

*Mogens True Wegener*

**A DIVINE ARGUMENT  
ANSELM'S PROOF FOR GOD**

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*Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109): archbishop, philosopher, logician*

The fame of St. Anselm derives primarily from his proof for God. The proof does not concern the existence of God. God, as spirit, cannot properly be said to exist. Existence is literally a prerogative of temporal beings. Instead, it aims to show that reference to God is not empty. It will not prove that God has 'being', whatever that is, but that the claim of atheism, that God is just a mental projection, is inconsistent.

This shows the proof to be a *reductio ad absurdum* intended to silence the atheist. It takes as its premiss a clear proclamation of the atheistic position: 'There is no God!' So the atheist puts up the trap which is to catch himself, for his explicit repudiation entails the implicit concession that an imaginary god is unworthy of prayer and worship. The proof has no power against an agnostic pretending ignorance of the whole issue.

By accepting the distinction between reality and illusion the atheist clarifies the conceptual basis for his controversy with the believer and also raises the crucial issue. By denying his respect to a fictional deity, he indirectly admits that his attitude might differ in case that he had been compelled by rational argument to accept a real God.

A God who might manifest his indisputable reality is *greater* than the illusion of one who is a mere projection of human fancy. Clearly in this case there is *more* to fact than to fiction. Anselm is now able to formulate the first two premisses of his argument:

1) *That God might, after all, be real is possible (conceivable) even to the atheist. The crucial question, therefore, is whether God is merely a fictitious concept or whether He is more than a concept by being real, factual, or efficient, in His own right.*

2) *Of God, thought of as a conceptual possibility, it is true that we think greater of Him if we think Him as fact than if we think Him as fiction - i.e., we think Him greater if we think Him as real in His own right than if we think Him as mere illusion.*

It is hard for the atheist to discard these two premisses. The third premiss is posed by Anselm himself as a basic postulate of the Christian faith:

3) *God should be thought of as that than which nothing greater can be thought or, equivalently, as one than whom no better can be thought.*

If the atheist rejects this premiss Anselm can dismiss him with the rejoinder that he is a fool since he is ignorant of what he is talking about. If he accepts the premiss, Anselm can rebuke him with the remark that he is a fool as he is contradicting himself. The proof can be paraphrased thus: The atheist says: *There is no God*. Anselm answers:

*If you were right, then my God would be unreal or illusory. Now my God is that than which nothing greater can be thought. But that which you deny must at least be present to your thought as a conceptual possibility if you are not speaking empty words.*

*Thus, by claiming my God to be mere fiction, you equate that than which nothing greater can be thought with that than which something greater can be thought, because a fictional deity is clearly something than which something greater can be thought, viz. the very God you deny. Therefore you contradict yourself, which I promised to prove.*

According to Kierkegaard, proofs for God are either superfluous, or incoherent. For either there is a God, or there is no God: *tertium non datur* - but if God is, then all proofs are undeniably superfluous, and if he is not, no proof can possibly be coherent! Therefore the few engaged in proving God are fools who should not hope for fame, and rather than wasting precious time by yielding to futile speculation they should concern themselves with the basic facts of existence in a serious struggle for authenticity.

Kierkegaard's disdain of speculation was only matched by his disdain of science, and he openly admitted his sole interest to be that of St. Augustine: God and the soul. He nevertheless conceded that a proof for God may be reasonable, perhaps even fruitful, if constructed expressly to the following purpose: viz., to elucidate the Idea of God. Unfortunately he forgot, or ignored, that precisely this was the intention of St. Anselm: *his* demonstration explicitly aimed at clarifying the Idea of God intellectually.

It will be noticed that we have spoken of God, but not of the "existence" of God. The reason is that the etymological origin of the word 'existence' (lat. *existere*: to arise, to come forth, to become manifest) precludes that it be applied to God. According to human experience, as well as to the Jewish-Christian religious tradition, God is hidden, therefore he is disappointingly close to non-being. In the wording of the prophet Isaiah: *Verily, thou art a God who hides himself!* (Is.45,15).

However, it is the essence of Christianity that God was incarnate in Jesus Christ. Thus the Gospel teaches that God, who is, but does not exist, in fact did exist once, viz. in the man Jesus, son of Mary, and allegedly son of Joseph. But to say that God is a being who hides himself is to say next to nothing. Who is that God who was incarnate in the man Jesus of Nazareth - and what is He? Let us listen to the prophet once more:

*I am the Lord who created the World, who framed the Heaven and extended the Earth!* (Is.44,24) - *I am God from Eternity, the only one to remain for all future!* (Is.43,12)

God hides himself, must hide himself, since he is creator, source and origin of the world, including its possible future. God came to his own, but they did not receive him. Asked by Pilate who he was, Jesus presented himself as King of the Realm of Truth. *What is truth?* sneered the Roman sceptic. Augustine gave the answer:

*Either truth is that which excels or transcends everything, and then truth is God. Or, if there is something which is higher, or greater, than truth, then that is God.*

This statement, which is a liberal translation of passages in his work on free will, led Anselm to declare: *Deus est quo nihil maius cogitari potest!* - i.e.: *God is that than which nothing greater can be thought!* This is true to the believer. How can that, which is a truth of faith, be the core of a proof of God? Because the disbeliever, by saying: *There is no God!*, takes his claim to imply that God, whom the faithful believes to be real, is in fact illusive. By stating his own position, the atheist accepts to distinguish reality from illusion: not with respect to God, whom he repudiates, but with regard to the Idea of God. So he turns his attention away from God towards the Idea of God.

Anselm's *ontological* proof, which should rather be called *dialectical*, is meant to demonstrate that the plain proclamation of atheism is either irrelevant, or inconsistent.

The *first point* to be grasped is that the proof is not positive, but a *reductio* directed *ad hominem* against the atheist. So it derives its very force from the vigour invested by the disbeliever in his own position. When the atheist is silenced, the theist stops arguing.

The *second point* to be realized is that the *premisses* of the proof are provided by the atheist himself: partly a) by the distinction of reality from illusion, entailed by his claim that the Idea of God denotes nothing, although it appears to; partly b) by his derogation of the illusive, as compared to the real, implied by his refusal to worship an illusion.

The *third point* to be understood is that the atheistic rejection of a divine being applies to any kind of deity, therefore also to God as confessed by Anselm who, together with Augustine, acknowledges him to be *that than which nothing greater can be conceived*. The infinite itself being indefinable, however, this is not a definition, but a description. The crucial question is, does the Idea thus described correspond to anything real?

Now Anselm argues thus: Anything thought of, e.g. an idea, has being in thought, *esse in intellectu*. The distinction between reality and illusion refers to the difference between that which has reality both in thought and in itself, *esse et in intellectu et in re*, and that which has reality merely as thought of, but not in itself, *esse in intellectu solo*. For the Idea of God to refer, or to be real, is to be both in itself and in thought, while for the Idea of God not to refer, or to be illusive, is to be only in thought, but not in itself.

The atheist claims the Idea of God to be an illusion, nothing but a projection of the human mind, entirely unworthy of religious worship. By doing so, and by including *that than which nothing greater can be thought*, he shows himself to be a fool, or a numskull, unworthy of intellectual respect. The point is that what is denied is thought of - so the atheist, by denying that the Idea of God is real, does think of what he denies. But this shows the atheist to conceive *that than which nothing greater can be thought* as *that than which something greater can be thought*, which is a contradiction.

Anselm thus presents the atheist with a dilemma: either he does not know what he is talking about or he contradicts himself. In either case he makes a fool of himself.

Anselm's argument has been defended by Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz and Hegel, and it has been attacked by Aquinas and Kant and by a number of modern philosophers; however, a formal analysis in terms of modal logic shows its structure to be impeccable.

What does the argument prove, its validity being provisionally granted? Like any other valid piece of logic, it transfers the truth-value of its premisses to its conclusion, its force being derived entirely from its premisses. How these stem from the express statement of atheism we have already discussed; let us therefore consider the formula *quo nihil maius cogitari potest* a little more. The significance of identifying the Idea of God with the *quo nihil maius cogitari potest* is that the formal negation of supreme otherness enhances the divine transcendence to actual infinity. In this way the Idea of God is elevated infinitely beyond the limits of pure reason and human contingency.

The importance of Anselm's dialectical proof of God is not that it clarifies the *meaning* or *contents* of the Idea of God, for in fact it has none; the significance of the argument is that it elucidates the *function* of the Idea of God. It is impossible for us as finite creatures to grasp the infinite godhead; but the function of the Anselmian formula is to point out *the path to transcendence*: this it does by refusing to accept anything as divine to which something else is superior. Thus the argument becomes an instantiation of *via negativa* in contrast to *via affirmativa*: the divine is determined indirectly by the denial of everything which is not divine. Since divine existence is not at stake at all, there is no question of inferring the existence of the godhead from its essence or nature, neither is there any question of using existence, or being, as a special kind of predicate; this may characterize the Cartesian approach, but has nothing to do with that of Anselm. All this immunizes the Anselmian proof not only to the objections of Aquinas, but also to the criticism of "yon great terminator" of classical metaphysics - Kant.

It therefore appears that we, in spite of Kant, can refer to at least one instance of authentic metaphysics based on pure reason, viz.: *atheism beguiles us into absurdity*. The *basic experience of existentialism* has thereby been affirmed by formal reasoning!

Hence the only safe way to avoid God is to avoid speaking, yeah even thinking, of God. The believer can argue against an atheist - not against an agnostic who dares not speak. Probably the agnostic does not want to dispute the abstract possibility of metaphysics, and we will thus allow ourselves the liberty to neglect his awkward position at present. Instead we shall defend the position that *Metaphysics* is *scientia sui generis* (Mercier), viz. the *science of pure transcendence*, as extracted from the proof of Anselm.

To conclude, let us briefly recapitulate the structure of the argument:

1. God is described by reason as "that-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought".
2. Noone is able to speak reasonably of anything which is not present to his/ her mind. But we need to distinguish what is only present to the mind, such as mental illusions, from what we call independent reality, which is present both to the mind and in itself.
3. Regarding superiority, it is *ceteris paribus* greater to be present both to the mind and in itself, as independent reality, than to be present only to the mind, as mere illusion.
4. The Christian insists that God is that-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought-of. To which the fool, or atheist, will reply: God is not real, but delusive. There is no God!
5. Thus God is present to the mind of both, at least as a conceptual possibility, or idea. So it seems as if two possibilities are both open to reason: Either God is mere fiction, present only to our minds. Or God is pure fact, present both to our minds and in himself.
6. But is it at all conceivable that God is a deceitful illusion, present solely to the mind? No, for then we are not thinking of that-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought, but of that-than-which-something-greater-can-be-thought; so we were not thinking of God.
7. To think that that-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought is illusive is equivalent to thinking that God is not God. Therefore atheism is an untenable hypothesis. QED.

### **REFERENCES**

1. St.Anselm's *Proslogion*, ed. by M.J. Charlesworth, Oxford 1965.
  2. Søren Kierkegaard: *Philosophical Fragments* (ch.iii), 1844.
  3. Karl Barth: *Fides Quaerens Intellectum*, John Knox 1960, Pickwick 1985.
  4. André Mercier: *Roseau pensant 1-3*, P. Lang Verlag, Bern 1988-92.
  5. Alvin Plantinga: *The Nature of Necessity*, Oxford 1974.
- (Plantinga treats of God as an object with properties and, relativizing God as a possible object to an infinity of possible worlds, argues for God's necessity *de re*. In what follows there is nothing of the kind.)

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## ANSELM'S PROOF FOR GOD A MODERN RECONSTRUCTION

### Logical Foundations:

- I. **PC: Propositional Calculus, Lukasiewicz 1924**
- II. **QT: Quantificational Theory, the notation of Prior** ( $\Sigma x \equiv \neg \Pi \neg x$ )
- III. **S5: The strongest one of the Modal Systems of Lewis** ( $\nabla p \equiv \neg \square \neg p$ )
- NB strongest 'must be' ( $\square$ ) entails weakest 'might be' ( $\nabla$ ); hence:  
'necessary-not' = 'unthinkable' = 'inconceivable' = 'incoherent'

### Four Simple Premisses:

- P1  $\Pi xy: Cxy \Rightarrow Cyx$   
For all x&y: if x is comparable to y, then y is comparable to x  
NB The relation of comparability is symmetric and reflexive:  $Cxx \equiv true$ .
- P2  $\Pi xy: Mxy \Rightarrow \neg Myx$   
For all x&y: if x is greater than y, then y is not greater than x  
NB The relation of supremacy is asymmetric and irreflexive:  $Mxx \equiv false$ .
- P3  $\Pi xy: \nabla Gx \wedge \nabla Gy. \Rightarrow \nabla Cxy$   
For all x&y: if thinking x god and thinking y god, then thinking x and y comparable  
NB If we think x and y as gods, we think x and y comparable in this sense.
- P4  $\Pi xy: \nabla Cxy \Rightarrow : \nabla Rx \wedge \nabla \neg Ry. \Rightarrow \nabla Mxy$   
For all x&y: if thinking x and y comparable then,  
if thinking x real and thinking y faked, then thinking x greater than y  
NB Even the atheist who despises gods as being nothing but human fakes must admit that thinking x real but y faked implies thinking y less than x ('esse et in intellectu et in re' is more than 'esse in intellectu solo', since 'esse in re' is added to 'esse in intellectu' in the 1st case, not in the 2nd).

### Three Simple Corollaries

- Q  $\Pi xy: \nabla Gx \wedge \nabla Gy. \Rightarrow : \nabla Rx \wedge \nabla \neg Ry. \Rightarrow \nabla Mxy$  P3 & P4, syll.  
For all x&y: if x and y might both be gods, tacitly assuming gods to be comparable, then, if x might be real and y might be faked, x might be greater than y, that is: if both thinking x is a god and thinking y is a god, then, if also thinking x real and thinking y faked, then thinking x greater than y  
NB The reason why atheists claim all gods to be delusive is precisely that they are able to think what they deny, viz. that some god might be real!
- Q'  $\Pi xy: \nabla Gx \wedge \nabla Gy. \Rightarrow : \neg \nabla Myx \Rightarrow . \square Rx \vee \square \neg Ry$  Q, PC, see proof \*  
For all x&y: if x and y were both gods, tacitly assuming gods to be comparable, then, if unthinkable: y greater than x, then x is needs real or y is needs faked
- Q''  $\Pi x: \nabla Gx \Rightarrow : \neg \nabla Mxx \Rightarrow . \square Rx \vee \square \neg Rx$  Q', subst. y→x  
For all x: if thinking x is a god, then, if x cannot be greater than itself (evident), then needs: x is real, or needs: x is faked, i.e., x is not contingent
- NB Granted Q, we can prove Q'', the premiss of Hartshorne and Malmcolm.

\* Proof for Q':  $[\nabla Rx \wedge \nabla \neg Ry. \Rightarrow \nabla Mxy] \leftrightarrow [\neg \nabla Mxy \Rightarrow . \neg \nabla Rx \vee \neg \nabla \neg Ry] \leftrightarrow$   
 $\leftrightarrow [\neg \nabla Mxy \Rightarrow . \square \neg Rx \vee \square Ry] \leftrightarrow [\neg \nabla Myx \Rightarrow . \square Rx \vee \square \neg Ry]$

**The Postulates of Faith**

- $F \quad \Sigma x: G^{\dagger}x \wedge \nabla Rx$  Postulate 1  
There is an  $x$ ,  $x$  is the God of Christian Faith and  $x$  might be real
- $G \quad \Pi xy: G^{\dagger}x \Rightarrow . Gx \wedge \nabla Myx$  Postulate 2  
For all  $x$  &  $y$ : if  $x$  is the Christian God, then  $x$  is a god, and it is inconceivable that  $y$  is greater than  $x$  (deus est quo nihil maius cogitari potest)
- $G' \quad \Pi xy: \nabla Mxy \Rightarrow \neg G^{\dagger}y$  G, PC  
For all  $x$  &  $y$ : if  $x$  might be greater than  $y$ , then  $y$  is not the Christian God

**The Postulate of Denial**

- $N \quad \Pi y: \nabla Gy \Rightarrow . \neg Ry \vee \square \neg Ry$  Postulate  
For all  $x$ : if thinking  $x$  is a god, then  $x$  is either faked or necessarily faked
- NB The burden of proof that the Idea of God might be incoherent and therefore unthinkable is incumbent upon the atheist!

**The Crucial Argument**

- $F' \quad \Sigma x: G^{\dagger}x \wedge \neg \square \neg Rx$  F, df.  $\nabla$   
There is an  $x$ ,  $x$  is the Christian God, and  $x$  is not necessarily faked
- NB Faith that God is coherent is indispensable; cf. Barth.
- $F'' \quad \Pi x: \nabla G^{\dagger}x \Rightarrow . \square Rx \vee \square \neg Rx$  Q", subst.  
For all  $x$ : if thinking  $x$  is the Christian God, then one of two:  
either  $x$  is necessarily real, or  $x$  is necessarily faked
- NB Whether God is real or not is not a question of contingency.
- $F''' \quad \Pi x: G^{\dagger}x \Rightarrow . \neg \square \neg Rx \Rightarrow \square Rx$  F", PC  
For all  $x$ : if  $x$  is the Christian God, then, if  $x$  might be real,  $x$  is necessarily real
- NB Granted that God is conceivable in the weakest sense whatsoever, then it is simply inconsistent even to imagine God as being faked. Anselm's proof thereby lends force to the reasoning of Leibniz.

**The Final Conclusion**

- $C^* \quad \Sigma x: G^{\dagger}x \wedge \square Rx$  F', F"', PC  
There is an  $x$ ,  $x$  is the Christian God and  $x$  is necessarily real
- NB One of two: either the atheist doesn't know what he is talking of, or he is contradicting himself, implying that the Christian God is not the Christian God. In either case he is nothing but an idiot! -

Q.E.D.

"Was sich überhaupt sagen lässt, lässt sich klar sagen, und wovon man nicht reden kann, darüber muss man schweigen."

Wittgenstein: 'Tractatus'

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