

LeMans and *Proslogion* 15

ABSTRACT. Kearns 2021 argues that there is a parody version of Anselm’s ontological argument (a “gontological argument”) which shows that God does not exist. I show that Anselm considers one of the key premises in Kearns’ gontological argument, and explicitly gives an argument which entails its falsity, and hence the unsoundness of the supposed parody argument.

1. Introduction

It is an exciting time for medieval philosophy. Recent archival research done by Stephen Kearns (Kearns 2021) at the site of the Librarium Babelii (first discovered by J. L. Borges in 1941; for a detailed report see Borges 1984b) has uncovered the long-lost autograph of *Drosslogion*, the important work by medieval philosopher LeMans which formed the basis for Anselm’s parody so-called “ontological arument”. Kearns’ reconstruction of the argument from the original Pig-Latin is meticulously done. In this paper, I hope to offer evidence that Anselm, in the same work that he offers his parody argument, gives a direct reply to hers. Rather than offering *merely* a parody, he additionally offers an argument which directly entails the unsoundness of hers.

2. LeMans’ Argument

Kearns’ reconstruction of the original argument runs as follows:

- (L1) It is possible to conceive of a being greater than all actual things.
- (L2) Suppose: A being than which no greater can be conceived actually exists.
- (L3) If a being than which no greater can be conceived actually exists and it is possible to conceive of a being greater than all actual things, then it is possible to conceive of a being greater than a being than which no greater can be conceived – namely, a being greater than all actual things.

- (L4) It is not possible to conceive of a being greater than a being than which no greater can be conceived.
- (L5) (Hence) A being than which no greater can be conceived does not actually exist. (Reduction of 2, from 1–4.) (Kearns 2021, 448; I have relabeled the premises but otherwise changed nothing else)

Some liberties have been taken with the original text. For instance, while classical Pig-Latin has no articles, definite or otherwise, medieval Pig-Latin does. That being said, the argument is, I believe, a faithful reconstruction of the original. Kearns notes, of LeMans' argument, that "it is unclear how one might rationally support [Anselm's] argument without also advocating [LeMans']." (452)

I want to argue, however, that it *is* clear how Anselm can rationally support his argument without supporting LeMans'. Specifically, I will present evidence that Anselm indirectly considers (L1) – the premise that it is possible to conceive of a being greater than all actual things – and rejects it as the result of an argument.

3. *Proslogion* 15

Anselm offers his parody of LeMans' argument in *Proslogion* 2. The relevant portion is:

Now we believe that You are something than which nothing greater can be thought. Or can it be that a thing of such a nature does not exist, since 'the Fool has said in his heart, there is no God' [Ps. 13:1; 52:1]? But surely, when this same Fool hears what I am speaking about, namely, 'something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought', he understands what he hears, and what he understands is in his mind, even if he does not understand that it actually exists. For it is one thing for an object to exist in the mind, and another thing to understand that an object actually exists...And surely that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought cannot exist in the mind alone. For if it exists solely in the mind, it can be thought to

exist in reality also, which is greater. If then that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-bethought exists in the mind alone, this same that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought is that-than-which-a-greater-can-be thought. But this is obviously impossible. (Anselm 1998b, 87–8)

Most people stop reading there. But it is important to note that Anselm goes on to give an elaboration of several of the points addressed in that section later on in the work. Most importantly for our purposes, he writes the following, in *Proslogion* 15 (translation my own, from Anselm 1946-1961, v. 1, p. 112):

Hence, Lord, not only are you that greater than which is unable to be thought, but you are something greater than *can be thought* [*cogitari possit*, emphasis mine]. For since something of this kind [i.e., something greater than which is unable to be thought] *can be thought to be* [*valet cogitari esse*, emphasis mine], if you are not this thing itself, something greater than you is able to be thought [*potest cogitari*, emphasis mine], which is unable to happen.

Let us reconstruct this, somewhat charitably, as follows:

- (A1) God is some-being-greater-than-which-cannot-be-thought-of (an S). (premise)
- (A2) It is possible to think *that there is* some being greater than can be thought of. (premise)
- (A3) If an S can be thought of, then it is possible to thought *that there is* some being greater than that S. (from (A2))
- (A4) It is not possible to think *that there is* some being greater than an S. (premise)
- (A5) An S cannot be thought of. (from (A3) and (A4))
- (A6) God cannot be thought of. (from (A1) and (A5))

The turning point of my reconstruction of Anselm’s argument is that thinking-that-there-is and thinking-of are importantly different. This is my way, in English, of rendering the difference between *cogitari* and *cogitari esse* (literally, “to be thought” and “to be though to be”). The first is to endorse a proposition concerning the existence of some entity. The second is, roughly, to conceive

of that entity, to entertain its concept, without any particular existential commitment. My use of “think” and its cognates rather than “conceive” and its does not reflect any thick philosophical difference, only a slavish desire to stick to the surface meaning of the Latin.

Not every proposition that one can take a thinking-that-there-is attitude towards, according to Anselm, necessarily corresponds to some being, state of affairs, or other entity that one can take a thinking-of attitude towards. This the point of (A₄). And note that, if this argument is successful, *any* S will not be able to be thought-of. If the argument is sound, then, one is forced to reject (L₁) in LeMans’ argument, since anything greater-than-which-cannot-be-thought is also something that cannot be thought-of.

4. Concluding Remarks

My point here is not to argue that Anselm’s responsorial argument to LeMans’ argument is sound, even though all three premises are varying degrees of plausible. (A₁) seems definitionally true on the classical conception of God. (A₂) appears at least minimally plausible; no contradiction is obviously involved in the relevant conception. (A₄) is probably the most vulnerable, as it posits a substantive and perhaps non-trivial connection between thinking-that-there-is and thinking-of.¹

But I have not set out here to defend Anselm’s parody’s *soundness*. Instead, what I have tried to show is that Anselm explicitly endorses a proposition which entails the falsity of (L₁), and hence entails that LeMans’ argument is unsound – and he even gives an argument for it. Nor have I set out to defend the ontological argument. There may be something else quite wrong with it, or there may not. My argument does not touch that. Nor have I argued that the argument from *Proslogion* 15 entails any controversial existence claims by itself. Coupled with Anselm’s general ontological argument, yes, it does. But that does not touch the analysis in §3.

Instead, what I have argued is this. Not only does Anselm plausibly reject (L₁) in the same work that he offers the ontological argument, he gives a concrete reason as to *why* he does. Namely, he argues that any S must also be a being that cannot be thought-of. Perhaps his argument works, and perhaps it doesn’t; further inquiry is required. But even if it doesn’t, then his argument is no mere

1. To give a fully worked-out account of just what a theory incorporating such a connection would look like is far beyond the scope of the present task. Nonetheless, that is what Anselm appears to be after.

parody of LeMans', for he explicitly rejects one of the key premises of her argument. Hence, it is free from the problems which afflict an argument which has a relevantly similar parody.

References

Primary Sources.

Anselm. 1998a. *Anselm of Canterbury: the major works*. Edited by Brian Davies and G. R. Evans. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

———. 1998b. “Proslogion.” In Anselm [1998a](#).

———. 1946-1961. *Opera Omnia*. Edited by Franciscus Salesius Schmitt. Edinburgh: Thomam Nelson et filios.

Borges, Jorge Luis. 1984a. *Borges: Obras Completas 1923-1972*. Edited by Carlos V. Frías. Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores.

———. 1984b. “La Biblioteca de Babel.” In Borges [1984a](#).

Secondary Sources.

Kearns, Stephen. 2021. “LeMans’s Gontological Argument.” *Analysis* 81 (3): 447–452.