not be understood and be in the understanding” (Anselm 1962: 322).

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III. Gaunilo criticizes Anselm by pointing out that the example of the painter having already in his understanding what he is to paint is not in agreement with his argument. For the painting, before being made, is included in the art of the painter itself. And any such thing that exists in painter's art is nothing but a part of his understanding itself (Anselm 1962: 305).

Anselm answers to Gaunilo by stating that “I had no thought of asserting that the being which I was discussing is of such a nature, that is, as that of a not yet executed painting; but I wished to set forth that what is not understood to exist can be in the understanding” (Anselm 1962: 325).

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IV. Gaunilo criticizes Anselm by saying that if it should be told that a being which cannot be even thought in terms of any fact, is in the understanding, I do not deny that this being is in my understanding. But, to hold that this being has somehow gained real existence due to this fact is wrong, because no proof of it has yet been presented to us (Anselm 1962: 307). Gaunilo continues by arguing that,

“he who says that this being exists, because otherwise the being which is greater than all will not be greater than all, does not attend strictly enough to what he is saying. For I do not yet say, no. I even deny or doubt that this being is greater than any real object. Nor do I concede to it any other existence than this (if it should be called existence) which it has when the mind, according to a word merely heard,

tries to form the image of an object absolutely unknown to it" (Anselm 1962: 308).

Gaunilo goes on by asking: How can one prove the existence of such a being on the conviction that it is greater than all other beings? In addition to this, if one should deny or doubt this demonstration, and not accept that this being exists in his understanding even in the way as unreal objects do, then Anselm should first prove to Gaunilo that this being really exists somewhere, and then from the fact that it is greater than all (Anselm 1962: 308-09).

Anselm, in the first place, points out to Gaunilo that if the being in question is in the understanding alone, then one can think of yet another being existing in reality that would undoubtedly be greater so that the very being than which a greater cannot be thought, would be one than which a greater can be conceived (Anselm 1962: 315). Anselm continues to say that if it existed even in the understanding alone, can it not be thought as well to exist in reality? And if it can be so thought, does not he who thinks of this conceive of a thing greater than that being, if it exists in the understanding alone? Anselm argues that the more consistent conclusion can be drawn than this is that if a being than which a greater cannot be thought is in the understanding alone, it is not that than which a greater cannot be thought. Anselm suggests Gaunilo that they both think of a situation where one can think of a being, a greater than which is not conceivable, and that this being does not exist. It seems that what can be thought, but does not exist, and only later comes into existence, means that the being coming into existence is not the greatest conceivable being that was thought. That is to say, this would be a nonsense situation in which the greatest conceivable being is not the greatest conceivable being. As a result, Anselm tells, it is not true to deny that a being than which a greater can be thought exists, if it can be even thought.

Moreover, Anselm points out that "a being than which a greater is not conceivable cannot be thought as having a beginning. For, whatever can be thought to exist and does not exist is thought to exist only through a beginning. Therefore, what can be thought to exist, but does not exist, is not the being than which a greater cannot be thought. Hence, if such a being can be thought to exist, necessarily it does exist" (Anselm 1962: 312). Anselm is trying to present his proof on the basis of an epistemological fact that when the mind thinks of something that does not exist, it thinks of it only as having a beginning. However, the greatest conceivable being cannot be thought of as having a beginning, thus, if it can be thought at all, which it can be without any contradiction, then it can also be thought of as being non-existent (Hick & McGill 1967: 22).

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V. Gaunilo suggests Anselm that they both think someone were to tell Anselm that somewhere in the ocean there exists an island called the lost island due to the impossibility of discovering it. And that this island is said to have all kinds of priceless wealth and riches in greater affluence than is told of the islands of the Blest; and further that, having no owner or inhabitant, it is more excellent than all other countries, which are inhabited by mankind (Anselm 1962: 308-09). In this case, Gaunilo asserts, he would have no difficulty in understanding the man's words. But, let us suppose that the man continued by stating that,

"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" (Anselm 1962: 309).

Gaulino insists that what one needs to prove is that the hypothetical excellence of this island exists as a real and indubitable fact, and in no wise as any unreal object, the existence of which is not certain in his mind.

Anselm finds Gaulino's mentioned criticism rather weak, but nevertheless very important. Addressing to the island, Anselm tells that,

"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 his lost island, not to be lost again" (Anselm 1962: 316).

It seems that the point Anselm is making here is that the lost island, even if it is the most excellent island of all, is a contingent and created thing, deriving its existence from something other than itself. That is to say, it is not a self-existing being, and so the island would really be an imperfect being. For instance, it would have to rely on the sea to wash and maintain its coasts and shores. In addition, it would have to count on the rain and the sun for keeping itself warm and abundantly filled with vegetations. Hence, no matter how excellent Gaulino would like to make it, this example akin to the island cannot apply to, and not be compared with, that of the greatest conceivable being, who does not depend on another for its existence. As a matter of fact, the greatest conceivable being carries the necessity of its existence in the very concept of itself, to wit, that than which nothing greater can be thought.

"Anselm stresses the point further by arguing that the island like any contingent creature is indifferent to existence, i.e., it may or may not exist. But, in the case of the greatest conceivable being, there is no such indifference, because this being exists by its very nature, and is such that one cannot even think of it as non-existing" (Bonansea 1979: 141). As a result, to Anselm's mind, there is no similarity between his argument and Gaulino's lost island at all.

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VI. In making the point above, Gaulino tells Anselm that "the fool should be assured first of all that this being is so great that non-existence of which is not even conceivable, and secondly it should be proved to him that this being also exists in reality to such a degree that it cannot even be conceived not to exist" (Anselm 1962: 310). It strikes me that what Gaulino asks for from Anselm is this: Anselm must prove to Gaulino in a definitive way that the greatest conceivable being does indeed exist in reality rather than deriving its existence from the mere concept of it. Having shown that the greatest conceivable being exists in reality, only then should Anselm be legislated for deriving from it all its necessary attributes, and not the other way around, where the attributes of the being in question are employed to prove its existence.

Anselm replies by stating that there is the possibility of understanding and conceiving of a supremely great being. He tells Gaunilo that it is possible for one to think of and figure out a being whose very non-existence is out of the question; but the person thinking of this being conceives of a greater being than the one whose non-existence is possible, then for sure that is not a being than which a greater is inconceivable. In short, Anselm argues that "if one can think of a being whose very non-existence is impossible, then what he conceives of must exist, for anything whose non-existence is possible, is not that of which he conceives" (Anselm 1962: 327). If I am not mistaken what Anselm says is this: since the greatest conceivable being is such that it cannot even be thought not to exist, it must be such that it exists always, and everywhere, and is not in time but outside the time and the universe.

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VII. Gaunilo now deals with the issues in Anselm's statement that the non-existence of this being is inconceivable, and suggests that it would have been better if he had said that its non-existence or the possibility of its non-existence is unintelligible (Anselm 1962: 310). For, according to the true or real meaning of the word, only unreal objects are unintelligible, but their existence is nevertheless conceivable in the same way as the fool was able to think of the non-existence of God.

Anselm answers this criticism of Gaunilo by pointing out the distinction between the terms "conceiving" and "understanding" while the term "conceiving" refers only to those objects that either have a beginning or an end, or are made up of composing parts, that is, objects that exists or do not exist; the term "understanding" is reserved for those objects that cannot be understood not to exist (Anselm 1962: 317-18). Hence, Anselm draws the conclusion that "of God alone it can be said that it is impossible to conceive of his non-existence" (Anselm 1962: 319). In other words, God so truly exists without a beginning or an end that He does not fall into the class of ordinary objects that come and go out of existence.

It seems that the difference between "conceiving" and "understanding", as made by Anselm, is a very important one, and not just a semantic difference. Hence, it should not be discarded easily since it is related to the very heart of the logic of Anselm's whole reasoning.

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VIII. The final point Gaunilo criticizes and blames Anselm that will be discussed is that Anselm tries to demonstrate the existence of God merely from the notion of "a being greater than all other beings" (Anselm 1962: 303).

Anselm easily refutes Gaunilo's challenge by arguing 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: 319-320).

According to Schufreider, Gaunilo got Anselm's argument wrong because Gaunilo altered the key phrase from something than which nothing greater can be thought to that than which is greater than everything clearly not noticing that in so doing, he must change the form of the argument as well (Schufreider 1992: 489). Schufreider goes on

by saying 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: 491-92). In the final analysis, 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 conclusion, I think that Anselm wanted to offer a rational justification of man's belief in God from the concept we have of him from revelation, i.e., the concept of a being than which nothing greater can be conceived. It seems that through the analysis of this concept he reaches the conclusion that no one, and here especially to the fool of the psalms, can possibly deny the existence of God if he understands the meaning and content of this concept as something distinct from the mere knowledge of it. In the final analysis, it seems that the most striking thing regarding the debate between Anselm and Gaunilo is that Anselm had an opportunity for developing his argument further and clarifying certain points thanks to Gaunilo's contributions in his proof.

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