

The Ontological Argument

This is an important argument, but it's very different from the other arguments for God's existence. It tries to prove God's existence *a priori*, as though it were proving a mathematical theorem.

Go to <http://www.anselm.edu/homepage/dbanach/anselm.htm> and read the translation of the original argument there. This is from St. Anselm of Canterbury, and it is the first part of his ontological argument. Read it several times. It's short (about 325 words.) See how well you do on your own making sense of it. Read slowly and carefully. Don't be surprised if it takes several readings to get the sense of the argument.

Consider these questions:

- 1) Anselm says that "we believe you are something than which nothing greater can be imagined." Does this seem right? Is this a sensible way of characterizing God?
- 2) Anselm says that this thing than which nothing greater can be conceived is in the fool's understanding. What does this mean? Could something be in the understanding without also being in reality? What does Anselm say? What is the point of the remarks about the painter?

- 3) This seems like an important claim:

And certainly that than which a greater cannot be imagined cannot be in the understanding alone.

Is it true? Why does Anselm think that it's true?

- 4) How does Anselm get from the claim in 3) to the conclusion that God exists?
- 5) Suppose you tried to use this sort of argument to prove the existence of elves. Would it work? What, if anything, is the crucial difference?
- 6) Suppose you tried to use this sort of argument to prove the existence of an elf than which none greater can be imagined. What then?
- 7) Compare "something than which nothing greater can be imagined" with "elf than which nothing greater can be imagined." Are there any important differences as far as the argument is concerned?
- 8) Read the chapter and come back to these questions. Write up a brief response to question 7 and bring it to class on Monday.