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Anselm's Argument: On the Unity of Thinking and Being

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Abstract

In this article, I argue that at the root of the 'ontological' argument lies the notion that the idea of God is truth: in the idea of God, the meaning of the concept and the reality of the Being actually converge; the idea of God is God. After looking at a number of thinkers whose philosophical method is reminiscent of Anselm's I conclude that, while Anselm did not furnish a conclusive proof of the necessary existence of God, his argument shows how the question of the existence of God is one and the same with the question of the intelligibility and coherence of God and with the question of the intelligibility and coherence of reality.

Keywords

Anselm, ontological argument, Augustine, Martin Heidegger, Karl Rahner, thinking, being

The celebrated argument, particularly as put forth in Chapter II of the *Proslogion* has given rise to a greater volume of philosophical effort than perhaps any other single argument.[1] In this so-called 'Ontological' Argument,[2] the mediaeval philosopher maintains that the

[1] See Robert Brecher, *Anselm's Argument: The Logic of Divine Existence*, Hants: Aldershot, 1986, 3. See also Ian Logan, *Reading Anselm's Proslogion*, (Ashgate 2009), p. 1. In this article, I will not deal with the issue of the difference in the arguments presented in Chapter II and in Chapter III of the *Proslogion* as outlined by Norman Malcolm ('Anselm's Ontological Arguments', *The Philosophical Review*, 69 [1960] pp. 41–62) and Charles Hartshorne ('What did Anselm Discover', *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 17 [1962] pp. 213–222) respectively (see John Hick– Arthur McGill, *The Many-Faced Argument* [London: Macmillan, 1968], pp. 301–333).

[2] The argument was not originally called so. The term 'ontological argument' was coined by Immanuel Kant. For Anselm's argument, see *Proslogion* II-IV and Anselm of Canterbury's *Liber Apologeticus contra Gaunilonnem respondentem pro Insipiente* replying to the objection raised by Gaunilon of Marmoutier. (See Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogion*: *St. Anselm's Proslogion*, translated with an introduction and philosophical commentary by M.J. Charlesworth, [Oxford: Clarendon, 1965].)

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existence of the notion of God in thought would be impossible if God did not exist really. In this article, I shall argue that at the root of this argument lies the notion that the idea of God is truth: in the idea of God, the meaning of the concept and the reality of the Being actually converge; the idea of God *is* God.

In both his treatises (the *Monologion* and the *Proslogion*), Anselm maintains that the nature of God is ultimately unknowable to man. In the *Proslogion*, in particular, he reiterates the inaccessibility of God and the indirectness of any perception of his nature.[3] He uses the analogy of the sun and the eye to describe the relationship between God and the mind. One cannot look upon the sun itself but only on other things reflecting the sun's rays of light.[4] Anselm insists, with others, that we can know God only in the light of the truth, which is God.[5] Thus the discussions of the divine attributes in both treatises, particularly in the *Proslogion*, are attempts to 'grasp' the divine nature as it shows itself in things dependent on it. Chapters II-IV of the *Proslogion* are to be taken separately from the rest of his work, for they deal with the being of God (that he exists) rather than the manner of his existence.[6]

Anselm is a Platonic thinker[7] and his argument is only cogent within his Platonic framework. First in the *Proslogion*, and later in his reply to the objections of Gaunilon, Anselm argued from the idea of God to the existence of such a being. In a real sense his whole

[3] This feature of the *Proslogion* can be seen in the very statement naming God as '*id quo maius cogitari nequit*'. (See Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogion* III: *St. Anselm's Proslogion*, translated with an introduction and philosophical commentary by M.J. Charlesworth, [Oxford: Clarendon, 1965], p. 118.)

[4] See Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogion* XVI : *St. Anselm's Proslogion*, translated with an introduction and philosophical commentary by M.J. Charlesworth, [Oxford: Clarendon, 1965], pp. 136–137.)

[5] See Augustine, *De Libero Arbitrio* II, 12, 34; 15, 39 : (= Nuova Biblioteca Agostiniana III/2) introduced and translated and annotated by Domenico Gentili, (Roma: Città Nuova Editrice, 1987), pp. 255–257; 261–263. It is typical that thinkers such as Alexander of Hales, Bonaventure, Duns Scotus and others, who hold the doctrine of divine illumination, accept Anselm's argument. Idealist thinkers of the post-Enlightenment age such as Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Hegel and others, also accept his argument, although they re-formulate it in their own fashion.

[6] Anselm clearly distinguishes between the understanding of God 'that he is as we believe' ('*esse sicut credimus*') and 'that he is what we believe him to be' ('*hoc esse quod credimus*'). (See Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogion* II : *St. Anselm's Proslogion*, translated with an introduction and philosophical commentary by M.J. Charlesworth, [Oxford: Clarendon, 1965], pp. 116–117.)

[7] The 'ontological' argument is Platonic, not because it relies on the content of Plato's Theory of Forms, but because it relies on that theory's form. God and the 'Good' occupy similar positions at the summit of a hierarchical system, the nature of which they (respectively) determine. The point is that the Judeo-Christian God must have something in common with the rest of the hierarchy, his creation, in order to be the most real entity possible. (See Robert Brecher, *Anselm's Argument: The Logic of Divine Existence*, [Hants: Aldershot, 1986], p. 67.)

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argument hinges on the definition Anselm uses for God: '*aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari possit*',[8] a definition partly inspired by Augustine who had characterized God as that "than which there is nothing higher".[9]

The argument is meant to give voice to the ontological connection between God and man, that is the image of God in the interior of man, where the reality of God directly manifests itself. The idea of God is innate in man as the image of God; thinking can therefore be radically directed beyond itself.

Anselm holds that ideas are themselves things and for them to be is an indication of something concerning the nature of things. For him, thinking is a participation in being and an interpretation of being. The 'ontological' proof itself only holds in the case of God because God is that single being on which all thought, all action, and all being depend. Normally, the idea of no part of being would imply the existence of that part. Yet, if thought is itself being, the existence of thought would warrant the assertion of the existence of Being as a whole. As they approach their source, ideas and beings are identical, since the eternal ideas that may be experienced in thinking are the principles of Being.[10]

[8] At the beginning of the *Proslogion* II, where it appears for the first time, this name is rendered by the words: '*aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari possit*'. The actual formulation is not fixed either in the *Proslogion* itself, nor in the 'Reply' to Gaunilon: instead of *aliquid*, Anselm also says *id*; he sometimes omits the pronoun; he at times replaces *possit* by *potest* or even by *valet*; he occasionally replaces *nihil* (or *non*) ... *possit* by *nequit* and also, quite frequently, uses *maius* or *melius* interchangeably. The phrases are quite similar and he seems to regard them as synonymous.

[9] "*Quo nihil superius*". Augustine, *De Libero Arbitrio* II, 6, 14 : (= Nuova Biblioteca Agostiniana III/2) introduced and translated and annotated by Domenico Gentili, (Roma: Città Nuova Editrice, 1987), p. 230.

[10] See *Selections from Mediaeval Philosophers*, I/Augustine to Albert the Great, edited and translated with introductory notes by Richard McKeon, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929), pp. 147–148. Anselm's argument was largely neglected during the remainder of the Medieval Period due to its having been rejected by Aquinas in favour of the Cosmological Argument. However, in the seventeenth century, it was again brought into prominence by Descartes who made explicit the presupposition of the argument; that existence is an attribute or predicate which like other predicates, a given *x* can meaningfully be said to have or to lack. He argues that just as the idea of a triangle necessarily includes among the defining attributes of a triangle that of having its three internal angles equal to two right angles so the idea of a supremely perfect Being necessarily includes the attribute of existence. Therefore, we can no more think without contradiction of a supremely perfect Being which lacks existence than of a triangle which does not have three sides. Descartes then considers the objection that from the fact that in order to be a triangle a figure must have three sides, it does not follow that triangles exist; and likewise in the case of a supremely perfect Being. His reply is that whereas the notion (or essence) of a triangle does not include the attribute of existence, that of a supremely perfect Being does. Therefore in this case alone, we are able to infer existence from a concept.

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Karl Barth's re-reading of Anselm's argument, while typical of one who is averse to natural theology, is illuminating.[11] He holds that the Anselmian proof shows that, according to the testimony of his own revelation, God has the freedom to prove his existence within the reality that is distinct of him.[12] He sees the argument as nothing other than a repetition of the self-proof of God.[13]

Charles Hartshorne, whose publication in 1965 helped spark off a spate of works on the argument,[14] sees Anselm's discovery as being the claim that both believers who lack understanding and unbelievers clearly do not know the meaning of belief in God.[15] His formulation of Anselm's '*aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari possit*' is 'that than which no greater can be thought'. This entails that it is contradictory to assert that God does not exist. The question of the existence of God is a self-answering metaphysical one: although it involves a matter of fact and not merely of formal definition, its answer is seen as soon as the idea contained in it is correctly understood. One, therefore, does not need experience to confirm or deny God's existence.

Anselm proved the existence of God from the fact that God has proved himself and continues to do so by setting himself as the beginning beyond which thinking cannot go and with which all thinking must begin. Here, the Anselmian formula does *not* intend to say that we can first understand what the sentence means and then set about to determine whether there is anything corresponding to it; thinking

[11] Both Anselm and Barth would agree that it is through God's light and truth that understanding is possible at all; even the understanding of the Fool is a gift of God, whether he acknowledges it or not. Where they differ radically is in their epistemology: in Barth's case, but not in Anselm's, epistemology is grounded in Christian faith. Barth implies that knowledge of God, which is possible only for those who believe in God, is a necessary condition of true knowledge of anything at all. (See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, edited by G.W. Bromiley – T.F. Torrance, [Edinburgh 1956], p. 148.) Anselm holds that certain things about God can be known by anyone. Whereas Barth thinks that the Fool can, without inconsistency, continue to think as he does (for he is an *insipiens* and as such thinks on a level where one can only think falsely; though without violating the inner consistency of that level – see Karl Barth, *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum*, [Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1975], p. 165), Anselm's argument is directed towards showing that the Fool is thinking irrationally if, after having attended to and understood his argument, he persists in his atheism.

[12] See Karl Barth *Church Dogmatics*, II/I, edited by G.W. Bromiley – T.F. Torrance, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957), p. 304.

[13] See Ibid., pp. 304–305.

[14] The initial impetus to the re-ignited interest in the 'Ontological' Argument was provided by Norman Malcolm, the celebrated disciple and biographer of Wittgenstein. One may criticize Hartshorne's 'relocation' of the ontological argument in Chapter III (of the *Proslogion*) and his regard of the argument in Chapter II as only a poor first attempt. In effect, Hartshorne is accused by some authors (like Brecher himself) of foisting on to Anselm an argument that is not his own. (See Robert Brecher, *Anselm's Argument: The Logic of Divine Existence*, [Hants: Aldershot, 1986], pp. 3–4.)

[15] See Charles Hartshorne, *Anselm's Discovery: A Re-examination of the Ontological Proof for God's Existence*, (La Salle/IL: Open Court, 1965), p. 97.

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along such a plane would be to imitate the *insipiens*. One can here refer to Anselm's own description, where he claims that it is one thing to think a reality (*res*) by thinking the vocable (*vox*) that signifies it; it is quite another thing to think a reality by understanding the very thing that the reality is.[16]

Anselm's position here is surely reminiscent (only of course, it is the other way round) of that of Martin Heidegger. Heidegger was inspired by the famous poem penned by Parmenides, who found it impossible to deny that the world around us possesses some elements of truth, even if they are mingled with falsehood. Perhaps the most famous line in that poem is the one which is the most difficult to translate.[17] Attempted translations have been: "is and cannot not be" and "is not and needs must not be". The translation proferred by Heidegger is interesting and axiomatic to his philosophic system: 'Being and the thinking of Being are the same'. His aim was to "work out the question of the meaning of Being; …. [his] provisional aim [was] the interpretation of time as the horizon within which any understanding whatever of Being is possible".[18]

He denied that there are any 'eternal truths', holding that this contention belongs to the residues of Christian theology in philosophical thought,[19] and attempted to establish the original meaning of the word. True to form, he appealed to the use of the etymology of the term to help him in this regard. He took up the Greek word *a-letheia*, a privative expression, meaning 'uncoveredness' or 'unconcealment' to argue that truth is the sense of coming to light: the truth of something is its having been brought out of a state of obscurity and forgetfulness into a state of notice and recall. A true statement is, therefore, one that is true in the sense of *aletheuein*: it clears and reveals; it lets something stand out.[20] Thus, we attain the truth when

[16] "*aliter enim cogitatur, aliter cum id ipsum quod res est intelligitur*" (Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogion* iv : *St. Anselm's Proslogion*, translated with an introduction and philosophical commentary by M.J. Charlesworth, [Oxford: Clarendon, 1965], p. 120).

[17] The Greek original reads: "ΤΟ ΓΑΡ ΑΥΤΟ ΝΟΕΙΝ ΕΣΤΙΝ ΤΕ ΚΑΙ ΕΙΝΑΙ" (*DK 28 B 3*. See Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 440, 12; Plotinus *Enneads* 5, 1, 8).

[18] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson (London: SCM Press, 1962), p. 19.

[19] When discussing the Kantian categories, Heidegger claimed that Kant himself was very close to abandoning belief in timeless logic and timeless categories in his first edition of *The Critique of Pure* Reason. In the second edition, however, he fell back to the traditional point of view. (See John Macquarrie, *Heidegger and Christianity*, [London: SCM Press, 1994], p. 25.)

[20] Schleiermacher can be said to have used the concept of 'truth' in this sense when he speaks of the redemption-liberation accomplished by Jesus as a passing from a state of God-forgetfulness to one of God-consciousness. (See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clarke, 1989], §11, pp. 54–55.)

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something is presented to us as it really is, without any concealment or distortion.

The centrality of the concept of *Dasein* in his philosophy is also indicative. The *Dasein*, in which the human mind participates, is like a clearing in which Being comes to light.[21] It is a point at which the *intellectus* and the *res* converge. Recalling Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas,[22] he defines the 'I' as the entity whose nature it is to come together with every entity[23] In *Being and Time*, Heidegger altered the metaphysical terminology so that the act that is directed toward Being is itself called 'Being' instead of 'thinking'. 'Thinking of', thus becomes 'Being toward' (*Sein zu*) in Heideggerian terminology. Thus *Dasein* is nothing but the point of reflection where thinking and Being come together. It is the remoteness of Being manifested in the closeness of 'here'.

At the other end of the self-to-other relation is the connectedness of meaning and reality in all things that is seen in the experience of truth. For Heidegger, the locus of truth is not the proposition, but the *Dasein*. Truth is an event in *Dasein*. This does not mean that truth is subjective, or that it can be made whatever we want it to be for "[Man] is the more mistaken, the more exclusively he takes himself to be the measure of all things".[24] Heidegger maintains that truth is linked with the freedom of letting-be. Therefore, we perceive the truth of something when we let it be what it really is.

These two dimensions of *Dasein* and truth are brought together through a reflective act involving *projection*[25] and *disclosure*.[26] The connection between projection and ascertainment (which derives from disclosure) is *time*. Heidegger argues that truth does not have "the structure of an agreement between cognition and object in the sense of an assimilation (*Angleichung*) of one entity (subject) to another (object)".[27] For him, making an assertion is itself a relating of oneself

[21] Also, as Parmenides linked being and thought, thinking cannot fail to be a thinking of being, and this establishes the link between *Dasein* and *Sein*. Heidegger also holds that *Dasein* is a unity. He holds that: "to be sure, the constitution of the structural whole and its everyday kind of Being is phenomenally so *manifold* that it can easily obstruct our looking at the whole as such phenomenologically in a way which is *unified*". (Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, [London: SCM Press, 1962], p. 225.)

[22] See Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae De Veritate* I, 1 : (= Editio Sexta Taurinensis), [Roma: Marietti, 1931], p. 3.

[23] See Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1963), p. 14.

[24] Martin Heidegger, 'On the Essence of Truth', in Werner Brock Henry ed., *Basic Writings*, edited by (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1949), p. 316.

[25] The reality indicated is *projected* by signs (that is, the visual or acoustic figures that are used in spoken or written language).

[26] This is the way in which the object shows itself. This makes it possible to ascertain the reality corresponding to the projection.

[27] See Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1963), p. 91.

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in thought to the real thing itself;[28] the projection it contains is not that of a representation of the object but of the object itself. Verification takes place when the thing shows itself to be in itself the same as how it is projected, or disclosed, in the assertion. What is between the *intellectus* and the *res* is the temporality indicated by saying that the thing *is* in itself what it *was* in the assertion.

One might here well argue that the difficulty with this line of thought is precisely the link between *Dasein* and *Sein*. It seems hard to agree, with Heidegger, that thinking of being is the same as Being. For, while one would agree that '"A knows that p" implies p' could be valid, it seems easy to disprove '"A thinks that p" implies p'. For one could easily picture impossible states of affairs.[29]

As we have seen, Anselm too, argues that we cannot divorce the word from the reality it permits us to understand. His presupposition is that the name of God is not a mere word, as Gaunilon thought; it is a word of God that also reveals his existence. The fool's mistake is that he did not see that the name '*aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari possit*'[30] is not merely one vocative among others but is a revelatory word and the revealed and believed name of God.[31] Anyone who hears and understands the name 'God' finds himself, not merely before a vocative, but before an actual possibility which in turn presents thinking with its real boundaries.

Hence, Anselm's argument is not as *a prioristic* and purely deductive as it seems. It is rather connected with Anselm's own doctrine of the image of God in the human person and is therefore close to the teaching of various Church Fathers on the idea of God as innate in the human person. However, as an argument, it certainly appears highly suspect to the philosophical tradition, especially that subsequent to Immanuel Kant. For, it is alleged that while it establishes that the concept of God involves the idea of God's existence, and indeed of the concept of God as necessary existence (as it is inconceivable that a being which exists without beginning or end and always as a whole ceases to exist); it cannot take the further step of establishing that this concept of an eternally existent Being is exemplified in reality. Therefore it does not follow from the argument that an eternal being

[28] "*Sein zum seienden Ding selbst*" (Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, [Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1963], p. 218).

[29] I am indebted to Peter Serracino Inglott, *Beginning Philosophy*, (Malta: Media Centre, 1987), pp. 47–48, for the formulation of this argument.

[30] This is not intended by Anselm to be a definition of the nature of God, from which his existence is to be deduced. Instead, it formulates a rule of thinking. The point of the argument lies in the fact that, by starting with nothing more than the rule of thought contained in the name of God, one could arrive at the conclusion that God exists not only in thought, but also in reality.

[31] See Karl Barth, *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum*, (Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1975), p. 113.

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in fact exists but only that *if such a being exists*, its existence is ontologically necessary.[32]

Barth interprets the proof put forth by Anselm as involving, not the truth of the assertion 'There is a God', but the truth of the assertion 'God is truth, that is, the unity of meaning and reality'. The unity of meaning and reality refers to what is given in the words '*aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari possit*'. What is shown in the proof is that "the object designated as God cannot be thought of as being only in the understanding".[33] Anselm conducts this proof of the existence of God by presenting God as the only one whose existence can be proven. He attempts to show that it is impossible to even formulate the words 'God may not exist', because such an effort would violate the rule of non-contradiction. Thus, in the words of the name '*aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari possit*', the referent of the name is present. Thinking the meaning of these words is to the knowledge of God's existence what perceiving a physical object through the senses is to the knowledge of mundane things.

Hence, the argument is concerned with the existence, not of just any idea, but of the supreme idea which is required for thinking and in which thinking transcends itself. The ontological argument is simply a logical unfolding of the ontological constitution of reason (*ratio*).

Indeed, Anselm interprets the sense of 'God is' through comparison of the relation between essence or *esse* and existence, to that between *lux*, *lucere*, and *lucens*. As 'shining' (*lucere*) is what light (*lux*) does by virtue of its being light, so 'being' (*esse*) is what God does by virtue of God's being God. Light cannot but *lucere* and God cannot but *esse*.

The Anselmian proof, thus, claims to show that, in the thought of '*aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari possit*', we are presented with the unity of thinking and Being; it attempts to point out a place at which thinking cannot be separated from real Being.[34] Its sense is that of

[32] The term 'ontologically' is here used to differentiate from '*logical* necessity' i.e. that existence is logically true (by definition). It is certainly highly doubtful to the human being whether a proposition asserting existence could be *logically* necessary i.e. whether or not one could maintain that a given kind of entity exists if one's argument is based only on the rules of language.

[33] Karl Barth, *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum*, (Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1975), p. 94.

[34] To identify God with the name '*id quo maius cogitari nequit*' is to make a declaration of faith. The proof, in itself, does not show that God is the one referred to by the name. What the proof points to, is the structure of the thinking of being. To think that than which no greater can be thought is to be in the presence of the structure of being. We cannot think of anything greater that the relation between self and the world (the structure of being), because all thinking is involved in such a relation. The structure of being is that than which nothing greater can be thought.

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an idea that is not merely such, but that opens thought on to the real referent of thinking.

The highly original argument advanced by Anselm has not been without its critics of whom Gaunilon was the first. The argument was, however, dealt a virtual death-blow by Thomas Aquinas.

One argument the latter advances against Anselm is to be found in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*: "For it is not a difficulty that given anything either in reality or in the intellect something greater can be thought, save only for him who concedes that there exists something in reality than which a greater cannot be thought".[35] This objection, which pinpoints the impossibility of conceiving God's greatness, is a serious one. However, ironically enough it is one with which Anselm would have been in complete agreement. In *Proslogion* XV he writes: "You are also something greater than can be thought". Anselm 'agrees' with Aquinas that that entity, which both take to be the most real of all, is not knowable. In his definition '*aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari possit*', he does not mean to say that God is a definite, specifiable entity within the grasp of one's conceptual capacity, but that God is *what-ever* is such that nothing greater can be conceived. Anselm's ontological argument seems to hold even if we do not have a clear and distinct idea of God. All we need to know is that God is something greater than which nothing can be conceived.[36]

Through another argument, Thomas Aquinas dealt what, for many centuries, was considered to be the *coup-de-grace*, to the argument.[37] He recognized that Anselm was assuming that the being, to whose existence his formula led him, was to be identified with the Christian God. Aquinas is more conscious of the distinction between philosophy and theology. As a philosopher, he uses the term 'God' as a general term, and not as a proper name. While Aquinas certainly believed in God, he was perhaps more sensitive to the possible objections of the adversaries than was Anselm.

On the other hand, Anselm, while explicitly mentioning the Fool of the Psalm, who says in his heart "There is no God",[38] nevertheless addresses himself to God in prayer, not to the Fool.[39] He makes God his primary audience: the reader feels that he is overhearing the prayer of a believer who is not prepared to discard his belief if he does not find rational proof for it. Anselm is evidently operating within the

[35] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* I, 11.

[36] See Gareth Matthews, 'Aquinas on Saying God Doesn't Exist', *The Monist* 47 (1963) p. 473.

[37] Thomas Aquinas' refutation can be seen in his *Summa theologiae* I, 2, 1, 2.

[38] Ps 14 (13), 1.

[39] Karl Barth, too, has claimed that Anselm was not intending to argue against the atheist. (See Dayton Haskin, 'The Ontological Argument and Theological Education', *New Blackfriars* 54 [1973] p. 150.)

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Augustinian tradition in an era where no careful distinction between philosophy and theology was made. His proof only confirmed that of which he was already convinced.

Aquinas also objects to Anselm's conclusion that the Fool cannot deny God's existence without contradiction. He distinguishes between something being self-evident in itself, and its being self-evident to us. Philosophically God is reached only through reasoning based on the existence of sensible things in themselves:

> I maintain then that the proposition 'God exists' is self-evident in itself for, ... its subject and predicate are identical, since God is his own existence. But, because what it is to be God is not evident to us, the proposition is not self-evident to us, and needs to be made evident. This is done by means of things which, though less evident in themselves, are nevertheless more evident to us, by means, namely, of God's effects ... It is self-evident that there exists truth in general, but it is not self-evident to us that there exists a First Truth.[40]

It is interesting to note that Anselm would probably agree with Thomas Aquinas's last point. He would have held that it is only with the help of the light of God, which enlightens the human mind, that one can understand that God's existence is necessary. Just as Augustine argued that "The hidden things and secrets of the Kingdom of God first seek out believing men that they may make them understand. For faith is understanding's ladder, and understanding is faith's reward",[41] Anselm speaks of the "ladder of faith".[42] For Anselm, God is inaccessible light and yet provides the very context and precondition of our seeing. He maintained, along Augustinian lines, that eternal truth illuminates human intellects, rendering them certain and infallible. Thomas does not agree. He holds that there is nothing eternal in the human intellect: "since the divine intellect alone is eternal, truth has eternity in it alone".[43] Thus, the perception and the enunciation of truth by the human intellect is always necessarily historical, changeable, perfectible and fallible. This is even more the case when one considers the fundamental truths such as those regarding God and the soul.

The marked divergence between Anselm and Thomas derives from a divergence in feeling which lies in that the one is turned to the contemplation of the infinite intelligibility from which all truth proceeds, while the other concentrates on the question of a finite intellect working among the finite effects of a cause that exceeds its

[40] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, 2, 1.
[41] Augustine, *Sermo CXXVI*, 1, 1.
[42] See Anselm, *De Incarnation Verbi*, 1.
[43] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* i, 16, 7 : *Summa theologiae*, edited by Thomas Gilby and others, iv, (Cambridge: Blackfriars 1964), p. 93.

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understanding.[44] This ancient debate between the two philosophers has been extended into contemporary times. For instance, Donald Davidson argues, on the one hand, that 'truth' enters the world with successful knowers or, as he puts it: "Nothing in the world, no object or event, would be true or false if there were not thinking creatures".[45] On the other hand, we have proponents of the Augustinian-Anselmian tradition such as John Zizioulas who speaks of the truth in terms of 'that which is'. The latter asks: "How can a Christian hold to the idea that truth operates in history and creation when the ultimate character of truth, and its uniqueness, seem irreconcilable with the change and decay to which history and creation are subject?"[46]

Perhaps it would be instructive, at this point, to recall that, while it may not seem too evident that Karl Rahner's epistemological and metaphysical lines lie parallel to Anselm's – after all Rahner was in dialogue with Aquinas, not Anselm – there are a number of similar points that bear further elucidation.

The first concerns Rahner's postulation of the unity of being and knowing. His metaphysics and epistemology lead him to assert that, in the activity of human questioning, a questioning that inevitably raises the implicit and primordial question of Being, Being reveals itself as luminous self-presence. This does not exactly mean that Being is clearly self-evident:

> ... What being is, is not always obvious. We know of it ('*bekannt*') but we do not really know it ('*erkannt*'). Although we know of being, our question is not a rhetorical one. We ask it, because we do not yet really know what we are inquiring about. Finally our question always makes a distinction between being and beings. It is precisely this which enables us to inquire about being. We know of beings, we know beings, we have continually to do with them, our knowledge refers to them. But we do not know what the being of these beings is. That is why we inquire.[47]

He argues that: "Knowledge is the self-presence of Being and this self-presence is the being of any entity".[48] Now, being is knowledge

[44] See Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe, 'Truth: Anselm or Aquinas', *New Blackfriars* 66 (1985) p. 86.

[45] Donald Davidson, 'The Structure and Content of Truth', *The Journal of Philosophy* 87 (1990) p. 279.

[46] John Zizioulas, Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church, (London: DLT, 1985), p. 70.

[47] Karl Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, translated by Joseph Donceel, (New York: Continuum, 1994), p. 28. This translation contains an error in the first sentence quoted above and reads: "What being is, is always obvious". This error has been corrected in the quotation from the same translation in *A Rahner Reader*, edited by Gerald A. McCool, (Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1975), p. 6.

[48] As quoted in Peter Serracino Inglott, *Beginning Philosophy*, (Malta: Media Centre, 1987), p. 202.

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or truth only to the extent that being is or has Being. For, Rahner, in rejecting an idealist, panentheistic interpretation of the unity of Being and knowing (or what he calls the 'self-luminosity' of Being[49]), maintains that 'Being' is an analogous concept. This, of course, is a quintessentially Thomistic perspective. However, his exact interpretation appears to locate knowledge or truth[50] in the degree of self-possession an existent enjoys. At any rate, there is very little scope for truth as the fruit of a relation between the intellect and the thing known or at least, this relationship is quite different from the Angelic Doctor's:

> We must ... start from this: that being is of and by itself knowing and being known, that being is self-presence ... The complete ontic reality of the intellect is that which is actually known. Since this statement refers to the essence, it is also reversible: in order to be actually known, that which is knowable must basically be the ontic reality of the intellect itself ... something is known to the extent that it becomes in its being identical with the knowing subject.[51]

Moreover, Rahner holds that intelligibility does *not* 'develop' in being from without; it does not consist only in a relation that is extrinsic to the being itself or in some knowledge that happens to grasp the being in question. He believes that intelligibility belongs intrinsically to the very nature of the being in question: when one affirms being, being is always already expressing itself. Every being has, on account of its very being an "inner ordination to possible knowledge and so to a possible knower".[52] Intelligibility belongs to the essence of every being.

This principle is based on the original and fundamental concept of being from which all other objects of knowledge are but derivations: actual being or *esse*. This original unity of knowable and knowing implies that the intellect and the object have the same origin; in Thomist terms: the intellect and that which is intelligible in act are one.[53] Thus, being is, in itself, knowing and knowing is nothing else than the self-presence of being that is inseparable from its very make-up. Knowledge is self-possession or self-presence; being is self-luminosity.

Rahner also argues that one's interpretation of the Angelic Doctor's epistemology would be extremely shallow if one were to interpret the

[49] See Karl Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, translated by Joseph Donceel, (New York: Continuum, 1994), p. 30.

[50] See Ibid., pp. 39–40, where Rahner equates 'knowledge' and 'truth'.

[51] Ibid., p. 32.

[52] Ibid., p. 29.

[53] "*Cum intellectus et intelligibile in actu sint unum*". (Thomas Aquinas, *In Metaph. Prooem.*, in Karl Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, translated by Joseph Donceel, [New York: Continuum, 1994], p. 31.)

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unity of the knowing and the knowable as if it simply meant that the known as such must be known to some knower; that the knower must know something and that it is in this sense that both must be one. For him, what Thomas really means is that, that which is knowable is basically the ontic reality of the intellect itself.[54]

Thus, in Rahner's interpretation of Thomas, there is no distance or gap between the knower and the known. The intellect and that which is intelligible in act are one. Knowledge essentially takes place through the return of the knowing subject into him/her self. This possibility of '*reditio in se ipsum*,' in turn, is the basic constituent in being.[55] It belongs to the basic constitution of the human person that s/he that not only *can* s/he inquire about being but that s/he *must* do so. The human person is not absolute consciousness; s/he is a finite spirit. It is only the pure act of being that is the absolute identity of Being and knowing; it is only that which possesses itself in pure luminosity. However, the more a human person knows and wills, the more s/he draws back into him/herself and the more s/he becomes present to him/herself and, concomitantly, the more s/he places him/her self in the presence of Absolute Being. The real and primordial object of knowledge is the knower him/her self:

> The *degree* of self-presence, of luminosity for oneself, corresponds to the intensity of being, to the *degree* in which being belongs to some existent, to the *degree* in which, notwithstanding its non-being, a being shares in being. And the other way round: the degree of intensity of being shows in the degree in which the being in question is able to return into itself, in which it is capable, by reflecting upon itself, to be luminous for itself.[56]

Also, Rahner maintains that the union of knower and known in the human person's act of knowledge demands their prior identity in Absolute Being as the condition of its possibility. In this regard, Rahner understands the relation between the intellect and the thing known in a very different manner from that envisaged by Aquinas;[57] in fact he may be said to give a somewhat Anselmian interpretation to Aquinas' vision. For, his understanding of intelligibility and knowledge is an

[54] See Karl Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, translated by Joseph Donceel, (New York: Continuum, 1994), p. 32.

[55] The problem Rahner sees in Thomistic epistemology lies rather in the direction of how the known, which is originally identical with the knower can stand in a relation of otherness. Rahner considers the answer to lie in his postulation of the '*Vorgriff*' towards being as illimited in itself, which is the transcendental condition of the possibility of an object known as object.

[56] Karl Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, translated by Joseph Donceel, (New York: Continuum, 1994), p. 37.

[57] Even if Rahner's interpretation of Aquinas is to some extent correct, his perspective from a post-Cartesian point of view was vastly influenced by Kantianism and is very different from that of the Angelic Doctor's.

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almost exclusively transcendental one which gets intelligibility into things and knowledge into intellects by deriving both rather hastily from the *esse actu* or *summa veritas*, which is God.

This epistemological and metaphysical idea is an extremely alluring one and it produces abundant fruit in Rahner's philosophico-theological system. For instance, in the '*Vorgriff*' as the necessity that drives the human person to anticipate being as such, the existence of an absolute being (hence of God) is always co-affirmed, even though not categorially represented. The '*Vorgriff*' affirms Absolute Being as real and, in this sense, one may say that the '*Vorgriff*' aims at God. Rahner does maintain that this is *not* an *a priori* demonstration of God, like that of Augustine, Anselm or Leibniz for the '*Vorgriff*' and that its range could only be known and be affirmed in the *a posteriori* knowledge of a real being and as the necessary condition of this knowledge.[58] However, whereas Thomas holds that the concept of God comes last in all our knowledge, Rahner's '*Vorgriff*' implies that in every act of knowledge God is already implicitly known as the previous condition of that knowledge.[59]

Like Anselm, Rahner is not careful enough in his distinction between philosophy and theology. Something being self-evident in itself is not necessarily self-evident to the human person. Like Anselm's, Rahner's demonstration (while derived from *a posteriori* experience) depends on inner individualist-mentalist experience. In rather the same Platonic-Augustinian line as Anselm, Rahner seems to present thinking as inconceivable except as a participation in being and as an interpretation of being. The ancient idea of the illumination of the soul by God appears to lurk behind Rahner's metaphysical epistemology as related to the idea that the image of God in the interior of the human person is the *locus* where God directly manifests Godself. In a similar way to Anselm's presentation of his celebrated argument, Rahner presents his idea of the '*Vorgriff*' as the condition of the possibility of all knowledge of objects and all human action (Anselm might be said to have presented the concept of God as the supreme idea that is required for thinking and in which thinking transcends itself). Like Anselm's argument, Rahner's understanding of the '*Vorgriff*' and of the 'supernatural existential' might well be dismissed

[58] Rahner maintains that his understanding of the knowledge of God is but a new translation of the traditional Thomist ways demonstrating the existence of God. The translation takes place from the language of the metaphysics of being to that of the metaphysics of knowledge. (See Karl Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, translated by Joseph Donceel, [New York: Continuum, 1994], p. 51.)

[59] This is also held by Aquinas who also argues that in every act of knowledge we implicitly know God (See Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate* XXII, 2 ad 1). However, Aquinas is much more mindful of the limitations of human knowledge: he maintains that what is self-evident in itself is not necessarily self-evident to the human person.

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by the modern thinker for much the same reasons as the ontological argument was rejected by Kant.[60]

Rahner and Anselm both assume that the being, to whose existence their respective methods lead is to be identified with the Christian God: this leap, once again blurs the distinction between philosophy and theology for there *is* a difference between the usage of the term 'God' as a general term and its usage as a proper name. The non-conceptual, pre-thematic postulation of an ultimate, absolute or infinite[61] or the experience of the dynamic movement of thought beyond itself makes no explicit reference to an object: there is no explicit answer to the implied 'whence' of the experience.[62] Clearly, however, both Anselm and Rahner think that the experiences to which they appeal necessarily give rise to explicit beliefs. They would argue that the experiences and the beliefs are inseparable.

In conclusion, one must say that Anselm's philosophy is an attempt to circumvent the need for finite things in an attempt to arrive directly at the one, subsistent, eternal truth that is in God and that is God. It reflects the aspiration for perfect, eternal knowledge, the drive to rise above that which is merely human. It holds fast to the ideal of the knower being disengaged from human sensory and intellectual limitations, and social and historical contingency, and thus free to see reality objectively.[63]

[60] Descartes' classic defence of the Ontological Argument had some important critics, but the most invoked criticism was offered by Immanuel Kant in his Critique of Pure Reason. Kant rejected the argument on two bases: First, leaving the argument's presuppositions unchallenged for the moment, he grants the analytic connections Descartes had asserted between the concept of God and that of existence. Therefore in the proposition 'a perfect Being exists', one could not affirm the subject and reject the predicate. However, one could choose not to affirm both the subject and the predicate without contradiction i.e. to reject as a whole the concept of an existing all-perfect Being. Secondly, Kant rejects the assumption that existence is a real predicate (if it were a real and not merely a grammatical predicate, it would be able to form part of the definition of God, and it would therefore be an analytic fact that God exists) on the grounds that propositions asserting existence are always true or false as a matter of fact rather than as a matter of definition. The function of 'is' or 'exists' is not to add to the content of a concept, but to lay down a real object answering to a concept. Thus the real contains no more than the imaginary (a hundred real dollars are the same in number as a hundred imagined ones); the difference is that in one case the concept does, and in the other the object does not correspond to reality.

[61] Anselm too would argue along these lines, for the idea of God he embraces is the point at which thinking necessarily transcends itself and thinks something it is incapable of thinking out any further because the infinite is incapable of being captured in any finite concept.

[62] See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clarke, 1989), Part I. It is, however, difficult to conceive of the possibility of such experiences as Rahner and Anselm point to as being linked to some term in the sense of being experiences 'of' something or 'about' something.

[63] See Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Papers*, I, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 112.

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While he did not furnish a conclusive proof of the necessary existence of God, Anselm's argument shows how the question of the existence of God is one and the same with the question of the intelligibility and coherence of God and with the question of the intelligibility and coherence of reality; in discussing the possibility of such talk, one is discussing the possibility of the existence of God. This is, perhaps, Anselm's greatest achievement in his argument: he demonstrated, albeit inadvertently, how and why the question of the existence of the theist God is also a logical problem, a problem that lies at the heart of man's search for truth.

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