



The Philosophy of St. Anselm

Alfred Weber

The first really speculative thinker after Scotus is St. Anselmus, the disciple of Lanfranc. He was born at Aosta (1033), entered the monastery of Bec in Normandy (1060), succeeded Lanfranc as Abbot (1078), and as Archbishop of Canterbury (1093). He died in 1109. He left a great number of writings, the most important of which are: the *Dialogus de grammatico*, the *Monologium de divinitatis essentia sive Exemplum de ratione fidei*, the *Proslogium sive Fides quærens intellectum*, the *De veritate*, the *De fide trinitatis*, and the *Cur Deus Homo?*

The second Augustine, as St. Anselmus had been called, starts out from the same principle as the first; he holds that faith precedes all reflection and all discussion concerning religious things. The unbelievers, he says, strive to understand because they do not believe; we, on the contrary, strive to understand because we believe. *They and we have the same object in view*; but inasmuch as they do not believe, they cannot arrive at their goal, which is to understand the dogma. The unbeliever will never understand. In religion faith plays the part played by experience in the understanding of the things of this world. The blind man cannot see the light, and therefore does not understand it; the deaf-mute, who has never perceived sound, cannot have a clear idea of sound. Similarly, not to believe means not to perceive, and not to perceive means not to understand. Hence, we do not reflect in order that we may believe; on the contrary, we believe in order that we may arrive at knowledge. A Christian ought never to doubt the beliefs and teachings of the Holy Catholic Church. All he can do is to strive, as humbly as possible, to understand her teachings by believing them, to love them, and resolutely to observe them in his daily life. Should he succeed in understanding the Christian doctrine, let him render thanks to God, the source of all intelligence! In case he fails, that is no reason why he should obstinately attack the dogma, but a reason why he should bow his head in worship. Faith ought not merely to be the starting-point — the Christian's aim is not to *depart* from faith but to remain in it, — but also the fixed rule and goal of thought, the beginning, the middle, and the end of all philosophy.

The above almost literal quotations might give one the impression that St. Anselmus belongs exclusively to the history of theology. Such is not the case, however. This fervent Catholic is more independent, more of an investigator and philosopher than he himself imagines. He is a typical scholastic doctor and a fine exponent of the alliance between reason and faith which forms the characteristic trait of mediaeval philosophy. He assumes, *a priori*, p. v that revelation and reason are in perfect accord. These two manifestations of one and the same Supreme Intelligence cannot possibly contradict each other. Hence, his point of view is diametrically opposed to the *credo quia absurdum*. Moreover, he too had been besieged by doubt. Indeed, the extreme ardor which impels him to search everywhere for arguments favorable to the dogma, is a confession on his part that the dogma needs support, that it is debatable, that it lacks self-evidence, the criterion of truth. Even as a monk, it was his chief concern to find a simple and conclusive argument in support of the existence of God and of all the doctrines of the Church concerning the Supreme Being. Mere affirmation did not satisfy him; he demanded proofs. This thought was continually before his mind; it caused him to forget his meals, and pursued him even during the solemn moments of worship. He comes to the conclusion that it is a temptation of Satan, and seeks deliverance from it. But in vain. After a night spent

in meditation, he at last discovers what he has been seeking for years: the incontrovertible argument in favor of the Christian dogma, and he regards himself as fortunate in having found, not only the proof of the existence of God, but his peace of soul. His demonstrations are like the premises of modern rationalism.

Everything that exists, he says, has its cause, and this cause may be one or many. If it is one, then we have what we are looking for: God, the unitary being to whom all other beings owe their origin. If it is manifold, there are three possibilities: (1) The manifold may depend on unity as its cause; or (2) Each thing composing the manifold may be self-caused; or (3) Each thing may owe its existence to all the other things. The first case is identical with the hypothesis that everything proceeds from a single cause; for to depend on several causes, all of which depend on a single cause, means to depend on this single cause. In the second case, we must assume that there is a power, force, or faculty of self-existence common to all the particular causes assumed by the hypothesis; a power in which all participate and are comprised. But that would give us what we had in the first case, an absolute unitary cause. The third supposition, which makes each of the 'first causes' depend on all the rest, is absurd; for we cannot hold that a thing has for its cause and condition of existence a thing of which it is itself the cause and condition. Hence we are compelled to believe in a being which is the cause of every existing thing, without being caused by anything itself, and which for [p. vi](#) that very reason is infinitely more perfect than anything else: it is the most real (*ens realissimum*), most powerful, and best being. Since it does not depend on any being or on any condition of existence other than itself it is *a se* and *per se*; it exists, not because something else exists, but it exists because it exists; that is, it exists necessarily, it is necessary being.

It would be an easy matter to deduce pantheism from the arguments of the *Monologium*. Anselmus, it is true, protests against such an interpretation of his theology. With St. Augustine he assumes that the world is created *ex nihilo*. But though accepting this teaching, he modifies it. Before the creation, he says, things did not exist by themselves, independently of God; hence we say they were derived from non-being. But they existed eternally for God and in God, as ideas; they existed before their creation in the sense that the Creator foresaw them and predestined them for existence.

The existence of God, the unitary and absolute cause of the world, being proved, the question is to determine his nature and attributes. God's perfections are like human perfections; with this difference, however, that they are essential to him, which is not the case with us. Man has received a share of certain perfections, but there is no necessary correlation between him and these perfections; it would have been possible for him not to receive them; he could have existed without them. God, on the contrary, does not get his perfections from without: he has not received them, and we cannot say that he *has* them; he *is* and must be everything that these perfections imply; his attributes are identical with his essence. Justice, an attribute of God, and God are not two separate things. We cannot say of God that he has justice or goodness; we cannot even say that he is just; for to be just is to participate in justice after the manner of creatures. God is justice as such, goodness as such, wisdom as such, happiness as such, truth as such, being as such. Moreover, all of God's attributes constitute but a single attribute, by virtue of the unity of his essence (*unum est quidquid essentialiter de summa substantia dicitur*).

All this is pure Platonism. But, not content with spiritualising theism, Anselmus really discredits it when, like a new Carneades, he enumerates the difficulties which he finds in the conception. God is a simple being and at the same time eternal, that is, diffused over infinite points of time; he is omnipresent, that is, [p. vii](#) distributed over all points of space. Shall we say that God is omnipresent and eternal? This proposition contradicts the notion of the simplicity of the divine essence. Shall we say that he is nowhere in space and nowhere in time? But that would be equivalent to denying his existence. Let us therefore reconcile these two extremes and say that God is omnipresent and eternal, without being limited by space or time. The following is an equally serious difficulty: In God there is no change and consequently nothing accidental. Now, there is no substance without accidents. Hence God is not a substance; he transcends all substance. Anselmus is alarmed at these dangerous consequences of his logic, and he therefore

prudently adds that, though the term ‘substance’ may be incorrect, it is, nevertheless, the best we can apply to God — *si quid digne dici potest* — and that to avoid or condemn it might perhaps jeopardise our faith in the reality of the Divine Being.

The most formidable theological antinomy is the doctrine of the trinity of persons in the unity of the divine essence. The Word is the object of eternal thought; it is God in so far as he is thought, conceived, or comprehended by himself. The Holy Spirit is the love of God for the Word, and of the Word for God, the love which God bears himself. But is this explanation satisfactory? And does it not sacrifice the dogma which it professes to explain to the conception of unity? St. Anselmus sees in the Trinity and the notion of God insurmountable difficulties and contradictions, which the human mind cannot reconcile. In his discouragement he is obliged to confess, with Scotus Erigena, St. Augustine, and the Neo-Platonists, that no human word can adequately express the essence of the All-High. Even the words ‘wisdom’ (*sapientia*) and ‘being’ (*essentia*) are but imperfect expressions of what he imagines to be the essence of God. All theological phrases are analogies, figures of speech, and mere approximations.

The *Proslogium sive Fides quoerens intellectum* has the same aim as the *Monologium*: to prove the existence of God. Our author draws the elements of his argument from St. Augustine and Platonism. He sets out from the idea of a perfect being, from which he infers the existence of such a being. We have in ourselves, he says, the idea of an absolutely perfect being. Now, perfection implies existence. Hence God exists. This argument, which has been termed the *ontological argument*, found an opponent worthy of Anselmus in Gaunilo, a monk of Marmoutiers in Touraine. Gaunilo emphasises the difference between thought and being, and points out the fact that we may conceive and imagine a being, and yet that being may not exist. We have as much right to conclude from our idea of an enchanted island in the middle of the ocean that such an island actually exists. The criticism is just. Indeed, the ontological argument would be conclusive, only in case the idea of God and the existence of God in the human mind were identical. If our idea of God is God himself, it is evident that this idea is the immediate and incontrovertible proof of the existence of God. But what the theologian aims to prove is not the existence of the God-Idea of Plato and Hegel, but the existence of the personal God. However that may be, we hardly know what to admire most, --St. Anselmus’s broad and profound conception, or the sagacity of his opponent who, in the seclusion of his cell, anticipates the Transcendental Dialectic of Kant.

The rationalistic tendency which we have just noticed in the *Monologium* and the *Proslogium* meets us again in the *Cur Deus Homo?* Why did God become man? The first word of the title sufficiently indicates the philosophical trend of the treatise. The object is to search for the *causes* of the incarnation. The incarnation, according to St. Anselmus, necessarily follows from the necessity of redemption. Sin is an offence against the majesty of God. In spite of his goodness, God cannot pardon sin without compounding with honor and justice. On the other hand, he cannot revenge himself on man for his offended honor; for sin is an offence of infinite degree and therefore demands infinite satisfaction; which means that he must either destroy humanity or inflict upon it the eternal punishments of hell. Now, in either case, the goal of creation, the happiness of his creatures, would be missed and the honor of the Creator compromised. There is but one way for God to escape this dilemma without affecting his honor, and that is to arrange for some kind of *satisfaction*. He must have infinite satisfaction, because the offence is immeasurable. Now, in so far as man is a finite being and incapable of satisfying divine justice in an infinite measure, the infinite being himself must take the matter in charge; he must have recourse to *substitution*. Hence, the necessity of the *incarnation*. God becomes man in Christ; Christ suffers and dies in our stead; thus he acquires an infinite merit and the right to an equivalent recompense. But since the world belongs to the Creator, and nothing can be added to its treasures, the recompense which by right belongs to Christ p. ix falls to the lot of the human race in which he is incorporated: humanity is pardoned, forgiven, and saved.

“Theological criticism has repudiated Anselmus’s theory, which bears the stamp of the spirit of chivalry and of feudal customs. But, notwithstanding the attacks of a superficial rationalism, there is an abiding element of truth in it: over and above each personal and variable will there

is an absolute, immutable, and incorruptible will, called justice, honor, and duty, in conformity with the customs of the times.”

Alfred Weber. *History of Philosophy*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1908.

© SophiaOmni, 2009. The specific electronic form of this text is copyright. Permission is granted to print out copies for educational purposes and for personal use only. No permission is granted for commercial use.