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Ontological Argument: Anselm

An ontological argument is a deductive argument that explains God's existence based on general principles of metaphysics and other assumptions pertaining to the essence or nature of God. Three significant developments have come up in the ontological arguments' history. An Italian monk named Anselm (1033-1109), who later became the Archbishop of Canterbury, formed the oldest of the three. He firmly believed in God; consequently, he sought a confirmation of his strong faith and proof of God's existence by employing logic and reason. He did this in the second chapter of his book *Proslogion* (1078). Various scholars, such as Gaunilo, criticized this argument. Rowe tried to defend Anselm's argument. However, his defense did not succeed in dismissing Gaunilo's criticism (Malcom 41).

According to Anselm, God is the greatest entity. He goes on to claim that everybody is in agreement with this definition including those who believe in Him and those who do not, like the fool in the book of Psalms who says that he does not believe in God. Anselm acknowledges a variance in understanding God an existing entity and understanding Him as a concept. Anselm uses the painter's analogy to explain this point. He postulates that prior to creating a masterpiece, a painter can clearly visualize a painting in his or her head. However, the painter knows the painting does not exist, and so he understands the painting as a concept. When the painter completes his work, he sees it in reality. He is able to understand both the painting's ideology

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and its existence. Any of God's believers who concur with Anselm's argument would be at the later stage; they have an understanding of both the idea and the existence in reality (Malcom 43).

Anselm stresses on the correctness of his definition of God. If one assumes that the definition is valid, it appears that God is perfect and nothing in existence is mightier than He is. Resting his argument on this definition, Anselm concludes that the God that exists is obviously greater than the one who does not exist. Consequently, the God whose definition is perfection must exist. Saying that God does not exist means that He is not the greatest. In turn, this implies that He is not God. Anselm takes the characteristic 'existing' to be a defining predicate of 'God' as a subject. Simply put, God has to exist, since he is perfect. If He were non-existent, then he would have to be less than perfect, thus not God according to the definition he puts forward. 'God exists' is an analytic statement, whereby God must exist by definition (Malcom 46).

In the third chapter of the book, Anselm speaks of God's nature rather than of His definition. God's first quality is that He has to exist. All inanimate and living things are contingent; their existence is dependent on that of other things, and they are not a necessary in any way. For instance, children exist only because their parents conceived them. However, it is not necessary that they exist, since the world would continue to be in existence even without their conception. Anselm implies that not only is God necessary, but also it is impossible for Him not to be. God has to exist in every perspective of the matter. The conclusion is that it is impossible to not believe in God while thinking of God and agreeing that He fits the 'correct definition' proposed by Anselm. Anselm goes on to assert that if there were a greater being than God, then it would judge the creator having risen above Him. This becomes an absurd situation, and consequently, God, in all of His perfection, has to exist by definition and logically (Malcom 49).

Anselm's argument came under criticism from Gaunilo in his book *On Behalf of the Fool*. This is despite the fact that Gaunilo was a firm believer as well, not to mention a monk too. Just like Anselm, Gaunilo refers to the same fool in the book of Psalms who has no faith in God. Gaunilo criticizes Anselm's claim that God's definition is perfection, and He has to exist, since the God that exists is better than the one who does not exist; the implication becomes that if God did not exist, then He would not be perfect; hence, He would not be God. Gaunilo applies Anselm's logic to his own 'Perfect Island's' example. According to him, the perfect island has to exist in reality in order to be perfect. If it does not exist, then calling it the perfect island becomes a contradiction. By employing this line of reasoning, the conclusion is that the perfect island has to exist in reality, because the failure to exist makes it an imperfect island. It is common knowledge that in reality no perfect island exists; therefore, Gaunilo's reasoning suggests that Anselm's argument does not hold. According to him, if Anselm's argument does not work when applied to parallel arguments, then it does not work in applying it to God's example either. Additionally, Gaunilo suggests that the concept of God is hard to conceive. He goes on to argue that many theists would agree that the nature of God is hard to comprehend fully. For this reason, the argument cannot work, because humans are unable to conceive God fully (Malcom 51-52).

Anselm tries to defend his theory by saying that the island and any other example is not like God; hence, such examples cannot work. The island is contingent, and it is not necessary at all. It relies on the sea and the earth to exist; it is entirely possible for the island to be non-existent. God, however, has to exist. What is more, His existence does not depend on anything else. Additionally, Anselm postulates that it is not possible to define the perfect island. It is not true to say that the island increases in terms of its perfection with its increase in size or by the addition of an extra grain of sand. On the other hand, Anselm specifically defines God, so the

Ontological Argument is applicable to Him. In a way, Anselm's response to Gaunilo puts some strength back in his argument by challenging Gaunilo's points of attack against the argument (Malcom 54).

Rowe comes to Anselm's defense and tries to punch holes in Gaunilo's points of attack against the argument. He stipulates that the line of reasoning that Gaunilo uses is not exactly parallel to the one that Anselm uses. To be specific, the argument by Anselm proposes that there exists some being so great that nothing greater can be thought. He does not argue that there has to be the greatest beings of all sorts. Consequently, the only implication that Anselm's argument gives is that there exists some being that is greater than the island that Gaunilo describes. The being does not necessarily have to be an island (Malcom 57).

It is clear that Gaunilo's criticism of the argument does not necessarily prove it untrue or flawed. It only shows that if Anselm's argument is true, then so are other arguments that use the same form of logic and that are unacceptable. This is the point of strength for Anselm's theory. It is not wrong, but it is not trustworthy, because it uses the same logic as other theories that are unacceptable. Despite this, Rowe does not succeed in dismissing the claims that Gaunilo makes in his critique of Anselm's argument. Rowe says that Anselm only suggests that there exists some being that is incomparable to others. Additionally, Rowe says that the being that Anselm speaks about does not necessarily have to be an island. This statement implies that Anselm's argument is only applicable in some cases, but it is not a universal argument. If the argument is sound, then it should be relevant and applicable to all cases and to all objects. Otherwise, it is not a valid argument. In this light, Rowe is not successful in defending the argument. He does not give any valid reason to disregard Gaunilo's criticism. The criticism, therefore, still holds. This is particularly for those cases where the object or subject in question is something like that island.

In such instances, Anselm's argument becomes inconclusive; hence, it becomes inapplicable (Malcom 60-62).

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Works Cited

Malcolm, Norman. "Anselm's Ontological Argument." *Philosophical Review* 69.1 (1960): 41-62.

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