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## ANSELM AND RUSSELL

**Abstract.** In his paper “St. Anselm’s ontological argument succumbs to Russell’s paradox” Christopher Viger presents a critique of Anselm’s Argument from the second chapter of *Proslogion*. Viger claims there that he manages to show that the *greater than* relation that Anselm used in his proof leads to inconsistency. I argue firstly, that Viger does not show what he maintains to show, secondly, that the flaw is not in the nature of Anselm’s reasoning but in Viger’s (mis)understanding of Anselm as well as in Viger’s (mis)application of some set-theoretical notions. I also describe some features of Anselmian *greater than* relation, which indeed plays a crucial role in his Ontological Argument. Last but not least, I present the Argument itself.

*Keywords:* ontological argument, St. Anselm, Russell’s Paradox, ontology

It has been nearly a millennium since the ontological argument for the existence of God was provided by Anselm of Canterbury. The fundamental problem it deals with concerns not only the problem of theological or religious nature, but also, as it was once observed by Bertrand Russell, one of the central problems of philosophy. For if we were able to show that from the very notion of an object one can draw a conclusion about its existence in reality, then there would be a kind of bridge between the realm of thoughts and the realm of nature. However, it can be observed with confusion that despite such importance, the argument is not treated with the appropriate respect. Many of both its critiques and advocates have come up with stories of rather dubious quality. Charles Hartshorne suggests that this may be because most of the people interested in the subject have never read more than a passage or two from *Proslogion*.

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However, even when looking at the top quality analyses such as those of Hartshorne or David Lewis, one cannot be certain of their validity. This, indeed, is a strange phenomenon, for the ontological argument is short, elegant and self-contained. Hence every *pro* or *contra* for the Argument shall be examined carefully.

In his paper [7] Christopher Viger presents a critique of Anselm's Argument from the second chapter of *Proslogion*. Viger claims there that he manages to show that the *greater than* relation that Anselm used in his proof leads to inconsistency. I shall argue firstly, that Viger does not show what he maintains to show, secondly, that the flaw is not in the nature of Anselm's reasoning but in Viger's (mis)understanding of Anselm as well as in Viger's (mis)application of some set-theoretical notions. I will also describe some features of Anselmian *greater than* relation, which indeed plays a crucial role in his Ontological Argument. Last but not least, I will present the Argument itself.

## 1. Viger's argument

As a reminder as well as for convenience of further analysis I shall present Viger's argument pointing out explicitly all the steps he makes in it. The study of Anselm's Proof lets Viger to come up with the following reasoning:

- (1) The *greater than* relation is one that holds between God and every other thing.
- (2) Moreover God is uniquely greater than every other thing that is not God.
- (3) Let  $\Omega$  be the set of all things, real or imaginable, that God is greater than.
- (4) Let  $\mathbf{U}$  be the set that contains everything that is contained in  $\Omega$  plus God, i.e.

$$\mathbf{U} = \Omega \cup \{\text{God}\}$$

- (5) Now consider a set  $\mathbb{R} = \{x \in \mathbf{U} : x \notin x\}$ . If  $\mathbb{R}$  is God, then  $\mathbb{R} \in \mathbf{U}$ . If  $\mathbb{R}$  is not God then God is greater than  $\mathbb{R}$  and, again,  $\mathbb{R} \in \mathbf{U}$ .
- (6) Now inquire whether  $\mathbb{R} \in \mathbb{R}$  or  $\mathbb{R} \notin \mathbb{R}$ . From both these assumptions we get a contradiction, since if  $\mathbb{R} \in \mathbb{R}$ , then  $\mathbb{R} \notin \mathbb{R}$  and if  $\mathbb{R} \notin \mathbb{R}$ , then  $\mathbb{R} \in \mathbb{R}$ .

- (7) It follows from the above statement that  $\mathbf{U}$  cannot be a set. And since it is unproblematic that  $\{\text{God}\}$  is a set then  $\Omega$  cannot be a set.
- (8) Further, since  $\Omega$  is not a set then, the defining property of  $\Omega$  must be self-contradictory since otherwise its extension would be well-defined and thus  $\Omega$  would be a set.

Hence, as Viger puts it, “it is clear why a version of the paradox can be generated from Anselm’s definition of ‘God’, also making clear a subtle logical flaw underlying Anselm’s clever reasoning” [7, pp. 125–126]. As we shall see it is not so clear, as Anselm’s reasoning is more clever than Viger suspects.

## 2. Russell’s Paradox

Let us begin with some remarks on Russell’s paradox since it is a clue notion employed by Viger in order to make a fool of Anselm.

Russell’s paradox stems from the idea that any coherent condition may be used to determine a set. Let me explain.

Consider the following — assuredly coherent — predicate: *is a cat*. It seems quite natural to expect that using this predicate we can construct a set, i.e., a set of those object that satisfy the condition of being a cat.

Hence we obtain the set of cats. It includes all cats and cats are its only members. Similarly for any predicate we can also expect to be able to construct a set of all objects satisfying this predicate. Thus we may obtain a set of dogs, a set of natural numbers, a set of Gods, a set of pages in this journal, *etc.*

Of course the set of all cats is not a cat itself. Similarly, the set of all natural numbers is not a natural number. They are just sets. Nothing more and nothing less. Hence they both clearly do not contain themselves.

However, let us consider the predicate *to be not contained in itself*. Hence we may expect to obtain a set of all those objects that do not contain themselves, denoted by  $\mathbb{R}$  for convenience. Let us now ask the simple question: does  $\mathbb{R}$  contain itself? If it does, then, given that it contains only those objects that do not contain itself, it must satisfy the condition and not contain itself. On the other hand, if it does not contain itself, then it satisfies the condition and must contain itself. Thus we have obtained a contradiction.

Therefore we must conclude that there is no such set. This means that the name  $\mathbb{R}$  refers to nothing. It also means that, against the beliefs of people like Cantor or Frege, it is not true that any meaningful condition



determines a set. There are some that do (like *is a cat*), and some that do not (like *is a set*<sup>1</sup>).

The view that for any meaningful predicate one can construct a set containing these and only these objects that satisfy this predicate was encouraged by so-called naive set theory and expressed by one of its axioms — the Axiom of Unrestricted Predication. All that Russell has shown is that this axiom is inconsistent. This observation was soon generalized leaving sets behind. Russell has realized that the contradiction has indeed nothing to do with sets, as its source is a problem lying in the nature of logic and language. He has given an exact formula for generating such paradoxes<sup>2</sup>, thus providing a method for an appropriate way of using the language.

Thus, after Russell’s observation, the axiomatic theory of sets was ‘repaired’. One of the possible solutions was to take another axiom instead of the troublesome one, saying that for any EXISTING set  $A$  we can construct a set  $B$  containing these and only these objects that a) are members of  $A$  and b) satisfy any meaningful predicate, thus restricting the old axiom to be applied only to members of existing sets.

But Viger clearly accuses Anselm of rather being committed to the inconsistent axiom and to making some violence to logic, since, as Viger puts it, Anselm is guilty of “levelling of the playing field, the lack of type differentiation, between things that God is greater than, which makes the paradoxical self-reference possible” [7, p. 125]. This is a quite strong accusation indeed! Of course, the stronger an accusation is, the more grounds it requires. Let us, then, have a closer look at the grounds Viger provides for his accusations, starting from the very end of his argument.

### 3. Viger’s conclusion

With clear conscience we can all agree that  $\Omega$  cannot be a set if it is to contain  $\mathbb{R}$  (step (7)). But Viger goes one step further — he argues that since the existence of such a set as  $\Omega$  leads to contradiction then the property defining

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<sup>1</sup>This was shown by the so-called Cantor Paradox, which in fact, has a similar structure to Russell’s Paradox.

<sup>2</sup>As Russell has stated by himself: “Given a property  $\phi$  and a function  $\delta$ , such that, if  $\phi$  belongs to all members of  $u$ ,  $\delta(u)$  always exists, has the property  $\phi$ , and is not a member of  $u$ ; then the supposition that there is a class  $\Omega$  of all terms having property  $\phi$  and that  $\delta(\Omega)$  exists leads to the conclusion that  $\delta(\Omega)$  both has and has not the property  $\phi$ ” (quoted after [4], p. 129). The formula provides an analogon of a countertautology of the lower predicate calculus:  $\exists_x \forall_y (\phi(x, y) \leftrightarrow \neg \phi(y, y))$ .

this set (i.e., to be not greater than God) is self-contradictory. This is clearly false.

Consider the following paraphrase of Viger's reasoning. Let  $GWB$  stand for George W. Bush, jr. Consider a set  $\Delta$  of all objects, real or imaginable, that are not identical with  $GWB$ , i.e., the set

$$\Delta \stackrel{\text{def}}{=} \{x : x \neq GWB\}$$

Similarly, let  $\mathbf{U} = \Delta \cup \{GWB\}$ . Let us consider the set  $\mathbb{R}$  again. Then of course  $GWB = \mathbb{R}$  or  $GWB \neq \mathbb{R}$ . If one consider the first possibility, then  $\mathbb{R} \in \mathbf{U}$ . If we assume, which is more reasonable for sure, that  $GWB \neq \mathbb{R}$ , then  $\mathbb{R} \in \Delta$ , hence again  $\mathbb{R} \in \mathbf{U}$ . So in both cases we obtain that  $\mathbb{R} \in \mathbf{U}$  and repeating Viger's reasoning exactly now — we are forced to say, that the relation *not to be identical with Mr. Bush, jr.* is inconsistent or self-contradictory. Yet, the only conclusion one can draw from the above reasoning is simply that  $\Delta$  cannot be a SET.<sup>3</sup>

Coming back to Russell and his paradox. Even when considered in a popular version (i.e., concerning a barber who shaves all but only these persons who are non-self-shavers) it does not show that the concept of shaving is inconsistent but that the concept of such a barber is. Russell has never intended to show that the  $\notin$  (or rather  $\in$ ) relation is inconsistent, nor that the concept of shaving is not consistent.

Hence saying that *greater than* relation is contradictory or paradoxical is, slightly speaking, mistaken. The only thing we could say so far<sup>4</sup> is that the collection of all things God is greater than cannot be a set. That is the predicate *is not greater than God* does not determine a set. It looks like Viger has come up with another example of a non-set-constructive predicate. But observe that it is Viger, not Anselm, who tries to construct  $\Omega$  uniquely from this property. If and only if the 'formalism' provided by Viger is an adequate translation of Anselm's Argument, the problem is on Anselm's side. But is it adequate? As we will soon see, it is not, for it does not fulfill neither standards of mathematics, nor of philosophy.

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<sup>3</sup>Observe that on the grounds of what Viger claims Anselmian *greater than* relation to be, the following sets are identical:  $\{x : \text{God is greater than } x\}$  and  $\{x : x \neq \text{God}\}$ .

<sup>4</sup>This will be discussed later with some special care.



#### 4. Defining relations

Nevertheless one can claim that Viger touched the weak point in Anselm's reasoning. Unfortunately his whole refutation fails to be correct from a mathematical point of view.

Observe that Viger wants to use purely set-theoretical notions in his critique. However if we look carefully behind the scenes here, we may want to know how to define the *greater than* relation explicitly. Every binary relation is a subset of a Cartesian product  $A \times B$  of some two (possibly empty and possibly but not necessarily distinct) sets  $A$  and  $B$ . The sets  $A$  and  $B$  employed in Viger's refutation are in fact both identical with  $\mathbf{U}$ , i.e., *greater than*  $\subseteq \mathbf{U} \times \mathbf{U}$ , since the relation must hold between the elements of the universe  $\mathbf{U}$ . Hence  $\mathbf{U}$  is the domain of the relation. To be more precise the relation is defined in the following way:

$$x \text{ is greater than } y \text{ iff } x \in \{G\} \text{ and } y \in \mathbf{U} \setminus \{G\},$$

i.e., ' $x$  is greater than  $y$ ' holds if  $x$  is God and  $y$  is a member of the universe of discourse  $\mathbf{U}$  different from God. This clearly shows, that one cannot consider the 'set'  $\mathbb{R}$  to be in the domain of *greater than* relation as one must have  $\mathbf{U}$  (as well as  $\{\text{God}\}$ ) granted to be a set in the mathematical sense. Hence  $\Omega = \mathbf{U} \setminus \{\text{God}\}$  is a non-problematic set. No set in its proper sense would contain such elements as  $\mathbb{R}$ , except, probably, the empty set. The confusion Viger provides when introducing his 'formalism' must disappear: the whole reasoning simply collapses as we try to speak of relations in the mathematical sense. Hence on the grounds of set-theory we will never be able to claim that God is greater than ANYTHING that is not God.

However, one may still say that it is rather Anselm's problem than Viger's. But does Anselm really claim that God is greater than **anything** that is not God?

#### 5. Anselm's God

Unfortunately what Viger calls "Anselm's Ontological Argument" is not really Anselm's. It is rather an unsuccessful paraphrase. The problems Viger encounters with Anselm's phrase *aliquid quod nihil maius cogitari possit* remind those of Gaunilo but cause even more confusion than it is tolerable.

Firstly, let us observe, contrary to Viger, that from Anselm's phrase it does not follow that God is greater than ANYTHING<sup>5</sup>, because, as even Anselm explicitly states elsewhere,

God is not greater than God. [1], p. 503.

An almost similar statement can be directly deduced from the phrase describing God in *Proslogion* 2. If we understand God to be such a being than that a greater cannot be thought, then it follows that it also cannot be thought that God is greater than God. More generally we obtain that no conceivable being is greater, not that God is greater than any being. For there is at least one object (i.e. God) that cannot be thought to be greater than God.

Secondly, it does not also follow that God is greater than EVERY OTHER THING that is not God. However Viger takes  $\Omega$  to be a set of all things that God is greater than and claims that such a set is constituted by the Argument, and moreover that it "contains everything, real or imaginable, that is not God" [7, p. 124]. But remember that there is a conceivability phenomenon involved in the phrase. It does not simply say that there is no object greater than God, but that IT CANNOT BE THOUGHT that there is an object greater than God. The latter however does not entail the former. It would be so only if one accepts a variant of the *ab esse ad posse* rule, i.e., the view that there is an inference from what is real to what can be thought<sup>6</sup>. But this is clearly not acceptable for Anselm, as, in *Proslogion* 14, he refers to God with the following words:

For how great that Light is from which shines everything true that illumines the rational mind! How vast that Truth is in which resides everything that is true and outside of which there is only nothing and what is false! How immense [that Truth] is which beholds in one spectrum all created things and beholds by whom, through whom, and in what manner [all things] were created from nothing! What purity, what simplicity, what assurance and splendor are present there! Surely, [these] surpass what can be understood by any creature. [1], p. 103

This is of course only one of the fragments showing that Anselm is committed to a claim that humans' conceptual capabilities are somehow limited in their powers. However Viger is lucky here as the set of things God is greater than is in fact, according to Anselm, identical with the set of beings that are

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<sup>5</sup>This will be also discussed later.

<sup>6</sup>Since then it would follow that what must be thought to be, is indeed also the case.



not God, for God is assuredly the greatest being of all others. But this has nothing to do with the Argument! The argument itself involves the notion of conceivability. Only with this notion playing its role, the rest of the proof can be carried out. Without it the proof as such could not be made, for the other premise in Anselm also employs the notion of conceivability (see Section 6). No *reductio* would be possible, no contradictory consequences could be drawn. So in no case shall the notion of conceivability be so easily omitted nor forgotten.

But Viger skips conceivability only where it is convenient for him, for later on he writes that

given any  $X$  that is not God, God can always be compared to  $X$  for greatness. This follows because if such a comparison were not always possible, than there would be some  $X$  different from God that could not be compared to God for greatness; it could not be said that God was greater than  $X$ . But then God would not be that-*than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought*, since we could think of something greater, for example something just like God except that it was also greater.

[7], p. 124.

Now this is a very peculiar argument! From the fact that there would be a being different from God that could not be compared to God for greatness it does not follow that we could think of something greater than God. For if this hypothetical object is not comparable, it is neither greater than God, nor worse — it is just incomparable.<sup>7</sup> Hence it is possible that the collection of all objects God is greater than would not contain some objects, i.e., the incomparable ones.<sup>8</sup> Note that despite the things said earlier, if  $\mathbb{R}$  is not comparable to God, then from the fact that  $\mathbb{R} \neq \text{God}$  it does not follow that  $\mathbb{R}$  is a member of  $\Omega$ . Hence the paradoxical properties of this set would be never established and Viger's refutation would fade to black.

In retrospect, Viger's essay betrays a certain unfamiliarity with Anselm's Argument as well as with methods of applying formal methods to philosophy.

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<sup>7</sup>Consider the following example. Let  $A = \{2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 12\}$  and let  $xRy$  hold if and only if  $x$  divides  $y$ . Then, with respect to  $R$ , no element of  $A$  is greater than 8 and no element of  $A$  is greater than 12. But clearly 8 and 12 are incomparable since neither 8 divides 12 nor 12 divides 8.

<sup>8</sup>However if such a comparison could be established, than it would be true that God is greater than any other comparable object, since comparability guarantees that for every two different beings  $x$  and  $y$  either  $x$  is greater than  $y$  or  $y$  is greater than  $x$ . Hence if there is no conceivable object greater than God, God must be greater than every (other) conceivable object ONLY IF every two beings are comparable or when every being is comparable to God.



Moreover, he is definitely not dealing with Anselm's Argument but rather with something he has created by himself. Hence if any of the two succumbs to Russell's Paradox, then it is Viger's paraphrase rather than Anselm's Proof.

## 6. Anselmian *greater than* relation

The real problem involved in any Viger-like refutation deals with the old problem of ignorance of Anselm's texts. The relation *greater than* Viger has indeed failed to describe plays not only a fundamental role in the Ontological Argument, but also in Anselmian metaphysics. As a platonian rationalist, Anselm believes that the world is ordered in a certain way, which has some important theological and philosophical consequences.

Anselm's ontology deals with substances, any of which CAN exist in reality. Hence Anselm's universe of discourse does not contain such 'objects' as squared circles, sets (including  $\mathbb{R}$ ), biggest numbers, etc.

In many different parts of his works Anselm maintains some specific hierarchies between substances in the world. All of them result when looking at objects' similarity to God, i.e., the most perfect being. For example in the 31st chapter of *Monologion* Anselm claims that one can measure the degrees of existence:

Therefore, it is clear that a living substance exists more than does a non-living one, that a sentient substance exists more than does a non-sentient one, and that a rational substance exists more than a non-rational one. So without doubt every being exists more and is more excellent to the extent that it is more like that Being which exists supremely and is supremely excellent. [...] Hence it must be the case that [...] every created nature has a higher degree of existence and excellence to the extent that it is seen to approximate this Word [i.e. God].

Hence we obtain here the following hierarchy of existence: (1) simple objects, (2) living objects, (3) living and sentient objects, (4) living, sentient and rational objects.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, a degree of existence is not the only quality one can measure. At the end of the 17th chapter of *Monologion* Anselm gives a whole list of attributes of which God's possession is on the highest level. All of them can

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<sup>9</sup>Similar hierarchies are maintained in *Monologion*, chapter 28 and in *Proslogion*, chapter 20.



be put in one class of properties — the class of all goods (*bona*). Among them we can find: reason, wisdom, truth, justice, goodness, beauty and so on. A similar list can also be found in *Proslogion*, chapter 18. This kind of properties is great-making, i.e., it is better to possess them, than not.

Hence one can find out that Anselm suggests a certain kind of a calculus of properties. Some of its important features can be easily identified: (1) distinction between positive and negative properties<sup>10</sup>, (2) distinction between properties it is better to possess than not to possess<sup>11</sup>.

We may state the above as

PROPOSITION 1. *Every positive non-relative and better-to-posses property  $p$  gives rise to a hierarchy with respect to  $p$  (in short:  $p$ -hierarchy).*

PROPOSITION 2. *There are many different degrees in every  $p$ -hierarchy.*

Since also, according to Anselm, there are finitely many objects in the world, we have that

PROPOSITION 3. *Every  $p$ -hierarchy is finite.*

Therefore

PROPOSITION 4. *There are lowest and highest degrees in every  $p$ -hierarchy.*

But what does greatness have to do with it? We may notice that greatness is some kind of META-property. An object  $x$  is *greater than  $y$  with respect to a certain property  $p$*  iff it inhibits a higher level in a  $p$ -hierarchy. However, due to the lack of the calculus of properties it may be difficult to say when  $x$  is simply greater than  $y$ . It is assuredly so, when for every  $p$ -hierarchy,  $x$  inhibits a greater level of that  $p$ -hierarchy than  $y$ . But what if  $x$  is for example more powerful and greater in knowing capabilities than  $y$  but at the same time  $y$  is better than  $x$ ?

However we may try to find out what exactly are the formal features of the *greater than* relation. Due to obvious reasons Anselm did not use the relation-theoretical notions as we know them. However, a careful reader can deduce some from Anselm's writings.

PROPOSITION 5. *The greater than relation*

1. *is not reflexive, i.e., it is not the case that every object is greater than itself,*

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<sup>10</sup>Cf. *Monologion*, chapter 15.

<sup>11</sup>Cf. *Monologion*, chapter 15.

2. *is transitive, i.e., if  $x$  is greater than  $y$  and  $y$  is greater than  $z$ , then  $x$  is greater than  $z$ .*

It is quite natural to suspect, that Anselm thought that

PROPOSITION 6. *The greater than relation is asymmetrical, i.e., if  $x$  is greater than  $y$ , then it is not the case that  $y$  is greater than  $x$ .*

Hence, the relation is an ordering relation in the sense of the theory of sets.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, as long as God is referred to as that than nothing greater can be thought, it simply entails that within the realm of thought God is a maximal object in the sense of the theory of relations. This means that there are no objects ‘above’ God with respect to the *greater than* relation. Of course, there are relations where God is not a maximal object, but these relations do not deal with perfections.<sup>13</sup>

## 7. Anselm’s Ontological Argument

Now we may try to present the Ontological Argument in a brief form<sup>14</sup>.

As in the case of all proofs, the validity of Anselm’s Proof relies on some assumptions.

The first assumption playing a crucial role in the Proof is Anselm’s *credo* referring to God as that than none greater can be thought. Let ‘ $\diamond$ ’ stand for conceptual possibility (i.e., conceivability). Then we can formalize the *credo* as

$$\neg \diamond \exists x x \succ \text{God}.$$

Now since it is not conceivable that there is an object greater than God, it is also not conceivable that there is an object greater than God and satisfying any property, i.e.

$$\neg \diamond \exists x (x \succ \text{God} \wedge \phi(x)).$$

The second assumption comes from the way Anselm thought about the world. Of course if one does not agree with such a metaphysical view, it is also quite natural to assume that if an object does not possess a perfection

<sup>12</sup>Of course the above formal features of the *greater than* correspond with our ordinary way of speaking.

<sup>13</sup>It is obvious, for example, that if one picks the relation *worse than*, then God would be at the very ‘bottom’.

<sup>14</sup>For a more detailed presentation see [3].



$\pi$  then there can be thought an object possessing  $\pi$  and thus greater: in the worst case scenario we could have the very same object in mind. So it is natural to take the following formula as true:

$$\forall x[\neg\pi(x) \rightarrow \Diamond\exists y(\pi(y) \wedge y \succ x)],$$

where  $\pi$  is a perfection.<sup>15</sup>

Observe that without the notion of conceivability the proof would not run. For the first assumption would be something like

$$\neg\exists x x \succ \text{God}.$$

So as to continue the proof, conceivability should have been also dropped in the second assumption and it would take the following form:

$$\forall x[\neg\pi(x) \rightarrow \exists y(\pi(y) \wedge y \succ x)].$$

But the crucial line in Anselm's reasoning depends on the fact that if God would not exist, than we could THINK OF HIM AS EXISTING, i.e., it would be conceivable that there is an object which exists and thus is greater than God (given that existence is a perfection). But this is of course impossible since, as we have said above, it is not conceivable that there is an object greater than God and satisfying any property (in this case existence). Therefore it is not the case that God does not exist. Thus God exists.

## 8. Russell on Anselm

At the end of his paper Viger claims that perhaps Russell had something like Viger's in mind when speaking of refuting the Ontological Proof in "On Denoting". Firstly, Russell would rather not have committed such mistakes as Viger did. Secondly, as Russell has said elsewhere, the argument fails on the grounds of his theory of descriptions. The proof Russell had in mind when saying

The argument can be made to prove validly that all members of the class of most perfect Beings exist; it can also be proved formally that this class cannot have *more* than one member; but taking the definition of perfection as possession of all positive predicates, it can be proved almost equally formally that the class does not contain even one member. [6], p. 54.

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<sup>15</sup>Note that from the two above formulas we may obtain an immediate Cartesian consequence: God is the subject of all perfections, which was taken by Descartes as granted. This observation was made by Uwe Scheffler.

would rather intend to show that the sentence ‘there is one and only one being that is the most perfect’ is false. However two things shall be noticed here.

Firstly, when speaking of ‘Ontological Argument’ in “On Denoting” Russell does not indeed refer to Anselm’s Proof but rather to the arguments of Descartes and Leibniz. It is obvious for neither the phrase *the most perfect being* nor any of its variants appear in Anselm’s Proof explicitly. The class of various ontological arguments divides into two parts. The first part contains classical arguments, such as Anselm’s, starting with the notion of conceivability and maximal objects of a given order. The second part includes arguments such as Descartes’, Spinoza’s or Leibniz’s, concerning God as a subject of all perfections. Hence the former group of ontological proofs is more fundamental than the latter for it introduces the concept of God as the most perfect being as a consequence, not as a presumption.

Secondly, if we want to apply the theory of descriptions to Anselm, then we are standing in front of the following two problems. Firstly, claiming that Anselm’s phrase can be regarded as a definite description in the sense of Russell needs grounds.<sup>16</sup> If it can, then the second problem arises. The Russellian paraphrase would look like *there is one and only one being than which a greater cannot be thought*. Following Russell’s remark, it can be easily shown that there is at most one such object<sup>17</sup>. But according to Anselm, a proof showing that there is at least one such object can be, in fact, carried out. This is the problem Anselm is concerned with in *Monologion*. In fact many parts of *Monologion* try to show that it is both possible and necessary that perfections are exemplified by means of one and only one entity to such an extent that it surpasses humans’ conceivability. Thus, if we accepted Anselm’s arguments from *Monologion*, the problem would be gone, since the sentence *there is one and only one being than which a greater cannot be thought* may be considered as true.

Finally, it is also suitable to note that Russell himself wrote this:

Clearly an argument with such a distinguished history is to be treated with respect, whether valid or not. [5], p. 417.

Let us, then, following Russell, pay at least a little respect to Anselm’s Proof.

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<sup>16</sup>See for example [2], p. 5.

<sup>17</sup>See also [3].



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