

From *On Behalf of the Fool*, Gaunilo, a Monk of Marmoutier 1078

1. IF one doubts or denies the existence of a being of such a nature that nothing greater than it can be conceived, he receives this answer:

The existence of this being is proved, in the first place, by the fact that he himself, in his doubt or denial regarding this being, already has it in his understanding; for in hearing it spoken of he understands what is spoken of. It is proved, therefore, by the fact that what he understands must exist not only in his understanding, but in reality also.

And the proof of this is as follows. -- It is a greater thing to exist both in the understanding and in reality than to be in the understanding alone. And if this being is in the understanding alone, whatever has even in the past existed in reality will be greater than this being. And so that which was greater than all beings will be less than some being, and will not be greater than all: which is a manifest contradiction.

And hence, that which is greater than all, already proved to be in the understanding, must exist not only in the understanding, but also in reality: for otherwise it will not be greater than all other beings.

2. The fool might make this reply:

This being is said to be in my understanding already, only because I understand what is said. Now could it not with equal justice be said that I have in my understanding all manner of unreal objects, having absolutely no existence in themselves, because I understand these things if one speaks of them, whatever they may be?

Unless indeed it is shown that this being is of such a character that it cannot be held in concept like all unreal objects, or objects whose existence is uncertain: and hence I am not able to conceive of it when I hear of it, or to hold it in concept; but I must understand it and have it in my understanding; because, it seems, I cannot conceive of it in any other way than by understanding it, that is, by comprehending in my knowledge its existence in reality.

But if this is the case, in the first place there will be no distinction between what has precedence in time -- namely, the having of an object in the understanding -- and what is subsequent in time -- namely, the understanding that an object exists; as in the example of the picture, which exists first in the mind of the painter, and afterwards in his work.

Moreover, the following assertion can hardly be accepted: that this being, when it is spoken of and heard of, cannot be conceived not to exist in the way in which even God can be conceived not to exist. For if this is impossible, what was the object of this argument against one who doubts or denies the existence of such a being?

Finally, that this being so exists that it cannot be perceived by an understanding

convinced of its own indubitable existence, unless this being is afterwards
145conceived of -- this should be proved to me by an indisputable argument, but not
by that which you have advanced: namely, that what I understand, when I hear it,
already is in my understanding. For thus in my understanding, as I still think, could be all
sorts of things whose existence is uncertain, or which do not exist at all, if some one
whose words I should understand mentioned them. And so much the more if I should be
deceived, as often happens, and believe in them: though I do not yet believe in the
being whose existence you would prove.

3. Hence, your example of the painter who already has in his understanding what he is
to paint cannot agree with this argument. For the picture, before it is made, is contained
in the artificer's art itself; and any such thing, existing in the art of an artificer, is nothing
but a part of his understanding itself. A joiner, St. Augustine says, when he is about to
make a box in fact, first has it in his art. The box which is made in fact is not life; but the
box which exists in his art is life. For the artificer's soul lives, in which all these things
are, before they are produced. Why, then, are these things life in the living soul of the
artificer, unless because they are nothing else than the knowledge or understanding of
the soul itself?

With the exception, however, of those facts which are known to pertain to the mental
nature, whatever, on being heard and thought out by the understanding, is perceived to
be real, undoubtedly that real object is one thing, and the understanding itself, by which
the object is grasped, is another. Hence, even if it were true that there is a being than
which a greater is inconceivable: yet to this being, when 146heard of and understood,
the not yet created picture in the mind of the painter is not analogous.

4. Let us notice also the point touched on above, with regard to this being which is
greater than all which can be conceived, and which, it is said, can be none other than
God himself. I, so far as actual knowledge of the object, either from its specific or
general character, is concerned, am as little able to conceive of this being when I hear
of it, or to have it in my understanding, as I am to conceive of or understand God
himself: whom, indeed, for this very reason I can conceive not to exist. For I do not
know that reality itself which God is, nor can I form a conjecture of that reality from
some other like reality. For you yourself assert that that reality is such that there can be
nothing else like it.

For, suppose that I should hear something said of a man absolutely unknown to me, of
whose very existence I was unaware. Through that special or general knowledge by
which I know what man is, or what men are, I could conceive of him also, according to
the reality itself, which man is. And yet it would be possible, if the person who told me of
him deceived me, that the man himself, of whom I conceived, did not exist; since that
reality according to which I conceived of him, though a no less indisputable fact, was not
that man, but any man.

Hence, I am not able, in the way in which I should have this unreal being in concept or
in understanding, to have that being of which you speak in concept or in understanding,
when I hear the word *God* or the words, *a being greater than all other beings*. For I can
conceive of the man according to a fact that is real and familiar to me: but of God, or a

being greater ¹⁴⁷than all others, I could not conceive at all, except merely according to the word. And an object can hardly or never be conceived according to the word alone.

For when it is so conceived, it is not so much the word itself (which is, indeed, a real thing -- that is, the sound of the letters and syllables) as the signification of the word, when heard, that is conceived. But it is not conceived as by one who knows what is generally signified by the word; by whom, that is, it is conceived according to a reality and in true conception alone. It is conceived as by a man who does not know the object, and conceives of it only in accordance with the movement of his mind produced by hearing the word, the mind attempting to image for itself the signification of the word that is heard. And it would be surprising if in the reality of fact it could ever attain to this.

Thus, it appears, and in no other way, this being is also in my understanding, when I hear and understand a person who says that there is a being greater than all conceivable beings. So much for the assertion that this supreme nature already is in my understanding.

5. But that this being must exist, not only in the understanding but also in reality, is thus proved to me:

If it did not so exist, whatever exists in reality would be greater than it. And so the being which has been already proved to exist in my understanding, will not be greater than all other beings.

I still answer: if it should be said that a being which cannot be even conceived in terms of any fact, is in the understanding, I do not deny that this being is, accordingly, in my understanding. But since ¹⁴⁸through this fact it can in no wise attain to real existence also, I do not yet concede to it that existence at all, until some certain proof of it shall be given.

For he who says that this being exists, because otherwise the being which is greater than all will not be greater than all, does not attend strictly enough to what he is saying. For I do not yet say, no, I even deny or doubt that this being is greater than any real object. Nor do I concede to it any other existence than this (if it should be called existence) which it has when the mind, according to a word merely heard, tries to form the image of an object absolutely unknown to it.

How, then, is the veritable existence of that being proved to me from the assumption, by hypothesis, that it is greater than all other beings? For I should still deny this, or doubt your demonstration of it, to this extent, that I should not admit that this being is in my understanding and concept even in the way in which many objects whose real existence is uncertain and doubtful, are in my understanding and concept. For it should be proved first that this being itself really exists somewhere; and then, from the fact that it is greater than all, we shall not hesitate to infer that it also subsists in itself.

6. For example: it is said that somewhere in the ocean is an island, which, because of the difficulty, or rather the impossibility, of discovering what does not exist, is called the lost island. And they say that this island has an inestimable wealth of all manner of riches and delicacies in greater abundance than is told of the Islands of the Blest; and

that having no owner or inhabitant, it is more excellent than all other countries¹⁴⁹, which are inhabited by mankind, in the abundance with which it is stored.

Now if some one should tell me that there is such an island, I should easily understand his words, in which there is no difficulty. But suppose that he went on to say, as if by a logical inference: "You can no longer doubt that this island which is more excellent than all lands exists somewhere, since you have no doubt that it is in your understanding. And since it is more excellent not to be in the understanding alone, but to exist both in the understanding and in reality, for this reason it must exist. For if it does not exist, any land which really exists will be more excellent than it; and so the island already understood by you to be more excellent will not be more excellent."

If a man should try to prove to me by such reasoning that this island truly exists, and that its existence should no longer be doubted, either I should believe that he was jesting, or I know not which I ought to regard as the greater fool: myself, supposing that I should allow this proof; or him, if he should suppose that he had established with any certainty the existence of this island. For he ought to show first that the hypothetical excellence of this island exists as a real and indubitable fact, and in no wise as any unreal object, or one whose existence is uncertain, in my understanding.

7. This, in the mean time, is the answer the fool could make to the arguments urged against him. When he is assured in the first place that this being is so great that its non-existence is not even conceivable, and that this in turn is proved on no other ground than the fact that otherwise it will not be greater than ¹⁵⁰all things, the fool may make the same answer, and say:

When did I say that any such being exists in reality, that is, a being greater than all others? -- that on this ground it should be proved to me that it also exists in reality to such a degree that it cannot even be conceived not to exist? Whereas in the first place it should be in some way proved that a nature which is higher, that is, greater and better, than all other natures, exists; in order that from this we may then be able to prove all attributes which necessarily the being that is greater and better than all possesses.

Moreover, it is said that the non-existence of this being is inconceivable. It might better be said, perhaps, that its non-existence, or the possibility of its non-existence, is unintelligible. For according to the true meaning of the word, unreal objects are unintelligible. Yet their existence is conceivable in the way in which the fool conceived of the non-existence of God. I am most certainly aware of my own existence; but I know, nevertheless, that my non-existence is possible. As to that supreme being, moreover, which God is, I understand without any doubt both his existence, and the impossibility of his non-existence. Whether, however, so long as I am most positively aware of my existence, I can conceive of my non-existence, I am not sure. But if I can, why can I not conceive of the non-existence of whatever else I know with the same certainty? If, however, I cannot, God will not be the only being of which it can be said, it is impossible to conceive of his non-existence.