HISTORICAL STUDIES

The Perennity of Anselm's *Proslogion*

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Abstract

The first goal of Anselm in the *Proslogion* is to encourage believers by demonstrating the absolute necessity of the existence of the God of the Bible. Anselm most likely succeeds as the definition of God that he adopts is faithful to the content of special revelation. Whether the argument can function as an argument for the existence of God can be doubted. In this article we look at the various aspects of the question.

Anselm's *Proslogion* belongs to those works that have weathered all kinds of opposition, reaching a status that neither the author nor history itself could have anticipated. When the eleventh-century theologian set out to write this great work, he probably did not envision centuries of Christian apologetics debating the relevance and persuasiveness of its main argument for the existence of the God of the Bible.

What is today known as the ontological argument remains one of the great accomplishments of Anselm's work as a theologian. It has been commented on, accepted, rejected, and modified. After Anselm, it was rejected by Thomas Aquinas before being resurrected by René Descartes and opposed by Gottfried Leibniz. Kant unequivocally rejected the argument, while Hegel heavily criticized Kant's objections, all the while remaining ambiguous about his own evaluation of it. In the twentieth century, Kurt Gödel presented a modal form of the ontological argument, but Bertrand

Russell's atomism led him to reject it. The great English philosopher had initially found it valid: "I remember the precise moment, one day in 1894, as I was walking along Trinity Lane, when I saw in a flash (or thought I saw) that the ontological argument is valid. I had gone out to buy a tin of tabacco; on my way back, I suddenly threw it up in the air, and exclaimed as I caught it: 'Great Scott, the ontological argument is sound.'"[1]

Russell would, of course, soon change his mind about the ontological argument but would still recognize its force, concluding that "it is easier to feel convinced that it must be fallacious than it is to find out precisely where the fallacy lies."[2] In this comment, Russell shows himself to be a much more perceptive and honest critic of Christian theism than many modern-day atheists of the Dawkins type.[3] In any case, the argument has become a classic one in Christian apologetics, while by no means being without serious flaws. Closer to us, Cornelius Van Til criticized traditional theistic arguments—including the ontological argument—for giving up too much ground to the unbeliever's assumption of the power of fallen reason. In this short presentation, the intention is not to summarize Van Til's convincing objections to the argument. Rather, we will provide some background to the argument itself.

I. *Historical Context*

When Anselm began the *Proslogion* in 1077, he had been at the Abbey of Le Bec for about twenty years. In the course of these two decades, he had become prior in 1063, serving as a spiritual counselor for the Benedictine monks, as well as taking on the role of administrator of the abbey—a task he profoundly disliked. It was an extremely busy time, and he had little opportunity for writing, which partly explains why he did not produce any work during the decade preceding his *Monologion* (1075–1076). Only upon the request of some monks did Anselm gather the necessary momentum to write both the *Monologion* and the *Proslogion*. "Some of the brethren," he writes, asked him how to meditate "on the divine essence."[4] They added to this initial request a qualification, that "whatever the conclusion of each

[1] Bertrand Russell, "My Intellectual Development," in Paul A. Schilpp, ed., *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell* (New York: Tudor, 1946), 10.

[2] Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008), 586.

[3] Richard Dawkins, in his typical absence of philosophical intellectual curiosity, writes of Russell, "Why, I wonder, didn't he say something like: 'Great Scott, the ontological argument seems to be plausible.'" Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Black Swan, 2016), 105.

[4] Anselm, *Basic Writings*, ed. and trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2007), "Monologion," 1.

individual investigation might assert, the necessity of reason would concisely prove."[5] With some reluctance, Anselm wrote his two short treatises.

Anselm's argument, if it was a spiritual and devotional aid for the monks at Le Bec, was not merely the work of a spiritual counselor. It was also an apologetic argument. In fact, in our evaluation of the argument, we should avoid the pitfalls of thinking of the *Proslogion* as merely an argument against "atheism" or a spiritual support for his "brethren." Certainly, Anselm had an apologetic intent in writing the *Proslogion*, whether his first audience (the monks at Le Bec) were conscious of it or not. But we should not think that this apologetic thrust was directed at eleventh-century atheists, which would be a gross anachronism. It is more plausible that the *Proslogion*'s argument was directed at Jewish polemicists.[6] The *Proslogion* is indeed primarily a prayer and a meditation—in that, theologians are correct—but it is not merely that: it is also an argument in favor of the necessity of God's existence.

II. *God, Reason, and the Ontological Argument*

The main thrust of the ontological argument could be summarized as follows:

> God is the greatest being we can conceive of. Any being we can conceive of exists in our mind or in reality. Furthermore, a being that were to exist only in the mind would not be greater than any other being (or thing, for that matter) that exists in reality. For God to be the greatest of all beings, he must necessarily exist not only in the mind but also in reality.

That is at least the common understanding of the argument.[7]

One of the critical questions of the *Proslogion* is whether Anselm's definition of God is a valid and convincing one. Of course, Anselm defines God as the greatest of all beings, "than which nothing greater can be thought."[8] That is the core definition on which subsequent constructions of the ontological arguments have focused. Most syllogisms summarizing the argument begin with this line, including Alvin Plantinga's modal version, often thought as being the most compelling form of the argument.[9]

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[5] Ibid.

[6] Nancy Kendrick, "The Non-Christian Influence on Anselm's *Proslogion* Argument," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 69.3 (April 2011): 73–74.

[7] There has been discussion about whether this common understanding is true to Anselm's original formulation. See for example Ian Logan, *Reading Anselm's Proslogion: The History of Anselm's Argument and its Significance Today* (London: Routledge, 2016).

[8] Anselm, "Proslogion," §5, 83.

[9] Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974).

However, it is a problematic simplification to think of the argument as *merely* defining "God" as "that 'than which nothing greater can be thought.'" To Anselm, the *Proslogion* was a unit, a consistent meditative reasoning about God. Sectioning parts of the discourse in order to build a rational argument for the existence of God, while legitimate on the basis of the work, only builds on one of its aspects. Whether we analyze or meditate on the *Proslogion*, we should not forget that Anselm immediately qualifies his initial definition of God by adding that God is the one "who alone exists through himself and made all other things from nothing."[10] God is thus not merely the "greater being" but a *different* being.

To go further in our understanding of the ontological argument, we should remember that Anselm does not merely think of God as the maximally greater being of contemporary philosophy. He goes to great length to present the God of biblical theism and comments on God's attributes such as his mercy and impassibility (§8), as well as his love and justice (§9–10), and his simplicity (§18). Moreover, God is not just "that than which a greater cannot be thought" but also "something greater than can be thought."[11] God is thus not entirely demonstrable through reason but will always escape absolute delimitations of his being.

III. *Anselm's Use of the "Fool" of Psalm 14*

Criticisms of the ontological argument have taken many forms but have mostly focused on the notions of perfection and existence. This is the point of Leibniz and Kant's rejection of the argument. However, there is another troubling dimension in the argument that has rarely been commented upon. Anselm's argument begins by quoting Psalm 14:1: "The fool says in his heart 'There is no God.'" Following this text, he explains the relationship between something that is understood and the existence of the thing. Here, Anselm seems to interpret Psalm 14:1 as a reference to a sort of theoretical atheist, someone who denies existence to something that is necessary.

However, one question must be asked: Who is the "fool" in Psalm 14? Is he merely an atheist who has reasoned and concluded the nonexistence of God? When one considers the text carefully, the answer is more complex. There is no question that the heart of the fool's attitude is a denial of God, but folly here "represents practical rather than theoretical atheism."[12] The

[10] Anselm, "Proslogion," §5, 83.

[11] Ibid., §15, 90.

[12] Nancy DeClaissé-Walford, Rolf A. Jacobson, and Beth LaNeel Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 166.

fool completely discounts the presence of God in the world, which explains that the rest of the Psalm is an answer to the assumption that God is not present and active in the world.[13] Thus, there is a fundamental ethical dimension to the fool's attitude.

This ethical nature of the fool's rejections of God is reinforced by the fact that the fool is likely part of God's covenant people, one who has seen and witnessed the great acts of God. The psalmist "implicitly addresses fellow Israelites."[14] This identification of the "fool" with a member of the people is important, as the Psalm ends on a covenantal note. This is double folly because, as a member of God's people, the fool still claims, "There is no God."

However, the psalmist does not limit himself to a particular instance. Rather he adds: "there is no one who seeks God," implying a universality of judgment. From a particular judgment, the psalmist moves to a general one. Not only is this particular person a "fool" as a member of God's people who has rejected God, but all who do so are fools. Still, the immediate focus of the psalm's context is folly within the people of God. The point is not merely theoretical, but practical. If this exegetical misdirection does not in itself invalidate Anselm's construction of the ontological argument, it does point to the necessity of careful examination of the biblical text in formulating an argument for the existence of God. Careful examination of the context of Psalm 14 would not have changed history. Anselm would likely still have written the *Proslogion*.

The importance of this point for Anselm's ontological argument is simple. Anselm's argument revolves around the conviction that the fool of Psalm 14 is a fool because he denies existence to something that is necessary. Thus, he says in his heart what cannot be thought because what cannot be thought cannot have notional reality (§4). And without this, there can be no thought. The mere fact that there is thought about God points to his necessary existence. In identifying the fool in such a way, Anselm is true to his predecessors, including Augustine.[15] That, however, is hardly the meaning of Psalm 14, and thus the argument developed in the *Proslogion* loses some of its strength.

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[13] John Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 1, *Psalm 1–41*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 213.

[14] Ibid., 215.

[15] In his commentary on Psalm 53, Augustine writes, "For not even have certain sacrilegious and abominable philosophers, who entertain perverse and false notions of God, dared to say, 'There is no God.'" Augustine, *Expositions on the Psalms* (Enarrationes in Psalmos), Digital Psalms, https://faculty.gordon.edu, 2007, 83.

Conclusion

Anselm's first goal in the *Proslogion* is to encourage believers by demonstrating the absolute necessity of the existence of the God of the Bible, and in that he most likely succeeds, as the definition of God that he adopts is faithful to the content of special revelation. Whether the argument can function as an argument for the existence of God can be doubted. There are too many presuppositions at work, including the nature of God and the normative function of human reason. Of course, these criticisms of Anselm's argument are valid if our understanding of it is correct.

But the argument can also be read as presupposing that it is impossible for God not to exist, even though the argument itself lends credence to its interpretation in light of subsequent natural theology. Thus, the *Proslogion* could be seen as an argument for the impossibility of God's nonexistence. Seen in this light, Anselm's argument can be reinterpreted with a more consistent apologetic basis—even a Van Tilian one. To do so would require a closer examination of the entire *Proslogion*.

Anselm's *Proslogion* has traversed centuries. The attraction of this work is as much his argument as the union of piety, prayer, meditation, and rational inquiry that it displays. Faith crowns the theologian's reasoning, enlightening a humble mind. Anselm's work is a constant reminder that "doing theology" is a task that requires humility and devotion under God, fixing mind and heart on the one who, as creator, is ultimately distinct from his creation.