

# A Devilish Twist on Anselm's Ontological Argument

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St Anselm formulated his ontological argument to prove the existence of God. This paper is not intended to further the much-discussed issue of whether or not the argument is sound, but is instead concerned with some of the interesting consequences it would entail if it *were* sound: namely the fact that the ontological argument can also be used to prove or disprove the existence of the Devil. This paper will discuss the various guises of the Devil and the consequences the ontological argument holds for them. It will become apparent that Anselm's meaning on some points is unclear, and I will try to unravel these ambiguities before offering my opinion as to which interpretation of Anselm is correct. This paper will show that if Anselm's argument is sound then the Devil could exist, in at least one of his guises.

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## §1 Introduction

St Anselm's ontological argument is a classic *a priori* proof for the existence of God, the idea being that if we properly understand the nature of God then we will understand that he must exist. Although the proof is widely held to be unsound this paper is not concerned with evaluating the argument but rather with analysing some of the bizarre consequences it would entail if it *were* sound: if Anselm has successfully proved the existence of God, then what does that mean for the Devil?

This paper will outline Anselm's argument and clear up some definitional clutter before turning to the implications the argument has for the Devil. The Devil has been commonly identified as either 'that which nothing lesser can be conceived' or as 'that which nothing worse can be conceived', and we will examine the implications Anselm's argument has for both beings in this order. When we come to consider the existence of the latter being objections to the coherency of its concept will be discussed, and it will also become apparent that Anselm's ontological argument can be interpreted and applied to it in crucially different ways. Having considered the various implications that the different interpretations have for the Devil there will be a brief debate as to which interpretation of Anselm is correct. Assuming that Anselm's argument is sound, this paper will seek to show that if the Devil were identified with

‘that which nothing lesser can be conceived’ then it cannot exist, but that if it were identified with ‘that which nothing worse can be conceived’ then it could exist, depending on how Anselm’s argument is interpreted.

## §2 Anselm’s Ontological Argument

We will begin by outlining Anselm’s ontological argument for the existence of God. Anselm defines God as ‘that which nothing greater can be conceived’, and seeks to prove his existence in the following steps (Anselm, 1996, 99-100):

- P1) There is, in the understanding at least, something than which nothing greater can be conceived
- P2) If it is in the understanding then it can be thought to be in reality also
- P3) Which is greater
- C) There exists, therefore, both in the understanding and in reality, something than which nothing greater can be conceived.

Before proceeding further it is worth noting that while Anselm’s ontological argument has often been parodied in order to show that it is faulty, if the argument can be used to show that Devil does (or does not) exist this does not necessarily show that the argument is at fault, merely that it has some unexpected consequences. Furthermore these Devil parodies prove resilient to objections that have disposed of other parodies, so if the implications for the Devil that arise from the ontological argument prove unwelcome to the theist they will be harder to dismiss without dismissing the ontological argument as a whole (Chambers, 2000, 113).

Having outlined Anselm’s argument we will assume that it is sound, and now ask how it can be applied to the Devil. As mentioned above, the Devil has been identified with two different beings. The first being is an antonym of Anselm’s definition of God: ‘that which nothing lesser can be conceived’. However, Anselm identifies God not only with ‘that which nothing greater can be conceived’ but also with ‘that which nothing better can be conceived’: God is omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent (Mason, 1978, 3). Thus the Devil has also been identified with ‘that which nothing worse can be conceived’: a being that is omnipotent, omniscient and evil. Perry Mason interestingly observes that while it seems impossible to identify ‘that which

nothing lesser can be conceived' with 'that which nothing worse can be conceived', the antonyms of these beings are combined by Anselm in God (Mason, 1978, 3). It should also be pointed out that neither of these 'devils' coincides with the Devil of traditional theology: a fallen angel with many positive attributes and an over-weening pride (Oppy, 1995, 183). Whether or not one *should* identify the Devil of traditional theology with any or all of these beings is an open question, as is the issue of how many devils one feels compelled to admit into one's personal ontology (Mason, 1978, 3).

### §3 The Devilish Twist

#### 3.1 *The Non-existence of the 'Least Being'*

Firstly then we shall examine the implications the ontological argument has for the existence of 'that which nothing lesser can be conceived'. It seems obvious that if the Devil is to be identified with this being, and if existence is a great-making property, then the Devil cannot exist. Theodore Waldman thus rephrases Anselm's argument: 'I have in mind the idea of a being than which none less can be conceived. Clearly, if this being exists in reality, it is greater. Therefore such a being... exists only in my mind' (Waldman, 1959, 50). There is, however, a problem with Waldman's argument. Timothy Chambers points out that just as existence in reality is greater than existence in the understanding alone, surely existence in the understanding alone is greater than not so existing at all (Chambers, 2000, 111). This means that this Devil cannot even exist in the understanding.

Such a consequence of the ontological argument does not seem to be a problem for the theist. Anselm himself seems to have noted that a being 'than which nothing lesser can be conceived' is simply nothing (Oppy, 1995, 183). Unfortunately though Chambers claims that this parody is far from innocuous, and that while *prima facie* it may seem so - as it does not involve anything blinking into existence - in actual fact it does threaten Anselm's ontological argument (Chambers, 2000, 94). However, such problems are outside the scope of this paper.

#### 3.1 *The Existence of the 'Worst Being'*

Secondly then we will consider the implications that the ontological argument has for ‘that which nothing worse can be conceived’. Before proceeding further though we need to establish that the concept of this Devil is coherent. Earlier we listed the attributes of Devil, but it has been objected that these attributes are incompatible. For example, it could be argued that an evil being could not perform a good deed and so would not be omnipotent. The problem though with this objection is that if it applies to ‘that which nothing worse can be conceived’ then it also applies inversely to ‘that which nothing better can be conceived’: surely then an omnibenevolent being cannot have the power to sin (Devine, 1975, 257). If you consider the latter concept to be coherent then you must accept the former (Oppy, 1995, 183). A better objection to this Devil arises through the possible nature of evil: it could be argued that if evil is merely a privation of goodness then an evil being could not exist, as evil would not be a moral property. However, Peter Millican replies that even if evil were merely a privation of goodness this provides no relevant objection to the parody argument, for if a scale of goodness can be set up then a scale of evilness can be defined straightforwardly as its inverse, and if goodness has a determinate limiting value then it is hard not to see why evil should not have one too, even if that value is different and for the purposes of this argument is zero rather than an infinite value (Millican, 2004, 461-2). One last objection to the coherency of this Devil is based on the idea that moral facts are intrinsically motivating and so an omniscient being *must* be good (Millican, 2004, 462). But, as Millican writes, even if such a manoeuvre (and the questionable moral metaphysics that underlies it) were accepted, all one would have to do would be to drop the criteria of omniscience from ‘that which nothing worse can be conceived’, producing a more modest but still anti-theistic conclusion (Millican, 2004, 462).

Having established that our concept of this Devil *is* coherent, let us hold up our mirror-image parody of the moral dimension and see what implications the ontological argument has for its existence (Millican, 2004, 461). The problem with determining the existence of this Devil (unlike with our previous Devil, which is merely an antonym of God) is that it hangs on how one interprets Anselm’s argument. The first interpretation is that Anselm has proved the existence of God since God is the ‘best’ being, and since it is *more good* to exist in reality this means that God exists. The second interpretation is that Anselm has proved the existence of God since God is the ‘greatest’ being, and since it is greater to have *more reality* God

exists in reality at the top of an ontological hierarchy. The implications these different interpretations have for ‘that which nothing worse can be conceived’ will be examined in the above order.

What then does it mean that it is *better* for God to exist? Within this interpretation there are, unfortunately, two more possible meanings to distinguish between. Either existence is better because it is a perfection or a good, or existence somehow intensifies the qualities of existents. Both meanings will be applied to the Devil. If existence is a good then, as C. K. Grant argues, the Devil cannot exist: ‘if it is supposed that existence is one of the properties comprised in the conception of perfection, then non-existence must also be a property of a completely imperfect being’ (Grant, cited in Chambers, 2000, 94). Similarly David Haight observes that if existence is a good then there is no such thing as a good devil (Haight, 1974, 154). If existence is a good then an ultimately evil being cannot exist. More complex is the second possible meaning: that existence is not a good but somehow intensifies qualities. Robert Richman thus parodies Anselm’s argument: if one has an idea of a being than which nothing more evil can be conceived, then clearly that being is more evil if it exists in reality than if it exists only in the mind, therefore the Devil exists (Richman, 1958, 64). The idea here is that Anselm’s argument admits of a generalisation (Oppy, 1995, 182). Richman claims that the ontological argument is dependant only upon a comparative evaluation of a being existing in reality and a being only existing in thought (Richman, 1960, 79). If true then a parallel argument to Anselm’s original also results from the universal replacement of ‘greater than’ by any comparative term, including ‘more evil than’ (Richman, 1960, 79). Although Waldman calls Richman’s attempt to prove the Devil in this way ‘black magic’, Richman protests that it does not even involve ‘sleight of hand’ (Richman, 1960, 78). Thus Anselm’s words can be twisted: ‘So truly, therefore, dost thou exist, O Satan, my Devil, that thou canst not be conceived not to exist, and rightly’ (Haight, 1974, 156).

So which of these two possible meanings for it being *better* for God to exist is correct? Albert Cock argues that it is clear that if God existed it would be better and if the Devil existed it would be worse (Cock, 1917, 181). This also means that both beings would be necessary – surely a necessary Devil is worse than a contingent one as there is no chance it might wink out of existence (Haight, 1974, 154). Frankly though the idea that Anselm’s argument admits of such generalisation is questionable.

It is clearly worse for *us* if the Devil exists, but does that actually make the Devil worse? If Richman is correct in claiming that Anselm's argument can be modified using any comparative term then can we not also prove the existence of the happiest being or the being of the darkest purple? We could substitute any degreed relational predicate *F* within Anselm's argument: if one has an idea of a being than which nothing more *F* can be conceived then clearly that being is more *F* if it exists in reality than if it exists only in the mind, therefore the being of which nothing more *F* can be conceived exists (Oppy, 1995, 182). It seems unlikely that Anselm's argument was intended to admit such generalisations, and so of the two possible meanings of 'it is better to exist in reality' we will assume it means that existence is a perfection. If this interpretation of Anselm is correct then Grant's disproof of this Devil is successful.

We will now consider the implications for the Devil if the second interpretation of Anselm is correct, and that Anselm's ontological argument was not asserting that it was *better* for 'that which nothing greater can be conceived' to exist, but rather that it was *higher* in an ontological hierarchy. How is this to be understood? Mason writes that a being that exists has *more reality* than a thing that exists only in the understanding (Mason, 1978, 8). This means that *x* is greater than *y* if *x* has more reality than *y*, but it also means that the term 'greater than' is a morally neutral one. Although for Anselm what is higher on the ontological scale coincides with what is most good this interpretation of his argument is based on God's greatness, not his goodness (Brecher, cited in Oppy, 1995, 168).

For the theist though this interpretation of Anselm has worrying consequences: if being ontologically greater carries no moral qualifier then could not the being at the top of the ontological hierarchy could be evil? David and Majorie Haight argue that if existence is not a perfection then there is no reason why 'that which nothing greater can be conceived' could not be identical with 'that which nothing worse can be conceived' (Haight & Haight, 1970, 219-20). The Anselmian argument does not issue in the existence of a good God, only some God (Haight, 1974, 153). However Mason criticises the Haight's position, terming it 'a mixture of sound insight and basic confusion' (Mason, 1978, 5). Mason argues that Anselm has good grounds for identifying 'that which nothing better can be conceived' with 'that which nothing greater can be conceived', as Anselm holds the greatest being to be a creator: 'all things other than the greatest possible being are created by it from nothing and exist

through it, and that, as the creator and ground of all good things, the greatest possible being must be supremely good' (Anselm, cited in Mason, 1978, 5-8). But even if the long jump from 'greatest being' to 'creator of everything lesser' is acceptable, it is still questionable whether or not such a creator must be good - it could be claimed that such a creator is morally neutral or evil. Furthermore, as Graham Oppy writes, even if one accepts that such an ontological hierarchy of beings is possible, one could still hold that there is no greatest being or that there are a number of beings of the same ontological rank (Oppy, 1995, 169). This means that you could have two or more beings on the same level of greatness, with differing moral qualities, and so the Devil could certainly exist although his existence is not proved in the same way that God's existence is not.

Having looked at the different interpretations of Anselm's argument we need to ask which is correct. Does Anselm mean it is *better* or *higher* for God to exist? We have seen that the first interpretation – that it is better for God to exist in reality – has two alternate meanings, the most likely meaning being that existence is a perfection. But *is* existence a perfection? Admittedly such forms the basis of the Cartesian ontological argument: existence is a perfection and so because God owns all perfections he must exist (Descartes, 1996, 47). It could also be argued that, all other things being equal, life is a good (Nagel, 1979, 3). Frankly though the idea that existence has a moral quality is counter-intuitive: 'It makes sense and is true to say that my future house will be a better one if it is insulated than if it is not insulated; but what could it mean to say that it will be a better house if it exists than if it does not?' (Malcolm, cited in Chambers, 2000, 108). Furthermore neither the claim that God is perfect nor the claim that existence in reality is better or more perfect appears explicitly in Anselm's argument (Mason, 1978, 7). It seems more likely then that Anselm thought that God was highest in an ontological hierarchy, not that existence is a good. It is also possible of course that Anselm thought both.

#### §4 Conclusion

Having evaluated the implications the ontological argument has for the existence of the Devil in both of his guises we are now ready to draw some conclusions. If the Devil is identified with 'that which nothing lesser can be conceived' then not only does Anselm's ontological argument prove that he does not exist in reality but it also

proves that he does not exist in the mind either. However the implications for the Devil if it is identified with 'that which nothing worse can be conceived' are more complex, hinging as they do on different interpretations of Anselm's argument. If existence is a good then the Devil cannot exist, but there is little evidence in Anselm's writings to support this interpretation and furthermore it seems counter-intuitive to argue that existence conveys goodness. If though existence is not a good but conveys more reality onto existents then there is no *a priori* reason why 'that which nothing greater can be conceived' should be good, or why many other beings of the same ontological rank and varying moral dispositions should not exist alongside it. This allows for the Devil to exist. Of the two interpretations of Anselm the latter seems the more likely, although it is obviously least favourable to the theist.

Of course the existence of neither of our Devils has actually been conclusively proved or disproved, as such depends purely on the soundness of Anselm's ontological argument. As Richman observes, adding such a qualifier is rather like explaining the point of a joke, but is nonetheless necessary (Richman, 1960, 80).

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