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Anselm of Canterbury, Max J. Charlesworth (translator)

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In the *Proslogion*, St. Anselm presents a philosophical argument for the existence of God. Anselm's proof, known since the time of Kant as the ontological argument for the existence of God, has played an important role in the history of philosophy and has been incorporated in various forms into the systems of Descartes, Leibniz, Hegel, and others.

Included in this edition of the *Proslogion* are Gaunilo's "A Reply on Behalf of the Fool" and St. Anselm's "The Author's Reply to Gaunilo." All three works are in the original Latin with English translation on facing pages. Professor Charlesworth's introduction provides a helpful discussion of the context of the *Proslogion* in the theological tradition and in Anselm's own thought and writing.

Proslogion Details

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Christopher says

Worth reading for the first recorded description of the Ontological argument. The first few chapters have more philosophical merit than the latter chapters, which descend in to god fearing chanting and prayer.

Here's the argument, which seeks to prove the existence of God. When you first read it, you may think, as Bryan Maggee puts it, that 'there's something wrong with this', but it's a deceptively disconcerting argument.

Therefore, O Lord, You who give understanding to faith, grant me to understand—to the degree You know to be advantageous—that You exist, as we believe, and that You are what we believe [You to be]. Indeed, we believe You to be something than which nothing greater can be thought. Or is there, then, no such nature [as You], for the Fool has said in his heart that God does not exist? But surely when this very same Fool hears my words “something than which nothing greater can be thought,” he understands what he hears. And what he understands is in his understanding, even if he does not understand [i.e., judge] it to exist. For that a thing is in the understanding is distinct from understanding that [this] thing exists. For example, when a painter envisions what he is about to paint: he indeed has in his understanding that which he has not yet made, but he does not yet understand that it exists. But after he has painted [it]: he has in his understanding that which he has made, and he understands that it exists. So even the Fool is convinced that something than which nothing greater can be thought is at least in his understanding; for when he hears of this [being], he understands [what he hears], and whatever is understood is in the understanding. But surely that than which a greater cannot be thought cannot be only in the understanding. For if it were only in the understanding, it could be thought to exist also in reality—something which is greater [than existing only in the understanding]. Therefore, if that than which a greater cannot be thought were only in the understanding, then that than which a greater cannot be thought would be that than which a greater can be thought! But surely this [conclusion] is impossible. Hence, without doubt, something than which a greater cannot be thought exists both in the understanding and in reality Assuredly, this [being] exists so truly [i.e., really] that it cannot even be thought not to exist. For there can be thought to exist something which cannot be thought not to exist; and this thing is greater than that which can be thought not to exist. Therefore, if that than which a greater cannot be thought could be thought not to exist, then that than which a greater cannot be thought would not be that than which a greater cannot be thought—[a consequence] which is contradictory. Hence, something than which a greater cannot be thought exists so truly that it cannot even be thought not to exist. And You are this [being], O Lord our God.

Joel Everett says

A classic with regard to the ontological 'proof' for God. It always fascinates me on how most of the fundamental questions we struggle with as human beings today have been struggled with a thousand years prior or more.

Asha says

Perhaps the new agey think it, manifest it idea germinated from this 11th c monk's ontological argument for the existence of G_d! I think it's weak. but, I have to admit it is rather charming given the dearth of educational resources in those medieval times. A time when Europe and the christian church closed off all intellectual pursuits this monk actually deems it necessary to put forth an argument for the existence of "something than which nothing greater can be thought "
well, I think pink elephants exist...

This is required reading for the philosophy class I am taking with Harvard edX.

I have this fear of not gathering knowledge...so once again its edX time.

Scott says

Is it blasphemous to not give this five stars? Reading it as a philosophical text compared to a religious text it is easy to see how Descartes, Kant and others shredded this. Lots of repeated ideas throughout but should be a required read as a foundational text.

Matt says

Of course, the historical significance of this work is in Anselm's ontological argument for the existence of God. And this argument appears within the first six pages of the book. But I found the rest of the book very rewarding. Faith Seeking Understanding -- that is the driving theory of the book, and Anselm's sincerity is moving. Some of his arguments are successful, others... not so much. But throughout, it is a passionate philosophical work.

Why don't we write philosophy like this anymore?

Katie Marquette says

A dense, poorly executed 'logical' argument attempting to prove the existence of God. Anselm's logic is completely flawed as the nature of his claim relies almost solely on subjective experience. I was vastly unimpressed.

JP says

Anselm is recognized as revolutionary for the contemplative style of prayer that he wrote in a time when theology required something very different. Moreover, he provided a step in the direction toward a more

rational (logical) approach to theology and faith. His Proslogion is not a prayer but instead instructive about the nature of God, man, sin, and faith. Chapter 14 and 17 are especially worth reading. His writing style, in the Latin, is remarkable for the word choice and structure, both emphasizing the depth of feeling. It's especially enjoyable Latin to read aloud.

Nick says

a use/weaponization of the ontological argument that predates kant.

Jordy Andrade says

"Com efeito, não busco compreender para crer, mas creio para compreender. Efetivamente creio, porque, se não cresse, não conseguiria compreender" (Neque enim quaero intelligere ut credam, sed credo ut intelligam. Nam et hoc credo, quia, nisi credidero, non intelligam)

Elaborado com uma lógica afiada e uma expressão clara de amor pela superlativa beleza das coisas celestiais, esse opúsculo escrito pelo Arcebispo Anselmo da Cantuária (1033 - 1109) e o famigerado argumento ontológico para a existência de Deus nele contido seriam objeto de fascínio e debates por algumas das grandes mentes de nosso história. Alguns como Descartes e Leibniz adaptariam o argumento às suas construções filosóficas, outros, como Kant, Tomás de Aquino e o contemporâneo do autor, o monge Gaunilo de Marmoutier, procuraram refutá-lo.

O argumento de Anselmo encontra-se no capítulo II do Proslógio, e consiste na sequência lógica de que "o ser do qual não se pode pensar nada maior", o próprio Deus, não pode existir somente na inteligência. Caso existisse apenas na inteligência, poder-se-ia pensar que há outro ser existente também na realidade e que seria maior. Isto é, se "o ser do qual não se pode pensar nada maior" existisse somente na inteligência, este mesmo ser, do qual não se pode pensar nada maior, torna-se-ia o ser do qual é possível, ao contrário, pensar algo maior, o que, como bem definiu Anselmo, certamente, é um absurdo.

Apesar das várias controvérsias e debates acerca do argumento em questão (que acredito não ter sido refutado com extrema clareza) e outros presentes no opúsculo que ainda se sustêm (como a conclusão de que Deus é um ser tão perfeito que não pode ser concebida sua não-existência), tendo a concordar com o elucidativo comentário do teólogo Suíço Karl Barth sobre a obra de Anselmo. Para o suíço, a intenção de Anselmo não era comprovar a existência de Deus somente por meio da razão, sem qualquer apelo a experiência e revelação cristã. Seu argumento visava tornar claro que não podemos racionalmente negar o Deus vivo, uma vez que saibamos e compreendamos quem ele é - o ser mais perfeito.

Sendo assim, a célebre frase do Arcebispo, "creio para que possa compreender", diante da abordagem de Barth, nos remonta a ideia de duplo conhecimento de Deus, latente na obra de Calvin e cerne do que pode ser chamado de epistemologia reformada. De um lado, a ideia de que há uma consciência geral de Deus em todos os homens. Não é uma mera questão de provas escolásticas, mas uma consciência profunda de Deus em face de nós mesmos. Mesmo que não seja bem definida ou fácil de apontar, está ali. Entretanto, o homem se afundou tanto em pecado que sua sensibilidade em tais questões tornou-se embotada. Por outro lado, Deus se revelou através das escrituras não apenas como criador de todas as coisas, mas também como redentor em Cristo.

Façamos uma analogia com ramos da filosofia. Por exemplo, a filosofia da ciência investiga a natureza, os pressupostos e os métodos da pesquisa científica, ocupando-se com o caráter e a categoria das técnicas e dos resultados da pesquisa. Assim acontece com a filosofia da religião, que não se preocupa tanto com o conteúdo da experiência religiosa, mas sim com sua forma e as questões levantadas. Dessa forma, no caso da filosofia da religião cristã, o lugar apropriado para começar não está fora, como bem explana Sir Roger Scruton no primeiro capítulo de sua obra *O Rosto de Deus*. Segundo Scruton, essa perspectiva de lugar nenhum, a ideia de que podemos dar um passo para fora da cadeia de acontecimentos e pedir uma explicação sobre ela é semelhante a ideia de que podemos enxergar além do nosso campo de visão e assim estabelecer-lhe um limite. Todavia, o lugar apropriado para se começar essa abordagem filosófica se encontra dentro da própria religião cristã, sendo seu dado primário a experiência cristã de Deus em Cristo.

Logo, não se trata de comprovar primeiro para então crer. Não podemos simplesmente crer em verdades teológicas por razões não-teológicas. Pelo contrário, somente quando encontramos, através da fé, "aquele que É", o "totalmente outro" (nos termos do Barth), o Deus vivo, é que temos condições de entender a verdade da fé cristã.

Gabe Maxwell says

A relatively easy argument to pick apart, but historically important to get some context on the Schoolastic thinking of the time.

Christopher says

Ok boys and girls.

This is the FIRST ontological arguement for the existence of God.

It follows such as roughly as I would like to re-translate the latin as the phrase that-than-which-a-greater-can-be-thought is used like a variable in the arguement.

That said here is the outline.

Saint Anselms logic begins with faith.

I have faith in order to understand. God exists.

Faith and Reason are tough to join together.

When I think of God I think of that of which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought.

Like how a painter has an image in the mind of what he is going to paint, the idea exists, but when the idea exists in reality, it's a greater idea. After the painter paints the painting, the painting as been brought into reality.

Idea of God

The idea of God is less than the reality of God

The idea and the reality are the same (big assumption) Descartes is not alive yet.
God is reality

The idea of God is infinite, therefore there is only one God, there cannot be subservient lesser gods because I could not think of that which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought.

If I can think of that of which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought, then that which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought is not God, this is absurd, One God exists.

Not bad for the middle ages.

Maxime N. Georgel says

Je n'ai jamais lu un livre comme ce livre. Rempli de prières et de méditations comme les Confessions d'Augustin, rempli d'argumentation comme les Sentences de Lombard, léger dans le style comme le Cur Deus Homo. Je ne savais pas qu'un homme pouvait écrire quelque chose comme cela. J'en recommande vivement la lecture.

Et, au détour d'une ligne, Anselme nous livre l'argument ontologique pour l'existence de Dieu qui, dans sa forme modale, consiste à montrer qu'une saine déduction logique et rationnelle conduit à l'existence de Dieu si nous reconnaissons qu'il est possible que Dieu existe. Autrement dit, et j'y reviendrai sur mon blog (www.parlafoiblog.wordpress.com), l'argument ontologique montre que nous n'avons qu'à montrer qu'il est possible que Dieu existe pour prouver son existence.

Fantastique, je vous laisse avec la dernière prière de ce livre :

Je t'en prie, ô mon Dieu, fais que je te connaisse, que je t'aime afin qu'en toi je trouve ma joie tout entière. Et si je ne puis dans cette vie obtenir la plénitude de la félicité, qu'au moins elle croisse en moi chaque jour, jusqu'à ce moment désiré (la vie éternelle). Que dans cette vie, chaque instant m'élève de plus en plus à la connaissance de toi-même, et que dans la vie à venir-cette connaissance soit parfaite ; qu'ici mon amour pour toi s'accroisse, que là il atteigne sa plénitude ; qu'ici ma joie en espérance, soit de plus en plus grande, que là elle soit parfaite en réalité. Seigneur, tu nous ordonnes, tu nous conseilles par ton fils de demander, et tu nous promets que nous recevrons, afin que notre joie soit parfaite. Je demande, Seigneur, comme tu le conseilles par la bouche du maître admirable que tu nous as donné, fais que je reçoive, comme tu le promets par ta vérité, afin que ma joie soit pleine. Je demande ; fais, Dieu fidèle dans tes promesses, que je reçoive pour que ma joie soit pleine. Et maintenant, au milieu de ces désirs et de ces faveurs, que ce soit là l'objet des méditations de mon âme, et des paroles de ma langue. Que ce soit là ce qu'aime mon cœur, ce que parle ma bouche. Que mon âme ait faim de ce bonheur, que ma chair en ait soif, que ma substance tout entière le désire ; jusqu'à ce que j'entre dans la gloire du Seigneur qui est Dieu dans sa trinité et son unité, bénit dans tous les siècles. Ainsi soit-il.

Yann says

Anselm de Cantorbéry, ecclésiastique du onzième siècle, qui fut nommé en Angleterre, alors fraîchement envahie par les Normands, tente dans ce livre de démontrer l'existence de Dieu par des arguments rationnels. L'argument de taille, consiste à étendre l'intellect à la réalité, à confondre les mots et les choses. Si ses contemporains avaient déjà émis des réserves sur la démonstration, il connu pourtant une grande renommée, allant jusqu'à être nommé docteur, puis canonisé. Mais le lecteur aura beau mettre sa cervelle à l'alambic pour démêler les apparences de raisonnements de cet ouvrage, il n'en tirera qu'impatience, et haine de la chicane et des pédants. La fin du livre est accompagnée d'un dossier contenant des textes de philosophes célèbres, qui ont repris à leur compte, comme Descartes, ou critiqué, comme Kant, les arguments de l'auteur, et qui ne manqueront pas de fatiguer ceux qui auront la patience, ou plutôt l'imprudence, d'y prêter attention.

Katie says

Anselm, you charming little monk.

I went into this work not expecting to be overly impressed. The only thing I really knew about the Proslogion was that it was the home of the famous (infamous?) ontological argument for the existence of God. I wouldn't really label myself as a religious person, but ontological arguments and the like have always kinda rubbed me the wrong way. The idea of proving the existence or nature of God through reason alone seems vaguely arrogant, and also kinda besides the point: it's always seemed to me that if you could reason God's existence out with human logic, God wouldn't be terribly God-like anyway.

But Anselm really surprised me, and I found the Proslogion to be kind of beautiful. The argument for the existence of God is certainly there, and it's elegant if not logically unassailable. Anselm's God is simply defined as "that than which nothing great can be thought" and since existence is better than non-existence, God must necessarily exist. That takes up about two pages of the work. The rest of the work is honestly far more interesting, and it is surprisingly mystical for a work known almost solely for its logical arguments. Anselm's God is explored through a series of dichotomies - He is both incorporeal and perceptive, omnipotent and unable to do all things, just and merciful, seen and unseen. There is a deluge of light/dark imagery. On the whole, the Proslogion is a tract about the process of seeking, and how it must inherently be a dialogue: a diligent search for God through all possible means will not allot the seeker a unobstructed view, but will allow him or her small pieces of understanding. It's a humble and optimistic work.

If you don't believe in God already, the Proslogion is not going to change your mind. But's that not a mark against it - Anselm wasn't aiming for that kind of undertaking. Instead, I think the Proslogion is better viewed as a prayer for further understanding, and an attempt at articulation. Anselm and his audience already believed in God and his existence. Anselm was just reaching out for further understanding, and for a better set of words to encapsulate his belief.

J. M. says

I find Anselm's longing for understanding ennobling, moving and poetic. He lived in a period of intellectual darkness. The Christian Church had finally succeeded in closing the western mind; the eleventh century saw the culmination of the rise of faith and the fall of reason. In his review of Charles Freeman's *The Closing of*

the Western Mind for The New York Times, Anthony Gottlieb writes that Freeman “is right to emphasize the colossal ignorance of the Christian West in the second half of the first millennium. By the year 1000, all branches of science, and indeed all kinds of theoretical knowledge except theology, had pretty much disintegrated. Most classical literature was largely unknown. The best-educated people (all of them monks) knew strikingly less than many Greeks 800 years earlier. And the few mathematical writings from the time were for the most part downright stupid.”

I would like to think (on the evidence of his *Monologion* and *Proslogion*) that Anselm was one of those few exceptional human beings who felt a compelling will to understand. But Western Europe had to wait another four hundred years for the discovery by Poggio Bracciolini of a unique manuscript of Lucretius’s *De rerum natura* in a German monastery, and a further two centuries for Francis Bacon’s *Novum Organum* and his use of inductive reasoning. Yet, Anselm’s thirst for knowledge was unquenchable, as evidenced by his two tracts.

There was no House of Wisdom in Medieval Europe, nor the flourishing of learning, poetry, science and philosophy that turned Córdoba into the Ornament of the World, as the German nun Hroswitha of Gandersheim called it. The Toledo School of Translators was founded in the century following Anselm’s death. Had he lived in the 12th century, he might have been able to read Latin translations of Al-Khwarizmi, of Avicenna and of Aristotle, of Euclid by Adelard of Bath and of Ptolomy by Gerard of Cremona. But Anselm was born one century too early and his longing for knowledge could only be satisfied at that time and in that place by his kind of poetic, circular (poetry likes circuitousness), tautological, platonic (as Russell points out in his *History of Western Philosophy*, Plato uses a kind of ontological argument to prove the objective reality of ideas), yet beautiful, poignant, mystical, deductive reasoning.

Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus sold his soul to the Devil for knowledge of the physical world (“Now would I have a book where I might see all characters and planets of the heavens, that I might know their motions and dispositions. . . let me have one book more, wherein I might see all plants, herbs, and trees, that grow upon the earth”, etc.); Anselm sold his soul to his God for a spiritual, ethereal knowledge. That is how I read “Faith seeking understanding”. Lacking the tools to reach an understanding of the world he lived in, Anselm surrendered his reason to the inscrutabilities of his God. It is tempting to assume that one thousand years ago in Western Europe no one questioned the existence of God, but if that were the case, why take the trouble to prove it? Anselm tried to escape the “dark night of the soul” (to quote a Spanish mystic) by climbing a ladder, held upright by skyhooks, that led to the clouds.
