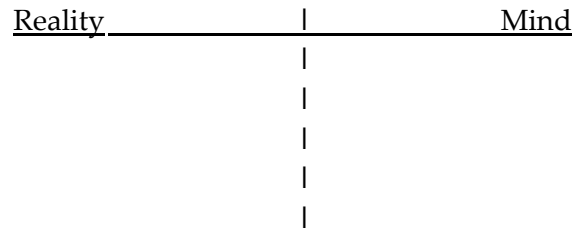


PROVING THE EXISTENCE OF GOD : HOW NOT TO GO ABOUT IT

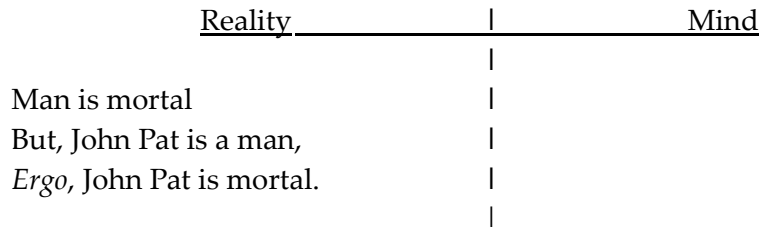
Things exist in mind in a manner different from the way they exist in the real. It is important to grasp this as we come to consider the proofs for the existence of God. One proof, or alleged proof, of God's existence gets these two orders muddled.

First we should say something about syllogistic proofs. Every proof by way of *deduction*, i.e., from cause to effect, otherwise known as proof *a priori*, (literally, *from an earlier* ontological principle) involves three terms, a *Principle* (Major premise), a *Fact* (Minor premise) and a *Conclusion*.

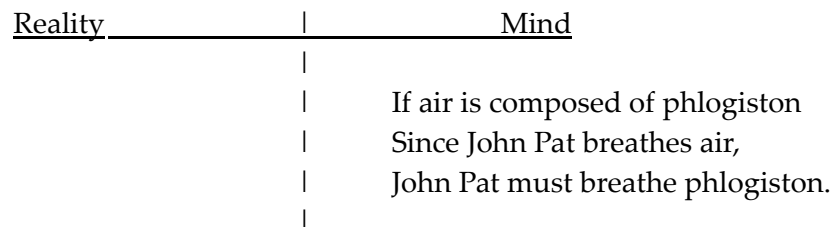
Here, again we have a diagrammatic representation of the two orders :



We might argue in the real order, like this :



Or we can argue in the mental, or intentional, order like this :



Note that the mental, or conceptual, argument is placed at the hypothetical level.

What we may *not* do is confuse the two orders. It is logically illicit (unlawful) to cross in argument from one order to the other and assert that this results in an objective conclusion.

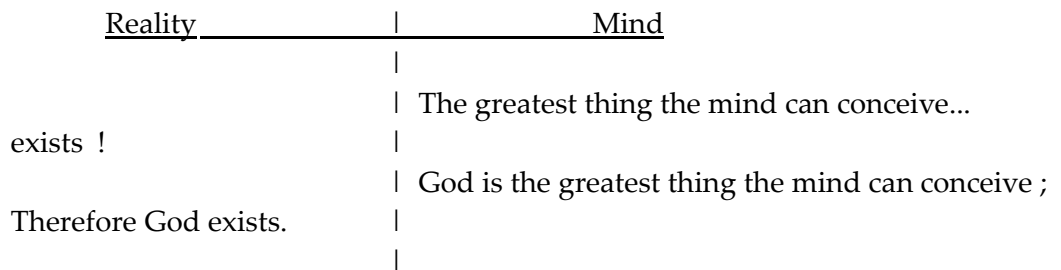
In the twelfth century St Anselm, the Archbishop of Canterbury, advanced an argument for the existence of God known as the *Ontological* argument. The argument is subtle and to render it understandable to you I have cast it in its simplest possible form. It runs like this :

- Major : The greatest thing that the human mind can conceive exists.
- Minor : But, God is the greatest thing that the human mind can conceive ;
- Conclusion: Therefore, God exists.

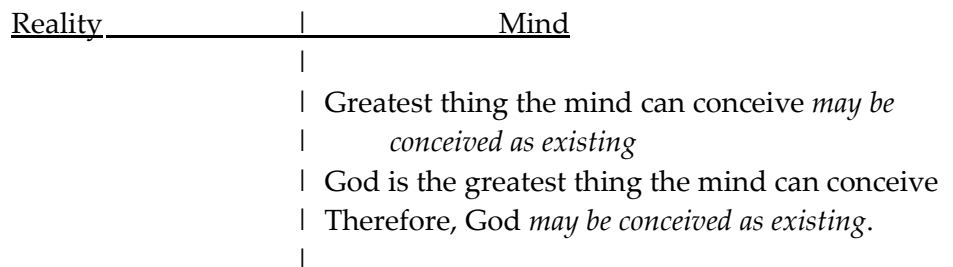


St Anselm

I have not shown how St Anselm arrives at his major premise or the shortcomings of the assertion in the minor premise because the issues involved are intricate and, if necessary, we can come back to them later. My purpose is simply to address the one aspect of the argument which is fatal to its force. Here again is our diagrammatic representation of the two orders. On it I have superimposed St Anselm's argument with the propositions upon which it relies in their correct setting.



The very word 'conceive' marks the major premise as starting in the intentional order. Do you see how he has passed from the intentional order to the real ? How should he have put his argument ? Like this :



Which proves nothing. Or, to be precise, it proves nothing objective.

If you wish to read what St Thomas has to say about the argument, look at his *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 2, a. 1, obj. 2 and his answer to the objection.

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If we are to prove God's existence, we must do it in the *real* order, not in the intentional, or mental, order. For what we want is a proof that accords with reality, that is objectively true.

Let us briefly reiterate the modes of proof open in the real order. St Thomas calls adequate proof in the real order 'demonstration'. He writes :

"[D]emonstration is twofold. The one which is through cause, called demonstration *wherefore*, is through what is simply prior (*a priori*), and the other which is through effect, called demonstration *that*, is through what is prior to us. For when some effect is more manifest to us than its cause, we proceed through the effect to knowledge of the cause.

"But whatever the effect, it can be demonstrated that the proper cause of it exists (so long as its effects are more known to us) because, since effects depend on the cause, given the effect it must needs be that the cause pre-exist. Wherefore, that God is, according as it is not self-evident to us is demonstrable through effects known to us." (*Summa Theologiae* I, q. 2, a. 2)

To summarise, there are two sorts of proof, *a priori* and *a posteriori*. Demonstration that God exists cannot proceed *a priori* because God is not known to us immediately. It can only proceed from effects, that is, *a posteriori*.

For saints like St Francis of Assisi and St Catherine of Siena, it never seemed anything but obvious that God existed because their high level of spirituality gave them a sort of *quasi-intuitive* knowledge of God, the sort of knowledge that a mother has for her baby's state of health, which resembles knowledge *a priori*. The rest of us must follow St Thomas's counsel and seek proof through the effects of God's creative action. He uses five facts of experience to ground his proofs.

The first of these facts is that of movement.
