



### St. Anselm Maurice de Wulf

#### Life and Works.

Born of noble parents at Aosta, in 1033, ST. ANSELM was successively Abbot of Bec (1078), where he knew Lanfranc, and Archbishop of Canterbury (1093). Down to his death, in 1109, he spent himself without reserve in the cause of science and the Church.

Among his authentic works the *Monologium* and the *Proslogium*, the *Liber Apologeticus ad Insipientem* (in reply to Gaunilo, see below), the *De Fide Trinitatis* and the *De Incarnatione Verbi*, the dialogues, *De Grammatico*, *De Veritate*, *De Libero Arbitrio*, and the *Cur Deus Homo*, are the most important from the standpoint of philosophy.

We may say of St. Anselm that he was the last of the Fathers of the Church and the first of the scholastics. He was formed on the great thinkers of the patristic period, especially on St. Augustine; and he effected the first *systematization* of scholastic philosophy, thereby succeeding largely in raising it above the level of discussions in formal logic. His mind was filled with problems, which he built into a system that can rival the anti-scholastic synthesis of John Scotus Eriugena. He reminds us of Gregory VII., who in the religious and political orders achieved such a wonderful organization of the Church and adjustment of its relations to the State: he is the Gregory VII. of knowledge. The pair of them are figures that adorn the eleventh century and mark it as an epoch of revival and reconstruction.

#### Philosophy and Theology.

The spirit of St. Augustine breathes through the formulas that give expression to St. Anselm's theory here. *Crede ut intelligas*. That is to say, firstly, that faith goes before reason inasmuch as it is the purifier of the soul; but, secondly and especially, that faith must be perfected and completed by a rational study of the contents of revelation; in other words, that philosophy should be at the service of theology. Applying this principle himself, Anselm undertook to give a rational justification of dogma, making some reserves, however, in regard to the demonstrative force of his arguments. "He borders unconsciously on rationalism, without falling into it."

In his investigations he is brought face to face with numerous philosophical questions. "St. Anselm thought he was writing only theology; in reality he was also developing the germ of a distinct system of philosophy."

#### Metaphysics and Theodicy.

In accordance with the tendency of his time, St. Anselm approached the problems of philosophy from the side of metaphysics; and, as a result of the plan he adopts, his metaphysical teachings all circle around a vast system of theodicy. His method is that of the regressive, deductive synthesis, so dear to St. Augustine: God is there as the supreme exemplar, efficient and final cause of the whole intelligible and real world. St. Anselm's theodicy is, moreover, the first in the present period really worthy of the name. It takes a large, commanding and masterly view of the whole region of speculation. The influence it exerted on subsequent studies in theology

is clearly marked and decisive. Indeed, with St. Anselm scholastic theodicy may be said to have reached the *status* of a finished science, so that subsequently “the body of the doctrine is unvaried, and each scholastic expounds it after his own fashion”. In the *Proslogium*, and still more in the *Monologium*—which sometimes recalls the Confessions of St. Augustine by the sublimity of its inspiration—we have proofs of the existence of God together with dissertations on the Divine Nature (simplicity, immutability, immensity, etc.), on Creation, Exemplarism, etc. The following points deserve special notice

(1) *His arguments for the existence of God*; many of which are original. For instance: there is something that is in itself good, in itself great, that cannot be merely communicated but must be or exist of itself; and that is God. Again: the vast visible hierarchy of beings proves that there must be a being superior to all others, a supreme being; and that is the Deity. But the name of St. Anselm is inseparably connected with one special argument for the existence of God: the famous ontological argument. It may be stated thus: “We possess the idea of a being so great that we cannot conceive a greater. But this idea necessarily implies the existence of that being; for existence, being a perfection, must belong to the greatest conceivable being. Therefore God exists.” This argument confounds the subjective or ideal order with the objective or real order. To conceive a being which is the greatest possible and which must therefore be conceived as existing is not at all the same thing as to affirm or prove that such a being exists really and objectively.

The argument was attacked by a contemporary of St. Anselm, the monk Gaunilo, who contended and rightly that it was worthless for convincing an atheist. One might as well attempt to demonstrate the existence of an island in the ocean, the most beautiful of all islands, from merely imagining such an island. Most of the great scholastics of the thirteenth century, notably St. Thomas, reject the argument as invalid.

(2) *His definition of truth*. — “Res sunt verae quando sunt ut debent,” writes St. Anselm in the dialogue *De Veritate*, — which shows that he is thinking only of transcendental or ontological truth (the *ut debent* is the conformity of things with the destination revealed by their essence, the imitation of the Divine essence); though in order to reach this definition he sets out from the truth of judgment. Truth is the rectitude of what is accessible to intelligence alone (“*veritas est rectitudo sola mente perceptibilis*,” *De Veritate*, 11). It is eternal, stretching beyond the changing mind and having its foundations in God. This language reveals the faithful disciple of St. Augustine. The metaphysical teaching of St. Anselm is sound and accurate, though wanting, of course, in the more perfect precision of the later Thomistic teaching.

(3) *Defence of the Divine Unity against Roscelin*. — Applying his anti-realism to the dogma of the Trinity, Roscelin fell into tritheism. St. Anselm defended the threatened faith in the name of reason, and maintained the unity of God in the name of His infinity. Here his thesis was unimpeachable, but his arguments were not always beyond exception. Indeed, in his anxiety to find weapons in the enemy’s arsenal he called in the aid of extreme realistic theories (4). To one excess he opposed the opposite.

(4) *Exaggerated Realism*. — St. Anselm is openly realist. “We might indeed call him an extreme realist, were we to take his language literally. We must, however, bear in mind the lack of precision that characterized the language of philosophy in the eleventh century.” “He who does not see,” says the philosopher of Bec, “how on a multitude of men are specifically one only man, can hardly understand that many persons, each of whom are God, are yet one only God.” But St. Anselm did not, any more than his predecessors, interpret extreme realism in that rigorous sense which would have led to pantheism and thereby to the destruction of his whole theodicy: which again shows that the solutions of the Universals problem must be judged historically not by their absolute doctrinal value, but rather in relation to the concrete circumstances of each epoch.

## Psychology and Ethics.

Without writing any special treatise on the subject, St Anselm deals with isolated questions of psychology, and in a spirit often distinctly reminiscent of St. Augustine. He places an essential distinction between sensible and intellectual faculties; he makes a triple division of the latter into memory, intelligence and love he refers to the sense-origin of ideas without however grappling with the difficulties of the problem; he outlines the theory of cognitional determinants (*species intentionales*) without giving them the erroneous meaning imputed to him by some historians; he dwells with emphasis on the immediate knowledge which the soul has of its own existence (*"Semper sui meminit anima," Monol., 46*); in explaining intellectual knowledge, he assigns to God, as the light of truth, an efficiency that is not easy to understand. Although he seems unaware of the application of the hylemorphic theory to the composite human being, he is nevertheless deeply convinced of the unity of the latter in its twofold nature, material and spiritual. About the origin of the soul he is doubtful.

The ethics of St. Anselm are mainly theological. He explains the transmission of original sin after the manner of Odo of Toumai, and he adopts the theories of St. Augustine on evil and on predestination. He devoted much thought to the problem of free will and has left us two treatises on the subject. He defines freedom as the power of preserving rectitude of will for its own sake.

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Maurice de Wulf. *History of Medieval Philosophy*. New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1907.

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