

Millican on the Ontological Argument

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Abstract

Peter Millican (2004) provides a novel and elaborate objection to Anselm's ontological argument. Millican thinks that his objection is more powerful than any other because it does not dispute contentious 'deep philosophical theories' that underlie the argument. Instead, it tries to reveal the 'fatal flaw' of the argument by considering its 'shallow logical details'. Millican's objection is based on his interpretation of the argument, according to which Anselm relies on what I call the 'principle of the superiority of existence' (PSE). I argue that (i) the textual evidence Millican cites does not provide a convincing case that Anselm relies on PSE and that, moreover, (ii) Anselm does not even need PSE for the ontological argument. I introduce a plausible interpretation of the ontological argument that is not vulnerable to Millican's objection and conclude that *even if* the ontological argument fails, it does not fail in the way Millican thinks it does.

1. Introduction

Peter Millican (2004) introduces a novel and elaborate objection to Anselm's ontological argument for the existence of God. According to Millican, a theory of natures upon which Anselm is alleged to rely entails that no possible interpretation of the ontological argument can yield the conclusion that God exists. Millican thinks that his objection is 'far more solid and persuasive' than any other because it does not dispute contentious 'deep philosophical complexities' that underlie the argument. For example, it does not dispute the issue, raised by Kant (1781), of whether or not existence is a property (or a

predicate). Instead, it tries to reveal the ‘fatal flaw’ in the argument by considering its ‘shallow logical details’ (pp. 437-438, 465).

In this reply, I argue that Millican’s objection does not succeed. I pay particular attention to Millican’s assumption that Anselm relies on what I call the ‘principle of the superiority of existence’ (PSE). I argue that (i) the textual evidence that Millican cites does not provide a convincing case that Anselm relies on PSE and that, moreover, (ii) Anselm does not even need PSE for the ontological argument. I introduce a plausible interpretation of the ontological argument that is not vulnerable to Millican’s objection and conclude that *even if* the ontological argument ultimately fails, it does not fail in the way Millican thinks it does.

2. The theory of natures

Millican claims that in order to provide an appropriate framework for Anselm’s reasoning, we need to formulate a theory that enables ‘reference to be made to an “entity” (such as God) without presupposing either its existence or its non-existence’ (p. 449). Millican uses the term ‘nature’ to denote an existence-independent entity and speaks of a nature as ‘instantiated’ if such an entity exists in reality.

According to Millican’s theory of natures, the nature of, for example, Laika, *i.e.*, the Russian space dog, can be expressed as follows:

<Laika>: <first dog to be sent into space>

In general, the first set of angle brackets encloses the name of a nature and the second set encloses at least one of the most significant properties that the nature has. Following this

format, the natures of Lassie, *i.e.*, the television dog, and Kings Alfred and Arthur, *i.e.*, British heroes, can be expressed as follows:

<Lassie>: <dog, catches villains, rescues victims, star of film and television>

<Alfred>: <King of England, defeated the Danes, translated Boethius>

<Arthur>: <saintly and heroic king, kept a court of knights, sought the Holy Grail>

Millican maintains that Anselm subscribes implicitly to this theory of natures, which enables him to rank them on the basis of their greatness. According to Millican's interpretation, Anselm thinks that 'among the various criteria for greatness (power, wisdom, goodness, *etc.*) real existence [or instantiation] "trumps" all others, so that any nature which has a real archetype, however lowly its characteristic properties may be, will on that account alone be greater than any nature, however impressively characterised, which does not' (p. 451). This means that, according to Millican's interpretation, Anselm endorses the following principle:

The Principle of the Superiority of Existence (PSE): Any nature that is instantiated is greater than any nature that is not instantiated (or any nature that is conceived only in the mind).¹

¹ Two remarks are in order here. First, the proposition that *x* is conceived only in the mind entails that *x* is not instantiated, but not *vice versa*. For there are, I suppose, uninstantiated natures that cannot be conceived in the mind. However, throughout this paper, I use the phrases 'is conceived only in the mind' and 'is not instantiated' interchangeably because I am not concerned with uninstantiated natures that cannot be conceived in the mind. Second, it is slightly odd that Millican allows natures to have existence, or instantiation, as their property when he stipulates that natures are 'existence-independent entities' (p. 446). If natures can be regarded as being existence-independent while being either instantiated or uninstantiated,

Suppose that Lassie is more courageous and smarter than Laika. According to PSE, however, <Lassie> is less great than <Laika> because it is not, unlike <Laika>, instantiated. It is controversial whether or not King Arthur really existed; that is, whether or not <Arthur> was instantiated. If <Arthur> *was* instantiated, then it is the greatest among the above four natures, for its existence immediately defeats <Lassie> and its other great-making properties defeat <Laika> and <Alfred>. On the other hand, if <Arthur> was not instantiated, then it is not as great as <Alfred> or even <Laika>. It is only greater than <Lassie>.

Now the nature of God can be expressed as follows:

<God>: <omnipotent, creator of the universe>

Omnipotence includes all divine properties, such as omniscience, omnipotence and moral perfection. If <God> is instantiated, then it is greater than the above four natures, or indeed any natures at all. On the other hand, if <God> is not instantiated, then it is not even as great as <Laika>; it is only greater than all other *uninstantiated* natures.²

Using the concept of natures, Millican presents his interpretation of the ontological argument as follows (pp. 457-458):

- (1) The phrase ‘a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought’ is clearly understood by the Fool, and apparently makes sense.
- (2) Hence we can take the phrase ‘a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought’ as successfully denoting some specific nature.

then, for instance, ideas and concepts are also existence-independent. It is then unclear why Millican needs to introduce the new terminology here. However, I set this concern aside for the sake of simplicity.

² This is, of course, based on the assumption that there is no more than one greatest uninstantiated nature.

- (3) A nature which is instantiated in reality is greater than one which is not.
- (4) So if a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought were not instantiated in reality, then it would be possible to think of a nature that is greater (for example, any nature that is in fact instantiated in reality).
- (5) But this would be a contradiction, since it is obviously impossible to think of a nature that is greater than a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought.
- (6) Therefore a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought must indeed be instantiated in reality.

Notice that premiss (3) is equivalent to PSE. On the basis of the above interpretation and the theory of natures, Millican provides a unique objection to the ontological argument.³

3. Millican's objection to the ontological argument

Millican's objection is concerned with the most crucial phrase in Anselm's ontological argument, namely, 'a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought', which appears in premisses (1), (2), (4) and (5). Millican maintains that there are four possible interpretations of this phrase:

- (i) A nature that is so great that no nature is greater
- (ii) A nature that can be thought so great that no nature can be thought greater
- (iii) A nature that is so great that no nature can be thought greater
- (iv) A nature that can be thought so great that no nature is greater

³ Whether or not it is legitimate, as Millican does, to reformulate the ontological argument in terms of natures is a matter of further debate. In this paper, however, I assume, in favour of Millican, that it *is* legitimate.

Now assume that the following is the greatest nondivine nature instantiated:

<Aurelius>: <absolute Emperor of the Roman Empire, wise, just, beneficent>

On this assumption, atheists would think that *<Aurelius>* is the greatest instantiated nature *simpliciter*, and *a fortiori* the greatest nature *simpliciter*. Millican argues that none of the above four possible interpretations of the phrase enables Anselm to convince atheists to hold that *<God>*, rather than *<Aurelius>*, is the greatest nature.

Consider each of (i) through (iv). Given PSE, (i) denotes an instantiated nature that is so great that no instantiated nature is greater. Atheists would think that, on this interpretation, the phrase ‘a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought’ refers to *<Aurelius>* rather than *<God>*. Here, the ontological argument yields the trivial conclusion that the greatest nature is instantiated, *i.e.*, that there exists the greatest existent being.

(ii) denotes a nature such that *if* it exists, it is so great that no nature can possibly be thought greater. In this case, the phrase refers successfully to *<God>* and the ontological argument goes smoothly up to premiss (4). However, it fails at premiss (5), according to which it is impossible to think of a nature that is greater than a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought. Given PSE, atheists would claim that it *is* possible to think of a nature that is greater than a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought; namely, any nature that is instantiated (*e.g.*, *<Laika>*, *<Alfred>*, *<Aurelius>*, *etc.*). From the atheistic point of view, they are greater simply because, unlike *<God>*, they are instantiated.

(iii) denotes an instantiated nature that is so great that no nature can possibly be thought greater. Atheists would not think of this phrase as denoting any nature at all,

because there is no such nature unless <God> is instantiated. On this interpretation, premiss (2), *i.e.*, that we can take the phrase ‘a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought’ as successfully denoting some specific nature, is unwarranted.

(iv) denotes a nature such that *if* it is instantiated it is so great that no instantiated nature is greater. In this case, the phrase could refer to <God>.⁴ However, the ontological argument fails, again, at premiss (5) because, given PSE, it *is* possible for atheists to think of a nature that is greater than <God>, namely, instantiated natures, such as <Laika>, <Alfred> and <Aurelius>.

Therefore, Millican concludes that Anselm’s ontological argument fails to prove the existence of God.⁵

⁴ The phrase *could* refer to <God> but it does not have to. For example, it could also refer to the nature of a being that is just like Aurelius but slightly more powerful.

⁵ In addition to this main objection, Millican introduces a supplementary objection, which appeals to a Gaunilo-type parody argument (pp. 459-463). According to the objection, there must be something wrong with Anselm’s reasoning because we can construct, from the ontological argument, a parallel argument that yields the absurd conclusion that ‘AntiGod’ exists, where AntiGod is a being that is almost identical to God, except that, instead of being morally perfect, it is ‘most effectively evil’. This argument is obtained by replacing the phrase ‘greater’ in Anselm’s ontological argument with ‘more effectively evil’. Since this sort of argument has already been introduced and discussed elsewhere (*e.g.*, Timothy Chambers (2000), Philip E. Devine (1975), C. K. Grant (1957), Patrick Grim (1979), David Haight and Marjorie Haight (1970), Millican (1989), Graham Oppy (1995, 2006), William L. Power (1992), Robert J. Richman (1958)), I consider it only briefly here. The key premiss of the parody argument is the following, which is a counterpart of premiss (3):

(3*) A nature that is instantiated in reality is *more effectively evil* than one that is not.

Or more generally:

(3**) A nature that is instantiated in reality is *more effectively F* than one that is not.

4. Initial response to Millican's objection

Again, Millican's objection to the ontological argument assumes that Anselm endorses PSE. PSE is based on the ideas that real existence is a property and that it is superior to all other properties that a nature can have. That is, even such great-making properties as omniscience, omnipotence and moral perfection cannot be more useful than existence when it comes to making a nature greater. Since PSE is the core of the theory of natures that Millican formulates, it is important to examine carefully whether Anselm really endorses it.

Millican provides three reasons for his claim that Anselm endorses PSE. The first is that what Millican takes as a correct translation of Anselm's relevant sentence in the *Proslogion* seems to prove it. M. J. Charlesworth translates the sentence as follows:

(Translation 1) [I]f [God] exists solely in the mind even, it can be thought to exist in reality also, which is greater. (Anselm 1077-1078, p. 117)

Millican (2004) claims that this is a mistranslation. He says that it should, rather, be translated as follows:

(3*) and (3**) seem untenable because they entail the implausible claim that any instantiated nature is more effectively evil, or more effectively *F*, than any uninstantiated nature while not itself being evil, or *F*, at all. So, for example, (3*) and (3**) entail that an instantiated nature that is necessarily morally impeccable *is* more effectively evil than any uninstantiated nature, which seems false. (Millican introduces only counterparts of (1) and (2) in his paper, but, in order to render his parody argument valid, he needs (3*) as well.) Despite their implausibility, we cannot dismiss (3*) and (3**) too quickly because they are at least suitably parallel to (3), or PSE, for the purpose of Millican's parody argument. If PSE is true, then (3*) and (3**) could also be true, and, hence, the parody argument might withstand. It is, therefore, crucial to consider, as I do in the main text, whether Anselm ever endorses PSE or even needs it for the ontological argument. Thanks to an anonymous referee for an insightful comment on this point.

(Translation 2) [If [God] exists solely in the mind, something that is greater can be thought to exist in reality also. (Millican 2004, p. 439)

According to Millican, Translation 2 implies that Anselm endorses PSE.

The second reason is that Anselm does not give any indication of disagreement when Gaunilo attributes PSE to him (pp. 439-440, p. 452). Gaunilo expresses his interpretation of Anselm's claim as follows: 'If this same being exists in the mind alone, anything that existed also in reality would be greater than this being' (Gaunilo 1078, p. 157). As Millican correctly points out, while this interpretation is essentially identical to PSE Anselm does not, in his reply to Gaunilo (1078), accuse him of misinterpreting him.

The third reason is that Millican thinks that 'the logic of Anselm's argument could not possibly be strengthened (and might well be weakened)' if Anselm does not endorse PSE (Millican 2004, p. 452).

I submit that these three reasons do not warrant Millican's claim that Anselm endorses PSE. As to the first reason, PSE is neither equivalent to, nor entailed by, Translation 2. Translation 2 says merely that if <God> is not instantiated, then *some* nature that is greater can be instantiated in reality. PSE is, however, the much stronger claim that *any* nature that is instantiated in reality is greater than *any* nature that is conceived only in the mind, including <God>, conceived only in the mind. Millican needs to show that Translation 2 entails PSE, but the entailment relationship here is the opposite; PSE entails Translation 2, but not *vice versa*. Moreover, while it is true that Translation 2 is consistent with PSE, so is Translation 1! Furthermore, if Anselm really has PSE in mind when he asserts Translation 2, what he compares with God that exists solely in the mind is a being that exists in reality, *e.g.*, Laika, Alfred, Aurelius, *etc.* It is

then puzzling why Anselm has to formulate the consequent of Translation 2 as a modal statement, ‘something that is greater *can be* thought to exist in reality also’, rather than a more straightforward, non-modal statement such as, ‘something that is greater exists in reality’.

The second reason seems stronger than the first because Gaunilo’s interpretation of Anselm’s claim is, indeed, equivalent to PSE. However, it is still not strong enough to warrant the conclusion that Anselm endorses PSE, because there is another possible explanation for the fact that Anselm does not correct Gaunilo’s interpretation. There is a consensus among Anselm scholars that Anselm’s presentation in the relevant texts, namely, Chapters 2 to 5 and 15 of his *Proslogion* and his response to Gaunilo, are highly ambiguous. There have been many different interpretations of the texts and many different forms of the argument have been derived from them. Some contend that Anselm provides three distinct versions of the ontological argument in the texts⁶; some contend that he provides two⁷; some contend that he provides only one⁸; and yet others contend that he does not even attempt to provide an argument for the existence of God at all.⁹

⁶ Brian Leftow (2002) maintains that in addition to the two versions of the ontological argument explained below, Anselm introduces the third version in his response to Gaunilo.

⁷ Charles Hartshorne (1941, 1961, 1965) and Norman Malcolm (1960) maintain that Anselm provides two, one modal and the other non-modal, versions of the ontological argument in Chapters 2 and 3 of the *Proslogion*, respectively.

⁸ Richard R. La Croix (1993) argues that, contrary to what Malcolm (1960) says, the version of the ontological argument in Chapter 3 of the *Proslogion* is not distinct from the one in Chapter 2.

⁹ Karl Barth (1931) argues that Anselm does not, in the *Proslogion*, attempt to provide a deductive argument for the existence of God; he rather provides an expression of faith, which *presupposes* the existence of God.

From these facts, we may hypothesise that Anselm remains purposefully ambiguous about the dialectic of his argument in the texts. If this hypothesis is true, it could well be the case that Anselm does not correct Gaunilo's interpretation because he does not want to commit himself to a specific interpretation of the argument.

The third reason why Millican thinks that Anselm accepts PSE is that he has to accept it in order for his ontological argument to retain its power. In what follows, I argue that, ironically, this claim is false because by giving up PSE we can undercut Millican's objection, which he claims reveals the 'fatal flaw' in the argument.

5. Further response to Millican's objection

I have argued that the textual evidence cited by Millican fails to show that Anselm endorses PSE. Nonetheless, perhaps Millican does not need to provide any such evidence; perhaps Anselm *has to* accept PSE because otherwise he cannot construct the ontological argument in the first place. In what follows, however, I argue that Anselm does not need PSE at all for the argument.

In order to construct the ontological argument, Anselm needs to justify at least the following claim: If there were <God> that is instantiated in reality and <God> that is conceived only in the mind, then the former would be greater than the latter. According to Millican, Anselm would justify this claim by appealing to PSE, which entails the following:

(A) <God> that is instantiated is greater than <God> that is conceived only in the mind because any nature that is instantiated is greater than <God>, or any nature, that is conceived only in the mind.

However, (A) is not the only possible justification. One alternative justification is the following:

(B) <God> that is instantiated in reality is greater than <God> that is conceived only in the mind because existence is a great-making property.¹⁰

(B) is much more modest than (A) because it does not entail the claims that existence is superior to any other great-making properties, such as omniscience, omnipotence and moral perfection, or that any instantiated nature is greater than any uninstantiated nature. It only says that since existence is *a* great-making property <God> that is instantiated has a larger amount of great-making properties than <God> that is not instantiated. If we take this as Anselm's reasoning in his ontological argument, then Millican's objection does not succeed in refuting the argument.

With the above alternative justification in mind, Millican's interpretation of the ontological argument can be amended as follows:

- (1) The phrase 'a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought' is clearly understood by the Fool, and apparently makes sense.
- (2) Hence we can take the phrase 'a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought' as successfully denoting some specific nature.

¹⁰ There are two interpretations of (B). One is that <God> that is instantiated in reality is greater than <God> that is conceived only in the mind because *with respect to* <God> existence is a great-making property. (This interpretation is linked to the idea that existence, or instantiation, is not a great-making property if the nature in question is, for example, intrinsically malevolent.) The other is that <God> that is instantiated in reality is greater than <God> that is conceived only in the mind because *with respect to any nature* existence is a great-making property. I set this point aside because this distinction does not affect my response to Millican's objection.

(3') A-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought that is instantiated in reality is greater than a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought that is conceived only in the mind (because existence is a great-making property).

(4') So if a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought were not instantiated in reality, then it would be possible to think of a nature that is greater; namely, a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought that is instantiated in reality.

(5) But this would be a contradiction, since it is obviously impossible to think of a nature that is greater than a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought.

(6) Therefore a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought must indeed be instantiated in reality.

Here, only the third and fourth premisses of Millican's interpretation have been amended and the rest remain the same.

As we saw in Section 4, the thrust of Millican's objection to the ontological argument is that Anselm's reasoning fails on any of interpretations (i) to (iv) of the phrase 'a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought'. I submit that the above interpretation of the ontological argument does not fail if we adopt interpretation (ii), according to which the phrase 'a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought' denotes a nature that can be thought so great that no nature can be thought greater. In the case of Millican's interpretation of the ontological argument, while the phrase successfully denotes God, the argument fails at premiss (5). This is because, given PSE, or equivalently (3), it *is* possible for atheists to think of a nature that is greater than a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought; namely, any nature that is

instantiated (e.g., <Laika>, <Alfred>, <Aurelius>, etc.). However, the above interpretation of the argument does not fail at (5) in this way because it abandons PSE and replaces (3) with (3'). According to the interpretation, it is indeed *impossible* for atheists to think of a nature that is greater than a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought. Therefore, the argument goes through and successfully yields the conclusion that a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought must be instantiated in reality. While there is no textual evidence that this is the correct interpretation of Anselm's argument, it is at least as consistent with relevant passages in Anselm's texts as is Millican's interpretation.¹¹

Millican might try to reject the above interpretation of the ontological argument by appealing to the Kantian thesis that existence is not a property. However, such an option is not available to Millican for several reasons. First, if he appeals to the Kantian thesis, he contradicts his own claim that such philosophically deep objections as the thesis should be avoided (p. 438). Second, if the Kantian thesis is true, Millican's objection is redundant; we can simply reject the argument, both Millican's and my interpretations of it, by appealing to the thesis alone. Third, it is dialectically illegitimate for Millican to adopt the Kantian thesis because his own objection is based on the theory of natures, which assumes, at least for the sake of argument, that existence *is* a (great-making) property.¹²

¹¹ In particular, my interpretation is at least as consistent with Translations 1 and 2, introduced in Section 4, as is Millican's interpretation.

¹² Millican might also try to reject my interpretation of the ontological argument by claiming that while existence is a property, it is not a *great-making* property. However, such a claim would have the same unwelcome consequences: (i) it would involve philosophically deep issues that Millican wants to avoid; (ii)

Whether or not the ontological argument on the above interpretation ultimately succeeds is, of course, a matter for further debate. Nevertheless, it is perfectly clear by now that the argument does not fail in the way Millican thinks it does; if it does fail, the failure is not due to its shallow logical details.

6. Conclusion

I have made three main points in this paper. First, Millican's interpretation of the ontological argument is not compelling because his attribution of PSE to Anselm is unwarranted; none of the textual evidence he cites provides a convincing case that Anselm endorses PSE. Second, there is an alternative, plausible interpretation of Anselm's reasoning, which is free from PSE. On this interpretation, the ontological argument undercuts Millican's objection. Third, Millican is mistaken in thinking that the ontological argument can be refuted merely by considering its shallow logical details without disputing deep philosophical complexities that underlie it. I do not mean merely that the ontological argument can be modified so that Millican is forced to dispute deep philosophical issues; such a modification can be made trivially by adding a metaphysically contentious premiss to the ontological argument. What I mean is rather that there is an interpretation of the ontological argument such that (i) it is consistent with Anselm's relevant texts; (ii) it is based on an assumption weaker than PSE, to which

it would render Millican's original objection redundant; and (iii) it would contradict Millican's assumption that existence *is* a great-making property.

Millican thinks that Anselm is committed; and (iii) it cannot be refuted without at least disputing underlying deep philosophical complexities.

While Millican is successful in showing the subtlety and logical complications of the ontological argument, he is not yet successful in revealing the ‘fatal flaw’ in the argument. After more than nine hundred years, the ontological argument is still powerful enough to torment its opponents.¹³

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