



St. Anselm Denis Hawkins

St. Anselm, born at Aosta in 1033, joined the Norman abbey of Bee, from which he was summoned to be archbishop of Canterbury in 1093. While he held that office, his energies were perforce devoted to asserting the rights of the Church against the King in the question of investiture, but he was able to die in peace in 1109. He was, apart from [John Scotus] Erigena, the first really systematic thinker of the middle ages. His celebrated formula of “a faith which seeks understanding” (*fides quaerens intellectum*) represents his attitude of mind. Firmly rooted in Christian tradition, and especially in Augustine, he sought to articulate his beliefs and to examine their sources, whether in pure reason or in divine revelation. As a theologian he will continue to be remembered for his treatise on the Redemption, the *Cur Deus Homo*; as a philosopher he expressed himself in the *Monologion* and the *Proslogion*. His view of man and the world, which is closely related to that of Augustine, need not detain us; his philosophical importance resides in what he has to say about the knowledge of God.

In the *Monologion* Anselm sets out lines of thought which are evidently in the ancestry of the Fourth Way of Aquinas. From the different degrees of value and of being observable in things about us he concludes to a *summum bonum* and a *summum ens* which is God. The point which obviously needs to be made clear in completion of an argument of this type is why such a supreme being should be supposed not only to be conceivable but actually to exist. Although there is no historical ground for supposing that Anselm was presented with this objection, he might well be understood as offering an answer to it in the ontological argument of the *Proslogion*.

His reasoning is as follows. What we mean by God is a being than which nothing greater can be thought. Even the fool who, according to the Psalmist, says in his heart, There is no God, understands this meaning when he hears God spoken of. Therefore this being can be said at least to have an existence as an object of thought. But to exist really as well as in the mind is to be greater than merely to exist in the mind. Hence, if the fool wants to say that God exists only as a figment of the mind, he is making God less than a similar being which would exist also in reality. That is, he is making God a being than which something greater can be thought, and so contradicting himself. Consequently, in order that God should genuinely be the being than which nothing greater can be thought, he must exist in reality as well as in the mind. God, then, really exists, and the fool, in denying this, is guilty of failing to understand what he is talking about.

This argument at once aroused interest and contradiction. Gaunilo, a monk of Marmoutiers, makes a brief appearance in the history of thought by voicing his objections in a work pleasantly entitled the Book on Behalf of the Fool (*Liber pro Insipiente*). He remarks in effect that the notion of a being than which nothing greater

can be thought has no positive content; it is simply the notion of something beyond anything which we can positively conceive. But, even granted that this is a working idea of God, he says that an object as conceived has not a different content from the same object when we are aware of it as existing; it only has a different relation to our thinking faculty. Hence we cannot take a mental object and add existence to it. If we are to be aware of something as existing, it must be presented in the appropriate way to our minds as existing. Before we can say that the being than which nothing greater can be thought necessarily exists, we must have specific evidence that it in fact exists, and we cannot find this in its mere notion. Otherwise we might as well say that the most beautiful and fertile of all conceivable islands necessarily exists, or it would have less of excellence than any island which we know actually to exist. This is plainly futile, and so is Anselm's argument.

Anselm retorted by a *Liber Apologeticus contra Gaunilonem*, in which objection has stimulated him to make his position clearer. His argument, he says, does not apply to the most excellent of islands but to the most excellent of all beings, and to this being alone. We have a working notion of the being than which nothing greater can be thought, because we can understand what this means, and we have a working notion of existence too. Moreover, in this case, and in this case alone, we can see such a connection of ideas that it would be contradictory to suppose that the being than which nothing greater can be thought did not really exist. Thus the ontological argument takes clearer shape. What it amounts to is that infinite being, and infinite being alone, necessarily exists. It is enough to think of infinite being to see its necessary connection with existence. For all other things, since they are contingent, we require specific evidence in experience, or by reasoning from experience, in order to know that they exist. In the single case of God, the notion of God is sufficient to guarantee his existence. This is Anselm's famous and much discussed contribution to metaphysics.

In the later middle ages the ontological argument proved on the whole acceptable to the Franciscan tradition. Among the Dominicans Albertus Magnus makes no final decision about it, but Aquinas firmly denies its validity. He remarks that, while God is in fact necessarily existent, we do not possess that insight into the divine nature which would enable us to perceive, as soon as we had a notion of God, that he existed. Existence does not strictly add anything to our notion of God; it rather transfers it from the ideal to the real order. Hence we require reasons based on experience, and not merely on an alleged conceptual necessity, in order that we may logically affirm the existence of God.

Duns Scotus, on the other hand, thinks that Anselm's argument is valid if we make the explicit addition that the nature of God is not self-contradictory and is therefore intrinsically possible. This being given, it is true to say that a real thing is greater than a mere mental object, and so Anselm's conclusion follows.

The triangular relation of Anselm, Scotus and Aquinas is repeated in modern times with the terms replaced by Descartes, Leibniz and Kant. Descartes asserts the ontological argument in its simple form: the nature of infinite being is such that it must exist. Leibniz, like Scotus, maintains that this major premise should be modified : if God is possible, he exists. Like Scotus too, he thinks that we are entitled to affirm the ideal possibility of the divine nature, so that the ontological argument, in this shape is conclusive.

Kant objects that existence is not a real predicate or attribute. In a proposition which affirms existence of something, existence does not add another attribute to the subject; it posits the subject as real, and that is the very assertion of the subject itself. If you deny existence of anything, you are not simply taking away a predicate from it; you are negating the whole subject. In these cases what you are really doing is to affirm or deny a relationship between your thought and fact. A hundred real dollars are not a larger sum than a hundred possible dollars; they differ as actual fact from the mere concept of such a thing. A proposition possesses ideal necessity when its denial involves a contradiction between subject and predicate, but the denial of the logical predicate of existence takes away the whole subject as well with all its predicates. Hence the denial of existence can never involve contradiction, and the ontological argument is invalid.

The principle of the ontological argument is, then, that it is immediately evident that infinite being necessarily exists. It appears to be no more than an assertion that a relationship of entailment or implication holds between infinite being and necessary existence. But an entailment is a connection of the form: if there is A, there is B. Hence the principle can rightly be taken to mean only that, if there is an infinite being, it exists necessarily. With this expansion, however, it becomes quite clear that no light at all is thrown on the question whether an infinite being exists in fact or not. If the ontological argument were to have any bearing on the question whether an infinite being exists, it would have to become the assertion of a necessary connection between the thought of an infinite being and its existence: if an infinite being is thinkable, it exists. But it is sufficiently evident that the -mere fact that I can form a concept of something can never by itself guarantee that there is any reality corresponding with my thought. Therefore, while it is true that, if an infinite being exists, it exists necessarily, other grounds are required before an infinite being can be asserted to exist in fact. With the ontological argument alone, either the existence of infinite being is assumed or the whole principle remains in the purely conceptual sphere.

The error of the ontological argument is, as Kant says, that it regards being as an attribute, whereas, if we are to talk in terms of subject and attribute, everything else might rather be said to be an attribute of being. Being is presupposed to everything else which can be attributed to any real thing. Anselm's mistake was, in effect, to regard the universe as composed of a number of possible things, some of which actually existed while others remained merely possible. Merely possible things, however, have no reality in themselves; they have a kind of reality only in the thought of those minds which think them and in the power of those agents which can bring them actually into being. Hence the ontological argument reposes upon a misunderstanding of the unique character of the notion of existence. The positive sequel of all this will appear in connection with Aquinas.

Nevertheless, although Anselm and his imitators were mistaken in thinking that they had discovered a new proof of the existence of God, they were perhaps struggling to lay bare a principle which is of real importance in the philosophical conception of God. For it is true, and it is a cardinal point in Aquinas's own philosophy of God, that necessary being can only be infinite being. As soon as it can be asserted that a necessary being exists, it follows that this is an infinite being. Kant thought that he had refuted this proposition by reducing it to the principle of the ontological argument. If all necessary being is infinite being, he says, it follows logically that some infinite being

is necessary being. But, since there can be only one infinite being, it is possible in the consequent proposition to replace *some* infinite being by all infinite being. Hence the proposition that all necessary being is infinite being entails the proposition that all infinite being is necessary being, which is the principle of the ontological argument.

Kant is here guilty of a disastrous confusion of thought. He does not realize that what he has proved of the principle of the ontological argument is not that it is in every sense false but that it cannot serve as a foundation for asserting the existence of God. Since it is in reality true that, if there is an infinite being, it exists necessarily, the circumstance that this follows from the proposition that a necessary being can only be infinite being is no objection to the latter proposition. Hence, if you begin with the fact of experience that something exists and draw the obvious inference that, since it is impossible that everything should be dependent upon something else, there must be some necessary being, you can validly continue your line of thought by perceiving that this being must be infinite. Such an argument, beginning with the experience of existence, is no longer in the purely conceptual sphere. It is not, therefore, equivalent to the ontological argument, but it may not be unduly charitable to suppose that Anselm was glimpsing something of the kind, although he misinterpreted what he began to see and offered a process of reasoning which is formally invalid.

Denis Hawkins. *A Sketch of Medieval Philosophy*. London: Sheed and Ward, 1946. This text is in the public domain.