## PHI 171 – Problems of Philosophy – Fall 2015

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### Reconstruction of Anselm's argument and Gaunilo's objection

The presupposition in Anselm's argument and Gaunilo's objection is the following:

> Presupposition – An item x *qua* existing in the mind <u>and</u> in reality is greater than the item x *qua* only existing in the mind.

I will later show how this presupposition is used by both Anselm and Gaunilo.

### Anselm's argument

Anselm begins by defining God as follows:

> Definition – God is the being than which no greater can be conceived.

From the definition, it immediately follows that

> (1) Nothing greater than God can be conceived.

Next, Anselm considers the fool who denies the existence of God. Yet, Anselm points out, when the fool asserts that God does not exist, he must implicitly admit the existence of God *as an idea in his mind*. So, the fool is only denying the existence of God *in reality*. In other words, according to the fool,

> (2) God does not exist in reality.

Now, if God only existed in the mind (and not in reality), by the presupposition, something greater would be conceivable, namely God as existing in the mind <u>and</u> in reality. Thus:

> (3) If God does not exist in reality, something greater than God can be conceived.

By logic, (2) and (3) together yield the following:

> (4) Something greater than God can be conceived.

We now have a contradiction between (1) and (4). Since this contradiction follows from (2) above, Anselm concludes—while holding on to both his definition and presupposition—that (2) must be false and its opposite must be true. In other words,

> Conclusion – God exists in reality.

This is an argument by contradiction. Anselm shows that a contradiction follows from (2) and concludes that (2) must be false, whence God exists. (After all, if it is false that God does not exist, then it must be true that God exists because there are only two possibilities, namely, either God exists or does not exist.)

**GAUNILO'S OBJECTION**

Consider the most perfect island and define it as follows:

> DEFINITION – The Perfect Island is the island than which no greater island can be conceived.

From the definition, it immediately follows that

> (1) No island greater than the Perfect Island can be conceived.

Next, Gaunilo considers someone who denies the existence of the Perfect island, not in the mind but in reality. This person asserts that:

> (2) The Perfect Island does not exist in reality.

Now, if the Perfect island only existed in the mind (and not in reality), by the presupposition, a greater island would be conceivable, namely the Perfect Island as existing in the mind <u>and</u> in reality. Thus:

> (3) If the Perfect island does not exist in reality, an island greater than the Perfect Island can be conceived.

By logic, (2) and (3) together yield the following:

> (4) An island greater than the Perfect Island can be conceived.

We now have a contradiction between (1) and (4). This follows from (2) above, so (2) must be false and its opposite true. In other words,

> CONCLUSION – The Perfect Island exists in reality.

This argument follows closely the structure of Anselm's argument. Since the argument as a whole and its conclusion are patently absurd, Gaunilo wants to suggest that Anselm's argument must also be absurd.