

LECTURE NOTES XIX

St Anselm (1033/4-1109), a great medieval philosopher and theologian, presented an argument for the existence of God that came to be known as the 'Ontological Argument.' He follows the definition of God as 'something than which nothing greater can be conceived'-a perfect being. God then exists in the understanding, since we understand this concept-whatever is understood exists in the understanding. But if He only existed in the understanding, something greater could be conceived, for a being that exists in reality is greater than one which exists only in the understanding. But then we can conceive of something greater than that than which nothing greater can be conceived, which is contradictory. Hence God does not exist only in the understanding but *must* exist in reality as well.

One thing to note about the argument is that it is *a priori*—based on concepts, not on experience. Such arguments are common in mathematics. For example, we start with definitions of geometric concepts (point, line, plane, figures etc.) and proceed to prove further properties and theorems. Or we define number concepts and operations on them in arithmetic and proceed to prove further properties and theorems. Anselm starts with a definition of the concept 'God' and proceeds to offer an argument for his existence. Another point is that the form of the argument is a '*reductio ad absurdum*'—reduction to absurdity. In this form of argument, one brings in as a premise an *assumption* that is the opposite of the proposition that is intended to be proven. A valid argument is then provided that leads to a contradiction. A contradiction is necessarily false and the argument is not sound, Therefore the assumption is false and its opposite is thus proven true. You are familiar with this form of argument, for example in mathematics where it is called 'indirect proof'. You are supposed to prove that proposition *p* is true but you start with its contradictory *not-p* and proceed correctly to derive a false proposition which shows that not-p is false and proves p true.

Let us look again at Anselm argument analyzing it into steps, premisses and conclusion. These are numbered to facilitate cross reference.

- (1) by 'God' we mean 'that than which no greater can be thought/conceived'
 - (2) *suppose* that that than which no greater can be thought does not really exist
 - (3) nevertheless, it can be thought to exist in reality
 - (4) now that than which no greater can be thought is greater if it really exists than if it does not
 - (5) hence, from (3) and (4), it is possible to think of something greater than that which no greater can be thought
- Since (5) is contradictory, the hypothesis/assumption/supposition in (2) is false
- (6) so that by *reductio* that than which no greater can be thought-that is God-really exists

At the beginning of the section (pp.152 ff.) Blackburn introduces some conceptual linguistic consideration that are the bases of the subsequent criticism. He distinguishes between the *sense* and *reference* of a linguistic expression. The sense is what we understand when we understand an expression-its meaning; and the reference is what is signified by the expression. We understand the meaning of the expression 'the present president of the US' and what we understand is its sense, and its reference is the person Donald Trump. If I had uttered the same phrase in 2002, it had the same sense but the reference would have been the person George Bush. If we speak of 'the present president of the US' in 2039, it has the same sense but we do not know the reference. There are also expressions that have sense but no reference, for example 'flying horse', 'golden mountain', 'largest number' etc. There are also expressions that cannot have a reference like 'round square'. We can keep adding examples illustrating various relations between sense and reference indefinitely, but *what matters to our discussion is the distinction itself*.

Considering the sense/reference distinction, Blackburn notes that the existence of a

reference is not determined or established on basis of sense (definition or description). It is determined by the world, the actual reality.

Blackburn extends the conceptual linguistic analysis to a related further issue. A description or definition is given by indicating the characteristics or properties of the thing described or defined. The characteristics/properties are *real* properties of the thing defined or signified *if it exists*. If, for example, the description 'red square' is used, we understand it because we understand the concepts 'red' and 'square'-they belong to the sense of the expression. The thing we apply the description to, if it exists, has the real properties, the shape and the colour-it *satisfies* the description. However, Blackburn notes, when we use 'exists' it does not signify a real property of existence. This point is expressed as 'existence is not a predicate' because the elements of a definition or description occur in a sentence in the position of a predicate grammatically-and 'predicate' is extended to the real characteristic or property itself.

Blackburn uses the considerations above to explain some of the criticism of the ontological argument:

- Anselm definition of 'God' gives us a description that belongs to sense and does not settle the question whether or not there is a being that satisfies the definition, a reference to which the definition applies.
- The suggestion that God exists in the understanding conflates sense and reference-what exists in the understanding is the concept 'God' (sense) and not the Divine Being itself (reference) who may not exist. Anselm is entitled only to asserting the existence of the former but not the latter
- These difficulties cannot be resolved by adding 'exists' to the description or definition because existence is not a predicate and does not confer a real property on what is signified.

Blackburn's discussion of the ontological argument (pp. 152-8) makes it unnecessarily

complicated especially because of his use of detailed examples (dream partner, perfect island, turkeys etc.) without making the point of the examples explicit. Such cases are analogous (similar) to the concepts used in the argument and the faults in the examples equally apply to those used in the argument.