

“The Ontological Argument” by St. Anselm



Canterbury Cathedral, Library of Congress, ©Detroit Publishing

About the author... St. Anselm (1033-1109), a member of the Benedictine Order and Bishop of Canterbury, extended the Augustine tradition of seeking to believe in order to understand the truth and existence of God rather than seeking to understand in order to believe in the truth and existence of God. Even so, St. Anselm does not distinguish clearly between religious and philosophical pursuits. Many theologians avoid trusting reason from the fear of the specter of skepticism; however, Anselm believes reason is necessary to elucidate and validate faith. Anselm is often considered to be the father of scholastic philosophy since his work emphasizes linguistic and analytical thinking. Scholasticism was the dominant approach to philosophical and theological problems during the medieval

period.

About the work... Although Anselm’s argument for God’s existence presented in this article is based on predominately on reason, Anselm presents the argument as clarification Christian faith. The heart of his argument is the insight that if God is defined as a “being than which no greater can be conceived,” then God could not be conceived of as not existing because perfection, he thinks, implies existence. Baruch Spinoza and René Descartes employed versions of the ontological argument where the very concept of God as a perfect being implies existence as a property. In philosophical jargon, a feature of the essence of God is said to be existence.

From the reading...

“... we believe that you are a being of which nothing greater can be conceived...”

Ideas of Interest from the *Proslogium*

1. Explain whether you think St. Anselm believes understanding the nature of religious belief is a necessary condition for believing in the nature and existence of God.
2. As clearly as possible, restate Anselm’s ontological argument.
3. Clearly explain what St. Anselm means when he writes there is only one way God can be conceived not to exist.
4. Explain why, according to St. Anselm, only God and nothing else cannot *not* exist? According to Anselm, why couldn’t other necessary beings exist?

The Reading Selection from the *Proslogium*

Lord, I acknowledge and I thank you that you have created me in this your image, in order that I may be mindful of you, may conceive of you, and love you; but that image has been so consumed and wasted away by vices, and obscured by the smoke of wrong-doing, that it cannot achieve that for which it was made, except you renew it, and create it anew. I do not endeavor, O Lord, to penetrate your sublimity, for in no wise do I compare my understanding with that; but I long to understand in some degree your truth, which my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand. For this also I believe, —that unless I believed, I should not understand. . . .

Truly there is a God, although the fool has said in his heart, There is no God.

AND so, Lord, do you, who do give understanding to faith, give me, so far as you knowest it to be profitable, to understand that you are as we believe; and that you are that which we believe. And indeed, we believe that you are a being than which nothing greater can be conceived. Or is there no such nature, since the fool has said in his heart, there is no God? (*Psalms* xiv. 1). But, at any rate, this very fool, when he hears of this being of which I speak—a being than which nothing greater can be conceived—understands what he hears, and what he understands is in his understanding; although he does not understand it to exist.

For, it is one thing for an object to be in the understanding, and another to understand that the object exists. When a painter first conceives of what he will afterwards perform, he has it in his understanding, but he does not yet understand it to be, because he has not yet performed it. But after he has made the painting, he both has it in his understanding, and he understands that it exists, because he has made it.

Hence, even the fool is convinced that something exists in the understanding, at least, than which nothing greater can be conceived. For, when he hears of this, he understands it. And whatever is understood, exists in the understanding. And assuredly that, than which nothing greater can be conceived, cannot exist in the understanding alone. For, suppose it exists in the understanding alone: then it can be conceived to exist in reality; which is greater.

From the reading...

“That which can be conceived not to exist is not God.”

Therefore, if that, than which nothing greater can be conceived, exists in the understanding alone, the very being, than which nothing greater can be conceived, is one, than which a greater can be conceived. But obviously this is impossible. Hence, there is doubt that there exists a being, than which nothing greater can be conceived, and it exists both in the understanding and in reality. . . .

God cannot be conceived not to exist. —God is that, than which nothing greater can be conceived. —That which can be conceived not to exist is not God.

AND it assuredly exists so truly, that it cannot be conceived not to exist. For, it is possible to conceive of a being which cannot be conceived not to exist; and this is greater than one which can be conceived not to exist. Hence, if that, than which nothing greater can be conceived, can be conceived not to exist, it is not that, than which nothing greater can be conceived. But this is an irreconcilable contradiction. There is, then, so truly a being than which nothing greater can be conceived to exist, that it cannot even be conceived not to exist; and this being you are, O Lord, our God.

So truly, therefore, do you exist, O Lord, my God, that you can not be conceived not to exist; and rightly. For, if a mind could conceive of a being better than you, the creature would rise above the Creator; and this is most absurd. And, indeed, whatever else there is, except you alone, can be conceived not to exist. To you alone, therefore, it belongs to exist more truly than all other beings, and hence in a higher degree than all others. For, whatever else exists does not exist so truly, and hence in a less degree it belongs to it to exist. Why, then, has the fool said in his heart, there is no God (*Psalms* xiv. 1), since it is so evident, to a rational mind, that you do exist in the highest degree of all? Why, except that he is dull and a fool?

...

How the fool has said in his heart what cannot be conceived. —A thing may be conceived in two ways: (1) when the word signifying it is conceived; (2) when the thing itself is understood. As far as the word goes, God can be conceived not to exist; in reality he cannot.

BUT how has the fool said in his heart what he could not conceive; or how is it that he could not conceive what he said in his heart? since it is the same to say in the heart, and to conceive.

But, if really, nay, since really, he both conceived, because he said in his heart; and did not say in his heart, because he could not conceive; there is more than one way in which a thing is said in the heart or conceived. For, in one sense, an object is conceived, when the word signifying it is conceived; and in another, when the very entity, which the object is, is understood.

In the former sense, then, God can be conceived not to exist; but in the latter, not at all. For no one who understands what fire and water are can conceive fire to be water, in accordance with the nature of the facts themselves, although this is possible according to the words. So, then, no one who understands what God is can conceive that God does not exist; although he says these words in his heart, either without any or with some foreign, signification. For, God is that than which a greater cannot be conceived. And he who thoroughly understands this, assuredly understands that this being so truly exists, that not even in concept can it be non-existent. Therefore, he who understands that God so exists, cannot conceive that he does not exist.

I thank you, gracious Lord, I thank you; because what I formerly believed by your bounty, I now so understand by your illumination, that if I were unwilling to believe that you do exist, I should not be able not to understand this to be true.

Related Ideas

Anselm of Canterbury (<http://www.utm.edu/research/iep/a/anselm.htm>) *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. A summary of life, writings, and theology of Anselm.

St. Anselm (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01546a.htm>) *Catholic Encyclopedia*. An extensive historical background summary of St. Anselm's life and works by W. H. Kent.

“The Ontological Argument” by St. Anselm



Canterbury Cathedral, Norman Staircase, Library of Congress, ©Detroit Publishing

Topics Worth Investigating

1. Anselm believes even a foolish person can understand the definition of “God” as “a being than which nothing greater can be conceived.” Is this phrase clear and distinct? For example, does a number than which no greater number can be conceived, exist in the same manner as any given number is said to exist?
2. If an apple has the of being red, fresh, round, and on a tree, need we add an additional quality assuring the apple exists? Is existence a characteristic of things? In what way is something existing in reality greater than something existing only in the mind?
3. Compare “being in the highest degree” with “existence in the highest degree.” Is existence an ordinal or a cardinal property? Can a thing partly or imperfectly exist?

Index

Anselm, Saint, 1
Descartes, René, 2
essence, 2
God, 3
modus tollens, 4
quality, 6
reality, 3
reductio ad absurdum, 3
scholasticism, 1
skepticism, 1
Spinoza, Baruch, 2
understanding, 3