Anselmian Atheism

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On the basis of Chapter 15 of Anselm's *Proslogion*, I develop an argument that confronts theology with a trilemma: atheism, utter mysticism, or radical anti-Anselmianism. The argument establishes a disjunction of claims that Anselmians in particular, but not only they, will find disturbing: (a) God does not exist, (b) no human being can have even the slightest conception of God, or (c) the Anselmian requirement of maximal greatness in God is wrong. My own view, for which I argue briefly, is that (b) is false on any correct reading of what *conceiving of* requires and that (c) is false on any correct reading of the concept of God. Thus, my own view is that the argument establishes atheism. In any case, one consequence of the argument is that Anselmian theology is possible for human beings only if it lacks a genuine object of study.

I. Introduction

Chapter 15 of Anselm's *Proslogion* contains the germ of an argument that confronts theology with a serious trilemma: atheism, utter mysticism, or radical anti-Anselmianism. The argument establishes a disjunction of claims that Anselmians in particular, but not only they, will find disturbing: (a) God does not exist, (b) no human being can have even the slightest conception of God, or (c) the Anselmian requirement of maximal greatness in God is wrong. Since, for reasons I give below, (b) and (c) are surely false, I regard the argument as establishing atheism.

Concerning option (b), presumably some human being has managed to achieve at least *some* conception of God. As both Anselm and ordinary folk use the verb "conceive of" and its cognates, it is not the case that *x* must exist whenever one conceives of *x*; one can, in some sense, conceive of unicorns even if no unicorns ever exist. Thus, one's conceiving of God does not analytically require the existence of God.[1] As far as the logic of the concepts is concerned, human beings can achieve at least some conception of God, and surely they have, even if there is no such thing as God—indeed, my argument suggests, *only* if there is no such thing as God. Regarding (c), I think the

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[1] Of course, if it is logically necessary that God exists, then any proposition at all, including the proposition that one conceives of God, will logically *entail* the existence of God, for it will be logically impossible for any proposition to be true without God's existing. But that is not the same as the proposition's *analytically* requiring the existence of God.

Anselmian requirement of maximal greatness in God is correct and should appeal to theists and atheists alike, a claim I will defend briefly when I reply to objections. So I conclude that atheism is the only plausible way of resolving the trilemma. In fact, it will emerge later that, even if my argument is sound, none of us can possibly *accept* my argument unless atheism is true.

Here is the text of *Proslogion* 15:

> Therefore, Lord, you are not only that than which a greater cannot be conceived; you are also something greater than can be conceived. It is possible to conceive that there is something of this kind. If you are not such a thing, it is possible to conceive that there is something greater than you—which cannot be.

The scholarly commentary on that chapter usually emphasizes a distinction Anselm draws between two kinds of conception. As Anselm puts it in *Proslogion* 4, "We conceive of something in one way when we conceive of words that signify it, but in another [way] when we understand what the thing itself is." Call the first "verbal" conception and the second "substantial" conception. Anselm provides examples of the distinction in his *Reply to Gaunilo*:

> For just as nothing prevents one from saying "ineffable," although one cannot specify what is said to be ineffable; and just…as one can think of the inconceivable—although one cannot think of what "inconceivable" applies to—so also, when "that than which a greater cannot be conceived" is spoken of, …what is heard can be conceived of…even if the thing itself cannot be…conceived of.[2]

Relying on that distinction, commentators typically point out that verbal conception does not imply substantial conception before concluding that *Proslogion* 15 shows, and is intended to show, at most the substantial inconceivability of God: human beings cannot understand God as God is in himself, even though they can understand God in some lesser way; or else, perhaps, human beings cannot understand God at all in this life, even though they can understand God to some degree in the next life.[3]

Even granting the standard interpretation of what Anselm was up to, I think that the chapter suggests an argument for the much stronger conclusion that, assuming God exists, no human being can ever—not here, and not hereafter—have concerning God even the slightest conception of any kind: substantial, verbal, whatever. If so, then God does not exist, for the claim about God's utter inconceivability, an assertion of mysticism so total that no one

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[2] Chapter 9, cited in Dennis Rohatyn, "Anselm's Inconceivability Argument," *Sophia* 21 (1982): 57-63; 58.

[3] See, e.g., Gregory Schufreider, *Confessions of a Rational Mystic: Anselm's Early Writings* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1994), pp. 210-230; Rohatyn, "Anselm's Inconceivability Argument"; and M. J. Charlesworth, *St. Anselm's Proslogion* (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), p. 81, cited in Rohatyn.

can consistently accept it, is surely false. At any rate, it is an assertion of mysticism totally at odds with our doing theology.

Scholars of Anselm will insist that I have read too much into what he says in *Proslogion* 15. They may well be right, but I find the argument suggested by that chapter interesting not so much for its relevance to Anselm interpretation as for two other reasons: first, it bears crucially on the questions whether we can even undertake theology—whether we can inquire about God, conceived of as the greatest being possible—and whether our inquiry can avoid being demonstrably pointless; second, it seems to take us, by perfectly reasonable steps, right to the brink of unreason. For my purposes, the argument matters more than its ancestry.

II. The Argument

In the following argument, the phrase "our cognitive equals" means "whatever beings have only the conceptual power had by actual human beings." The argument uses "actual" and "actually" as rigid designators whose reference does not vary across possible worlds: from the perspective of any world, actual human beings, for instance, are all and only those human beings (past, present, and future) who inhabit our world, the actual world.

(1) In at least one possible world, there exists something too great to be at all conceivable by our cognitive equals. [Premise]

(2) In any possible world, whatever is at least as great as something too great to be at all conceivable by our cognitive equals is itself too great to be at all conceivable by our cognitive equals. [Premise]

(3) So: In any possible world, whatever is *not* too great to be at all conceivable by our cognitive equals is not as great as whatever *is* too great to be at all conceivable by our cognitive equals. [From (2)]

(4) So: If God actually exists but is not too great to be at all conceivable by our cognitive equals, then God actually exists and God's actual greatness is not as high as the greatness of at least one thing in at least one possible world. [From (1), (3)]

(5) If God actually exists, then God's actual greatness is at least as high as the greatness of anything in any possible world. [Premise]

(6) So: It is not the case that God actually exists but is not too great to be at all conceivable by our cognitive equals. [From (4), (5)]

(7) So: If God actually exists, then God is too great to be at all conceivable by our cognitive equals. [From (6)]

Since, of course, *we* qualify as our cognitive equals, one need only add that we have managed to achieve at least some conception of God, and one gets the conclusion that God does not actually exist.

The argument contains three premises and four inferences. Using "C*a*" for "*a* is to some degree conceivable by our cognitive equals," the first inference, from (2) to (3), has this clearly valid form:

(2a) $\Box \forall x \forall y \, [(\forall z \, [Cz \supset (x > z)] \,\&\, [y \geq x]) \supset (\forall z \, [Cz \supset (y > z)])]$.

(3a) So: $\Box \forall x \forall y \, [(\forall z \, [Cz \supset (x > z)] \,\&\, \sim\forall z \, [Cz \supset (y > z)]) \supset \sim(y \geq x)]$.

Or, in more perspicuous notation:

(2b) $\Box \forall x \forall y \, [(\alpha \,\&\, \beta) \supset \gamma]$.

(3b) So: $\Box \forall x \forall y \, [(\alpha \,\&\, \sim\gamma) \supset \sim\beta]$.

Now, (4) contains the terms "actual" and "actually," terms not readily symbolized in ordinary quantified modal logic. Unfortunately, then, we cannot so easily display the form of the second inference, from (1) and (3) to (4), given that we need quantified modal logic to symbolize (1). Nevertheless, the second inference looks just as intuitively valid as the first inference. Fortunately, the final two inferences have logical forms that are clearly valid in ordinary sentential logic:

(4a) $(P \,\&\, \sim Q) \supset (P \,\&\, R)$.

(5a) $P \supset \sim R$, i.e., $\sim(P \,\&\, R)$.

(6a) So: $\sim(P \,\&\, \sim Q)$.

(7a) So: $(P \supset Q)$.

Nothing looks amiss with any of the inferences, so let us move on to consider the premises.

Why accept premise (1)? In a word, humility. (1) asserts, not that there *is* something too great to be at all conceivable by anything with only human conceptual power, but only that there logically *could* have been such a thing. Notice the rough similarity between (1) and a principle made famous by Descartes. In the third of his *Meditations*, Descartes asserts that the concept he has of an infinite God cannot have originated in his own mind or in the mind of any finite intelligence: the concept is too great to have come from such a humble origin. If Descartes is right about the concept of God, there is in fact a limit to what any finite intelligence can spontaneously conceive of, and even if he is wrong about the concept of God, might not what he says

have been true of some other concept? More cautiously, might not what he says have been true of some concept in relation to anything having only the *particularly* finite conceptual power had by actual human beings? Indeed, might there not have been a limit to what our cognitive equals could conceive of even with help from outside? Again, (1) implies only the logical possibility, and not the actual existence, of such a conceptual limitation.

Thomas Nagel has claimed even more, namely, that totally inconceivable things not only could have existed but, for all we know, do exist:

> [T]here may be aspects of reality...*altogether beyond* our capacity to form conceptions of the world.... About some of what we cannot conceive...we may be unable to say anything at all, except that there might be such things. The only sense in which we can conceive of them is under that description—that is, as things of which we can form *no* conception....[4]

One common argument for such a position proceeds by analogy. Consider the least sophisticated terrestrial species that has concepts.[5] Maybe that species is the chimpanzee, or the rat, but presumably it is not the human being. Now surely there are things, such as neutrinos, that lie completely beyond the conceptual limitations of any member of that species. No rat, say, or its cognitive equal, even if it possesses some concepts, can even begin to conceive of neutrinos. Why, then, should our admittedly stronger conceptual power immunize human beings from even the logical possibility of something beyond what *we* can begin to conceive? Even if in fact nothing stands to us as neutrinos stand to rats, surely something could have, which is all that (1) implies.

Nagel sketches a second argument for his position, this time from the logic of quantification:

> To be the value of a variable in our universal or existential quantifications it is not necessary to be the referent of a specific name or description in our language, because we already have the general concept of *everything*, which includes both the things we can name or describe and those we can't.... We can speak of 'all the things we can't describe,' 'all the things we can't imagine,' 'all the things humans can't conceive of,' and finally, 'all the things humans are constitutionally incapable of ever conceiving.' The universal quantifier does not have a built-in limitation to what can be designated in some other way.... Naturally the possibility of

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4   Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 91, 92, emphases added.

5   Nagel uses a similar analogy, but not precisely this one. See also Jonathan Bennett, "Descartes's Theory of Modality," *Philosophical Review* 103 (1994): 639-667, who draws the following conclusion from a parallel analogy:

> [S]ome of *our* questions, too, may have answers which we are profoundly, biologically incapable of grasping. We have no trouble understanding this, even though it is the possibility of our being unable to understand something; and we can even say what it is that we would not understand—namely the true answers to some of our questions. I offer this as refuting the general thesis...that we cannot say anything about our own limits without transcending them. [p. 656]

forming these ideas does not guarantee that anything corresponds to them. But in the nature of the case it is unlikely that we could ever have reason to believe that nothing does.[6]

Finally, there is an argument for the logical possibility of something utterly inconceivable based on the logical possibility that *concept empiricism* is true.[7] According to concept empiricism, all concepts are derived from sense-experience, a thesis which, given the inevitable limits of human sense-experience, implies that some concepts may forever lie beyond the grasp of human beings and their cognitive equals. Concept empiricism may well be false—although it continues to have its defenders—but if concept empiricism is even logically possible then some concepts at least *could* have altogether exceeded our grasp. From this perspective, premise (1) can be read as alleging the logical possibility of something whose greatness makes it conceivable only *via* concepts that, given concept empiricism, neither we nor our cognitive equals will ever possess.

Critics will of course be disappointed if they want me to *specify further* the conditions under which something would fit the description "too great to be at all conceivable by our cognitive equals." That task is, in the nature of the case, beyond me. Notoriously, though, our ability to imagine conditions in which a proposition P would be true is at best only an imperfect guide to the logical possibility of P. I cannot really imagine fundamental particles traveling in ten spatial and (sometimes backwards) in one temporal dimension, but the physicists—who cannot really imagine it either—tell me that such a state of affairs is not only logically and nomologically possible but actual. I can imagine that water is other than H_2O, but, to say the least, it does not follow from my imaginative accomplishment that water could have had a different structure. Our specifying conditions in which P would be true is neither necessary nor sufficient for the logical possibility of P, so the credibility of (1) should not collapse with our inability to specify them in this case.

Premise (2) looks obviously correct, an impression confirmed by inspection of (2a), its formalized version. (2), in turn, implies (3), the plainly true claim that whatever *fails* to achieve a given level of greatness—the level fixed by the predicate "too great to be at all conceivable by our cognitive equals"—is not as great as whatever *succeeds* in achieving that level of greatness.

One might wonder why steps (3) and (4) contain the phrases "not as great as" and "not as high as" instead of the somewhat tidier "less great than" and

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6   Nagel, p. 98.
7   Jerry Fodor hints at something like this line of argument in *The Modularity of Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983), p. 123, in a section of his book cited by Nagel, p. 90 n. 1. For a recent defense of concept empiricism, see Jesse J. Prinz, *Furnishing the Mind: Concepts and their Empirical Basis* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002).

"lower than." The reason is that in order to infer "less great than" from "not as great as" or "lower than" from "not as high as," we need the assumption

$$\Box\forall x\forall y\ [\sim(y \geq x) \supset (y < x)],$$

which in turn depends on assuming what Thomas Morris has called "universal value-commensurability," the claim that "there is some single, all encompassing objective scale of value on which every being, actual and possible, can be ranked."[8] For if two things could be incomparable with respect to their greatness, then there could be an x and a y such that both $\sim(y \geq x)$ and $\sim(y < x)$. Morris argues against universal value-commensurability, offering the following plausible counterexample: "It just makes no sense to ask which is of greater intrinsic value, an aardvark or an escalator."[9] One might reply that it does indeed make sense and that the aardvark, being sentient, is intrinsically greater than the non-sentient escalator. But such a reply typically relies on the medieval doctrine of a "great chain of being,"[10] a doctrine that seems to me at least as controversial as the value-commensurability claim it is being invoked to defend. The great chain of being implies that every sentient being is intrinsically greater than any non-sentient being, and it seems at least arguable that, for instance, the lowliest insect grub, whose wriggling when poked reveals its sentience, is *not* intrinsically greater than the most magnificent, although non-sentient, sequoia tree. Given the contentiousness, then, of assuming that any two things are value-commensurable, it is well that steps (3) and (4) do not rely on that assumption.

According to Morris, Anselmian reasoning about God does not require assuming (i) *universal* value commensurability but only (ii) that everything is value-commensurable with *God*. My own argument depends, in step (5), on the latter assumption but not the former. Morris points out that (ii) implies (i) only if value-commensurability is a transitive relation, and he argues that value-commensurability is not transitive: If "the letters 'f', 'g', and 'h' stand in for [great-making] features or value scales with respect to which a relation of value comparison holds," God can excel some being a with respect to f and some being b with respect to g even if there is no great-making feature or value-scale h with respect to which a and b themselves are commensurable.[11]

Again, the inference to step (4) looks secure. Indeed, one might wonder why (4) needs to be weakened by the antecedent clause "If God actually

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[8]   Thomas V. Morris, *Anselmian Explorations* (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), p. 15.

[9]   Ibid.

[10] See, e.g., Katherin A. Rogers, "The Medieval Approach to Aardvarks, Escalators, and God," *Journal of Value Inquiry* 27 (1993): 63-68; 64.

[11] Morris, pp. 16-19.

exists." The answer is that (4) and (5) must jointly imply (6), and since (5) contains the clause, (4) can do its part in that implication only if it too contains the clause. (5), in turn, needs the clause because (5) is not clearly true without it. For if God does not actually exist, then presumably the actual greatness of God is *zero*, in which case even lowly beings like me actually, and thus possibly, exceed in greatness the actual greatness of God.[12] With its antecedent clause, however, (5) becomes obviously, even analytically, true, at least concerning the God envisioned by Anselm: if such a being actually exists, then it has nonzero actual greatness and, indeed, a level of greatness at least as high as that had by anything in any possible world.[13]

Notice, finally, that the argument does not depend on a contrived or implausible definition of "conceivable" or, for that matter, on any definition of "conceivable" at all. Using the argument to establish atheism does require the proviso that one's conceiving of *x* not analytically require the existence of *x*, but, again, that proviso is already endorsed by Anselm and by common sense. Subject to the proviso, define "conception" however you like. On any such definition, if God exists, then no human being can have even the slightest conception of God. If the consequent of that true conditional is false, as it surely seems to be, then its antecedent must also be false.

III. Objections and Replies

Of the many objections one could raise against either the soundness of my argument or its capacity to persuade anyone, I will answer the six most important.

Objection A. Premise (1) is false for a reason you have not yet considered. Actual human beings understand the description "greatest possible being." Thus, the conceptual power had by actual human beings at least partly comprehends the greatest possible being, and so even the greatest possible being does not fit the description "too great to be at all conceivable by our cognitive equals." Since it is impossible for anything to be greater than the greatest possible being, it is *impossible* that anything should fit the description in (1).

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[12] One might object that the consequent clause "God's actual greatness is at least as high as the greatness of anything in any possible world" is analytically true and so in no need of the antecedent clause "If God actually exists." I reply that the consequent is not analytically true, for it is not analytically true (indeed, I am committed to claiming that it is false) that God has non-zero actual greatness. But this dispute is not pivotal, since one who regards the consequent as analytically true ought to accept step (5) of my argument anyway, for in classical logic the consequent of a conditional implies the conditional itself.

[13] Premise (5) does imply that, if God actually exists, God is value-commensurable with anything in any possible world, but, again, it is controversial whether that consequence implies universal value-commensurability. If it does, then, *contra* Morris, Anselmian theists are committed to the latter doctrine as well.

Reply. The objector's reasoning breaks down where it might appear least vulnerable: the claim that it is impossible for anything to be greater than the greatest possible being. For suppose that the expression "greatest possible being" fails to refer; suppose that it picks out nothing at all. Now, I am greater than nothing: I have nonzero greatness (however little)—something that, we are supposing, is not true of the greatest possible being. In a clear sense, then, I am greater than the greatest possible being.[14] In short, the objector's reasoning goes through only if the greatest possible being exists.

Granted, since actual human beings at least partly comprehend anything fitting the description "greatest possible being," no world contains the greatest possible being *and also* something too great to be at all conceivable by our cognitive equals—but only because no world contains the greatest possible being and also something greater. But from that fact it does not follow that no world contains anything greater than the greatest possible being. Thus, without assuming that the greatest possible being exists in all worlds, it does not follow that no world contains something too great to be at all conceivable by our cognitive equals. The objector reasons that if the greatest possible being does not fit the description in (1), then neither does anything greater than it; but that reasoning, remarkably enough, is invalid. By the same token, of course, (1) requires that there be at least one world in which the greatest possible being does not exist. [15] That consequence is, however, unsurprising: given that we can at least verbally conceive of the greatest possible being, my argument entails the nonexistence of the greatest possible being.

Objection B. Step (3) is false because it falsely suggests that something's being inconceivable by our cognitive equals contributes to that thing's greatness. There is no reason to think that inconceivability, as such, is a great-making property. Thus either your argument's first inference is invalid, or else step (2) is false.

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[14] In such circumstances, it is equally true that the greatest possible being is not the greatest possible being, which, of course, entails that there is no greatest possible being—although, significantly, it does not entail the *impossibility* of a greatest possible being, since a key premise in the reasoning (namely, the premise that I have nonzero greatness) is only contingently true: I could have failed to exist, in which case it would not have been true that I had nonzero greatness.

[15] At this point Anselmian theists might object, "God is the greatest possible being, God exists in every world, and thus there is no world in which the greatest possible being fails to exist." But, on the Anselmian view, it is God's greatness that entails God's necessary existence, not conversely; after all, some things, such as the empty set, exist necessarily without being particularly great. I, too, start with a premise about greatness: I assume the logical possibility of something too great to be conceivable by our cognitive equals, and I show that the assumption, conjoined with a contingent truth concerning our conceptual achievements, entails the nonexistence of the Anselmian God. Anselmian theists may not like the premise because of where it leads, but in this dialectical context I am entitled to demand from them an independent reason for rejecting the premise.

Reply. There is certainly no reason to think that inconceivability is a great-making property, but my argument never assumes otherwise. Step (3) does not claim that whatever is totally inconceivable by our cognitive equals is greater than whatever is not. Instead, (3) claims that whatever is not *too great* to be at all conceivable by our cognitive equals, whatever does not achieve that level of greatness, is not as great as whatever *is* too great to be at all conceivable by our cognitive equals, whatever *does* achieve that level of greatness. Thus (3) belongs to the same family as a more familiar Anselmian principle,

> (A) For any *x* and *y*, if *x* is so great that we cannot conceive of anything greater but *y* is not so great we cannot conceive of anything greater, then *x* is greater than *y*.

Like (3), A does not allege that human inconceivability *per se* contributes to greatness; rather, the antecedent inside A asserts that the description "being so great that we cannot conceive of anything greater" fixes a level of greatness which *x* achieves but which *y* does not achieve; from that assertion it follows that, as the consequent inside A says, *x* is greater than *y*.

Objection C. Premise (5) is false. God's actual greatness need not be logically unsurpassable, provided that God is the creator of all contingent beings and possesses enough of the traditional divine perfections—in particular, omniscience, omnipotence, and perfect goodness. Such a God remains worthy of worship, even if he should turn out to be logically surpassable because, say, *being timelessly eternal* is a perfection that he lacks. God's actual greatness, therefore, need not be unsurpassable, provided it is actually unsurpassed *and* it exceeds a threshold minimally sufficient to ensure that God is worthy of worship.[16]

Reply. This anti-Anselmian objection invites four replies. First, the objection threatens to change the subject: if my argument is construed as concluding the non-existence of the *Anselmian* God, it is no rebuttal of that argument to reject the Anselmian description of God. But, second, the Anselmian description can be defended by noting that the objection suffers from the following instability. The more reason we have to regard, e.g., timeless eternality as a perfection, the more reason we have for insisting that anything properly called "God" must possess it and that, therefore, any scenario in which God *lacks* it is incoherent. On the other hand, the more confident we are that such a scenario is coherent—the more reason we have for allowing that God could lack, e.g., timeless eternality—the less reason we have for regarding that property as a perfection, in which case God's lacking

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[16] I owe this objection to an anonymous referee for *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*.

the property would *not* imply that God is surpassable. The Anselmian description famously avoids this instability by insisting that the concept of God *is* the concept of an unsurpassable being. Third, there is the intuition, championed most notably by Morris, that "the divine perfections are all necessarily co-exemplified" and thus any scenario in which God has some but not all of the perfections is impossible.[17] Fourth, there is Morris's argument that the Anselmian God exists in every possible world and thus excels any less-than-Anselmian God in any world in which the latter exists. In any world, then, in which the objector's God exists, there exists an even greater being, and our intuitions tell us that at most one of those beings—the greater one—deserves to be regarded as the one true God of monotheism.[18]

Objection D. Like Anselmian arguments in general, your argument proves too much. Carried to its inevitable conclusion, its logic would prove, for example, that the lowliest possible being and the reddest possible being are humanly inconceivable; that God cannot even conceive of himself; and that, if God exists, God's name cannot even be written or uttered. But surely no sound argument could prove any of those absurd conclusions.

Reply. First, it is not absurd to hold that the lowliest or reddest logically possible objects are humanly inconceivable, for there could not be any such objects: given any object however lowly or red, it is logically possible that there have been a lowlier or a redder. Second, the conclusions concerning God's self-conceivability and God's susceptibility to being named depend, respectively, on the plainly false assumption that (d) the greatest possible being might exist and yet lack the power to conceive of itself and on the arguably false assumption that (e) "being too great for one's name to be written or uttered" fixes a level of greatness which something might achieve.

Take (d) first. Why would it be proving too much to prove that God is too great to conceive of himself? The answer, presumably, is that the power to conceive of oneself is a great-making property, and thus no maximally great being could exist and yet lack that power. One might reply that the predicate "self-conceivable" fixes a level of greatness which something might exceed and that anything exceeding that level is greater than anything not exceeding it:

> (P1) In any possible world, for any x and y, if x is too great to conceive of itself and y is not too great to conceive of itself, then x is greater than y.

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17   Morris, pp. 21-22.
18   Ibid., pp. 19-21. This reply is perhaps the weakest of the four, since Morris's argument appears to assume the justly controversial principle of S5 modal logic that any proposition which is possibly necessary is in fact necessary: "$\diamond\square\phi \supset \square\phi$."

P1, however, is totally ineffective. It is incoherent to suppose something too great to conceive of itself: because the power to conceive of oneself is a great-making property, nothing could be so *great* that it lacked that property. This fact is an instance of a more general truth: where *p* is any great-making property, the description "something so great that it lacks *p*" is incoherent and thus not possibly fulfilled. Thus, the antecedent inside P1 is impossible. Since an impossible antecedent is impossible to discharge, no instance of P1 is at all capable of showing that *x* is greater than *y*.

In this context it is important to recognize that the property of *being humanly conceivable* (like its complement, human inconceivability) is *not* a great-making property; indeed, to suppose otherwise seems to me nothing but hubris on the part of human beings. Thus, there is nothing incoherent about the notion of something so great that it lacks *that* property—and so nothing incoherent about the description in premise (1).

Regarding assumption (e), if indeed "being too great for one's name to be written or uttered" fixes a level of greatness that something might achieve, then I accept the resulting conditional: if God exists, then God is too great to be named—even in the sentence expressing the conditional itself. The consequent of that conditional certainly looks absurd, but we are committed to accepting the consequent only if the antecedent is true, and so the absurdity of the consequent provides further grounds for atheism.

Objection E. Even if being humanly conceivable is not a great-making property, perhaps being so *great* as to be humanly conceivable is such a property. If so, couldn't one use the following principle to prove that, contrary to your conclusion, God *must* be conceivable by us?[19]

> (P2) In any possible world, whatever is great enough that our cognitive equals *can* conceive of it is greater than whatever is not great enough that our cognitive equals can conceive of it.

Reply. To show why this objection fails, we need to display the logical form of P2 in slightly more detail:

> (P2a) In any possible world, for any *x* and *y*, if *x* is great enough that our cognitive equals can conceive of *x*, and *y* is not great enough that our cognitive equals can conceive of *y*, then *x* is greater than *y*.

The objection fails because P2a, like P1, is at best only vacuously true. The antecedent inside P2a says that *y* has a degree of greatness so *low* that our cognitive equals cannot conceive of *y*. But clearly *zero* represents the (unreachable) logical lower bound of greatness anything can have, and, for any nonzero degree of greatness that is close to zero, there is no reason to think

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19   I owe this objection to Mark Leeming.

that our cognitive equals cannot conceive of a *y* possessing that meager degree of greatness. Thus, P2a's antecedent, like P1's antecedent, is unsatisfiable. By contrast, there is at least some reason to think that, whether or not greatness has a logical *upper* bound, there could have been a thing whose level of greatness is so *high* that our cognitive equals cannot conceive of that thing.

Even if, moreover, it is possible for there to be something too lowly for us to conceive of, it does not follow that God must *not* be greater than anything we can conceive of. Whatever achieves the level of greatness fixed by "great enough for us to conceive of" is indeed greater than whatever fails to achieve that level of greatness, i.e., than whatever is not (at least) great enough for us to conceive of. So, if an inconceivably lowly thing is possible, it follows from the Anselmian conception of God that God is at least great enough for us to conceive of. But from that result it does not also follow that God is *not too great for us to conceive of*, because "at least great enough for us to conceive of" does not imply "conceivable by us" or "not too great for us to conceive of" (just as "at least equal to 1" does not imply "equal to 1" or "not greater than 1").

Objection F. Even if your argument is sound, it is necessarily unpersuasive, since none of us or our cognitive equals can *believe* that it is sound: no human beings or their cognitive equals can believe premise (1) or the conclusion, (7).

Reply. Accepting (1) does not require believing (f) that something actually fits the description contained in (1); it requires only believing (g) that something logically could have fit the description. According to Nagel's argument, there is no reason we cannot believe (f), in which case there is no reason we cannot believe (g), asserting only the logical possibility of (f). The situation is more complicated in regard to (7). On the safe assumption that our believing (7) requires our having some conception of God, it follows only that no human being can believe (7) *if God exists*. So two relevant things follow: (h) unless atheism is true, no human being can believe that my argument is sound; and (j) whether or not atheism is true, no theist can consistently believe that my argument is sound.

Let me emphasize, however, that neither (h) nor (j) implies that my argument *is* unsound. Consider, by analogy, any argument for the eliminative-materialist thesis

(EM) No human being has any beliefs.

Unless EM is false, and so unless any argument for EM is unsound, no one can genuinely *believe* the conclusion of any argument *for* EM, a fact which does not imply that any such argument is unsound; to get that implication,

one needs to assume that someone genuinely believes something, an assumption which simply begs the question against the soundness of the argument. Nor do (h) and (j) show that my argument is necessarily unpersuasive. My argument can correctly be judged sound only if God does not exist, and no consistent theist can judge my argument to be sound: those results are just what one would expect from any argument for atheism.[20]

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[20]   Here is a technical objection perhaps best left to a footnote:

Objection G. (1) is not as logically innocent as it seems. Where "Fa" abbreviates "a is too great to be at all conceived of by our cognitive equals," (1) says that, possibly, at least one thing necessarily satisfies F; i.e., (1) asserts something of the form "$\Diamond\exists x\Box\mathrm{F}x$." But $\Diamond\exists x\Box\mathrm{F}x$, in turn, implies $\Diamond\Box\exists x\mathrm{F}x$. Add the Brouwerian axiom "$\Diamond\Box\phi \supset \phi$," and (1) implies $\exists x\mathrm{F}x$: the assertion that there actually exists something too great to be at all conceived of by our cognitive equals—hardly the uncontroversial consequence (1) was portrayed as having.

Reply. Perhaps (1) would be shakier if it implied the existential assertion the objector alleges it does. But the objector's argument relies on three questionable, if not just false, assumptions.

First, the objection works only if we interpret "inconceivable" as "necessarily not conceived of," where the necessity is the metaphysical kind symbolized by "$\Box$." But my argument loses none of its force if we interpret "inconceivable," more plausibly, as marking only a nomological, and not a metaphysical, limitation. In that case, however, it is not clear that "$\Box$" is the right operator, and so it is not clear that (1) has the form "$\Diamond\exists x\Box\mathrm{F}x$" after all.

Second, even if (1) does have the form "$\Diamond\exists x\Box\mathrm{F}x$," the claim that $\Diamond\exists x\Box\mathrm{F}x$ implies $\Diamond\Box\exists x\mathrm{F}x$ relies on the necessary truth of

(P3) $\exists x\Box\phi x \supset \Box\exists x\phi x$,

and P3 is doubtful, if not just false. For, given that my kitchen table is made of wood, it is, many would say, essentially made of wood, and thus there is at least one thing essentially made of wood, a truth one might symbolize as

(P4) $\exists x\Box\forall y(y = x \supset \mathrm{W}y)$,

using "Wa" for "a is made of wood": there is an x such that, in any world, whatever thing (if any) is identical to x is made of wood. But from that truth it does not follow that

(P5) $\Box\exists x\forall y(y = x \supset \mathrm{W}y)$,

i.e., that necessarily at least one thing is made of wood, that it is an essential feature of logical space that at least one thing be made of wood; for there might have been nothing at all made of wood. Letting "ϕx" abbreviate "$\forall y(y = x \supset \mathrm{W}y)$," then, this reasoning implies that P3, the objector's second assumption, is not even true, let alone necessarily true.

Third, the objection assumes the truth of the Brouwerian axiom "$\Diamond\Box\phi \supset \phi$," but the Brouwerian axiom, together with unobjectionable auxiliary premises, notoriously implies the Barcan formula,

(BF) $\Diamond\exists x\phi x \supset \exists x\Diamond\phi x$,

and there are good reasons to doubt BF. Although Elizabeth I of England died childless, things might have gone differently: she might have had a child. Thus, "$\Diamond\exists x\mathrm{C}x$" is true, using "C$a$" for "$a$ is a child of Elizabeth I of England." But "$\exists x\Diamond\mathrm{C}x$" is false, since, assuming she died childless, there neither exists nor ever existed an individual such that it could have been her child. By the same token, many physicalists hold that everything is essentially physical while also regarding physicalism itself as only contingently true. If they are correct, then "$\Diamond\exists x\mathrm{N}x$" is true, using "N$a$" for "$a$ is nonphysical," while "$\exists x\Diamond\mathrm{N}x$" is false. Even if they are wrong, if their position is so much as consistent then BF is false as a thesis of modal logic. Thus, Objection G rests on yet a third questionable assumption; if even one of them is false, that is enough to rebut the objection.

IV. Conclusion

My argument is by no means just a restatement of the venerable theological claim that we creatures can conceive of God only "negatively" or only "analogically"; if the Anselmian requirement is right, then we cannot conceive of God, assuming God exists, even negatively, analogically, or verbally—let alone substantially. But surely we can conceive of God in at least one of those ways, in which case, as the Fool says, there is no God. The argument's first premise is contestable, but we have seen at least some reason to accept that premise and have seen no good reason to reject it. In a way, the problem posed by *Proslogion* 15 is obvious: how can we conceive of anything denoted by the description "something so great that we cannot conceive of it"? One might try to resolve the problem by distinguishing verbal and substantial conception, as Anselm himself does, or by imposing a *hierarchy* of types of conception. But neither of those approaches will work when the description in question is "something so great that we cannot conceive of it *at all*." Yet, if Anselm is right, it is precisely that description which God must satisfy.[21]