

Conceptually Guaranteeing God

A **concept** is a way of classifying something in our thinking. All of us have approximately a zillion concepts. We have the concept of a mammal, the concept of molasses, the concept of a toy, the concept of friendship, the concept of gravity, the concept of eyesight, the concept of danger, the concept of a boringly long list, and so on. A **singular concept** is a classification that brings to mind a single thing, if the concept applies at all. Singular concepts are familiar. Examples from ordinary life abound. When Donna's dachshund Dobson is in Donna's house alone, he is fond of luxuriating on the sofa, occupying his chosen pillow in regal comfort. While Dobson is doing this, we can bring him to mind in many ways—for example, by conceiving of him as the pooch on the couch, as the dachshund on the pillow, and as the dog in the house. These are singular concepts that apply to Dobson.

One important line of thinking has it that God is the greatest being that anyone could bring to mind. If so, then one singular concept of God is the concept of the greatest conceivable being. We'll need the phrase 'greatest conceivable being' a lot. Let's abbreviate it with its initials: GCB.

Almost a thousand years ago the medieval philosopher Anselm argued that the GCB concept has to apply to an existing entity who is God, because of facts that we can discover by appreciating the nature of the concept itself. The reasoning is called 'Anselm's ontological argument'.¹ In one version or another, ontological arguments are particularly appealing to many philosophers. This appeal has something to do with the remarkable fact that we are supposed to be able to find out, just by

¹ The aim of this chapter in considering Anselm's argument is to think about whether it shows that God *actually* exists. In the chapter 'Why Not Nothing?' two other ontological arguments are discussed. The aim there is to determine whether they can show that a *necessary* being exists, whether or not the being qualifies as God.

thinking correctly, all that we need to know to see them prove their point. They are pure philosophy with a powerful payoff—if they work. The ontological argument that we'll consider is a reconstruction of Anselm's highly influential reasoning.

It'll be helpful to have a label for what a singular concept singles out. In other words, we want a term for the entity that meets the specifications of the concept, if anything does. The concept of Donna's dog, for instance, calls for a dog that is the one owned by Donna. The concept applies to such a dog, or it does not apply. Let's label the entity that is singled out by a singular concept the **target** of the concept.

Typical singular concepts need not have a target. Consider the concept of the spoon on the moon. If a single spoon happens to be on the moon—maybe an astronaut left one there—then this concept has that spoon as its target. Otherwise the concept of the spoon on the moon has no target. Either way, the concept of the spoon on the moon is one of our concepts. The same goes for the singular concept of the pooch on the couch, the singular concept of the farthest star from the Earth, and so forth.

Key question: Could our GCB concept lack a target?

No, according to Anselm. He asks us to suppose that the GCB concept has no target. In other words, suppose that the GCB does not exist. Anselm argues that if this were so, then we could form another concept that would be a concept of something greater than the GCB. Starting with our GCB concept, we can add the idea of existing. This gives us the concept of the existing GCB (the EGCB for short). Anselm holds that under circumstances where no GCB existed, our EGCB concept would be the concept of something greater than the GCB. The reason is that existing is a better status than not existing and we would be explicitly requiring existence in our EGCB concept.

But wait! Anselm points out that there is no possible way for us to form a concept of any being that is greater than the greatest

conceivable one. The GCB is the greatest being that we can conceive of—it says so right in the concept itself. Therefore we *cannot* conceive of a greater being. Yet in the situation just described, we are supposed to *be* conceiving of a greater being. Since this is impossible, as we just saw, we must have assumed something untrue in setting up the situation. Anselm holds that the only questionable assumption in the setup is the initial one, the assumption that the GCB concept does not have a target. If that assumption is the mistake, then the GCB concept *does* apply to something. So the target of the GCB concept, the GCB, exists. The GCB is God. So God exists. This reasoning can be summarized as follows.

Anselm's Ontological Argument

Phase 1

Temporary Assumption (TA): The GCB concept has no target.

Now add this premise:

Premise 1: If the GCB concept has no target, then the EGCB concept is a concept of something greater than the GCB concept.

From TA and P₁, infer:

Temporary Conclusion (TC): The EGCB concept is a concept of something greater than the GCB concept.

Add another premise:

Premise 2: No concept is a concept of something greater than the GCB concept.

Premise 2 says that TC is untrue, so the temporary assumption TA that got us TC must be false. In other words, infer:

Conclusion 1: The GCB concept does have a target.

Phase 2

Conclusion 1: The GCB concept does have a target.

Premise 3: If the GCB concept does have a target, then the GCB exists.

Conclusion 2: The GCB exists.

Phase 3

Conclusion 2: The GCB exists.

Premise 4: The GCB is God.

Conclusion 3: God exists.

Let's start our critical consideration of this argument on a positive note by contemplating P₃. It is entirely okay. If a singular concept has a target, then the concept does apply to some existing thing. For example, since the singular concept of Donna's dog has the real dog Dobson as a target, Donna's dog exists.

Now let's consider the final assumption, P₄. It seems pretty credible at first that God is the GCB. But maybe we can conceive of something greater than God. Such as? Well, consider someone with limited abilities who overcomes adversity and acts heroically. In a way, such a person seems to be better than any being of unlimited power and knowledge who is morally flawless. That sort of being is too knowledgeable and powerful to be heroic. Maybe heroism is one feature of a conceivable being who would be overall greater than a being who has the power and knowledge of the traditional God.

This is debatable. God could still turn out to be the greatest. For instance, the greatness of God might consist in God's having all of the important positive properties, like knowledge, ability, and moral goodness, to a *maximum* extent. That sounds like an unbeatable combination.

This idea that God has the maximum degree of greatness is a risky one, though. The important positive properties may not all have a *possible* maximum. For example, part of being morally good is doing good. Yet no matter how much good someone does, it seems *possible* to have done more good. So moral goodness

may not have a maximum. If not, then we don't get the GCB by conceiving of a being who is *maximally* morally good, because we get an impossible being. Any being that does exist and is good surely outdoes the greatness of any impossible being. Thus, the maximum idea of God is a problematic way to try to establish God as the GCB.

Much more thinking is needed to draw a justified conclusion about the truth of P₄. But regardless of how well Phase 3 with P₄ works out, successful reasoning through Phase 2 would be nothing to sneeze at. A proof of Phase 2's conclusion, C₂, would be mighty metaphysically interesting. Establishing the actual existence of the greatest conceivable being would show us something wonderful about reality.

P₁ and P₂ are taken for granted in Phase 1. If either one of them is untrue, then C₁ is not proven in Phase 1. Without success in Phase 1, the whole argument collapses. Let's think more about P₁.

P₁ says that if the GCB concept has no target, then the EGCB concept is 'of' something greater. The interpretation of the small word 'of' turns out to be crucial to assessing the argument. Two interpretations should be distinguished. First, for a concept to be 'of' a greater being, on one interpretation, is for a greater being to be the concept's target. This interpretation gives us:

P_{1.1}: If the GCB concept has no target, then the target of the EGCB concept is a greater thing than the target of the GCB concept.

If the GCB concept has no target, then it is easy for some other concept to have a greater target. The other concept would just have to apply to something that is greater than nothing. Again, anything good is greater than nothing. So a concept of a good thing that exists would qualify as having a greater target than the GCB concept. But would the EGCB concept in particular have a greater target, as P_{1.1} says?

Suppose that the GCB concept has no target. Recall that this means that the GCB concept does not apply to anything. If nothing is the greatest conceivable being, then nothing is the *existing* greatest conceivable being either. Thus, if the one concept applies to nothing, then so does the other. Since they both lack targets, the greatness of their targets is the greatness of nothing—worthless! Therefore, if the GCB concept has no target, then the GCB concept and the EGCB concept would be *tied at zero* for the greatness of their targets. This denies the P1.1 claim that the EGCB concept would have a *greater* target. So if we have interpreted P1 correctly as P1.1, then it is untrue.

There is another interpretation of P1. The new idea is that if the GCB concept has no target, then the EGCB concept demands more greatness than does the GCB concept. In other words, if no GCB exists, then in the competition for being our way of conceiving of the greatest being that we can possibly conceive of, the EGCB concept would beat out the GCB concept. Both concepts clearly require extreme greatness to apply. But according to P1 as we are now interpreting it, in the absence of a real GCB, the EGCB concept would require the greater greatness. This gives us:

P1.2: If the GCB concept has no target, then the greatness needed for the EGCB concept to apply is more than the greatness needed for the GCB concept to apply.

P1.2 does not stand scrutiny. The GCB concept goes all out in its demand for greatness—it demands ‘the greatest’. It demands maximal greatness, whether or not its demand is met. For example, existing appears to be part of what it takes to be the greatest thing that we can conceive of. Any ‘things’ that could have existed, but don’t exist, at most could have been great. ‘They’ aren’t great. ‘They’ aren’t anything, much less anything great. If this appearance that existence is needed for greatness is correct, then the GCB concept demands existence just as much as the EGCB concept. If this appearance is incorrect, then the

EGCB concept does not demand more greatness by explicitly demanding existence.

There is just no way for the GCB concept to be beaten in this competition. The GCB concept requires ‘the greatest’, and that’s that! Yet P_{I.2} alleges that under one particular condition—the non-existence of the GCB—the EGCB concept demands more greatness. That must be a mistake. The existence or non-existence of a GCB does not alter what any concept demands for its application. A concept’s demands for its application are what make it the concept that it is. For example, the concept of chocolate is the concept of chocolate, rather than the concept of vanilla, or the concept of strawberry ice cream, or any other concept, because the concept of chocolate is the one that demands for its application precisely chocolate, nothing more or less. A concept’s demands are just built into it. The non-existence of the GCB doesn’t affect what the EGCB concept demands, including whether the EGCB concept demands something greater than the GCB concept demands. And we’ve just seen that the EGCB concept does *not* demand anything greater. So on this other interpretation P_I is also untrue and does not help Anselm’s ontological argument. Phase 1 of the argument relies on the truth of some interpretation of P_I. Since the argument needs Phase 1 to work in order to get anywhere, the argument goes nowhere if our criticism is correct.

Putting it All Together

We have found problems in each of the arguments for God’s existence that we have considered. Let’s not leap to any conclusions. Even if we had found problems in all arguments that are ever made for God’s existence, it would not follow that God does not exist. Entities whose existence cannot be proven by us might exist. They might exist without being in any revealing sort of