SJT 63(4): 379–397 (2010)
doi:10.1017/S0036930610000475
© Scottish Journal of Theology Ltd 2010

Anselm: Platonism, language and truth in *Proslogion*

Sigurd Baark
Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton NJ 08540, USA
sigurd.baark@ptsem-edu

Abstract

When the *Proslogion* is read from within the context of Anselm's *De Veritate* it seems that Anselm's project is firmly based on theological premises. Anselm works with a two-fold conception of truth. Truth is first of all a quality inherent in the statement itself. It is the correctness (*rectitudo*) of the statement. Second, truth is the correspondence with the extra-linguistic reality. This second level of truth is accidental to the statement. What provides the link between extra-linguistic reality and the statement is the Word of God, which is the level of true reference, where original statements correspond to the original will of God in the creation. When Plato asks what true knowledge is in the *Theatetus*, the final answer seems to be that what is needed is a statement which carries its own truth as a certainty of Being and Unity within itself. However, no such statement is presented in the dialogue. The name of God in the *Proslogion* is such a statement which carries its own truth as a certainty of Being and Unity within itself, in that on the first level of truth (*rectituto*) it is impossible to deny. As the statement concerns the Being of God and cannot be denied it necessarily overflows into the second level of truth which is correspondence with extra-linguistic reality. Therefore, this article argues that Anselm develops a statement which fulfils the criterion of true knowledge presented in the *Theatetus*. He manages to do this from the position of faith, which includes a strict theological rationality.

> 'Why then do you try to "enlarge" your mind? Subtilize it.'
>
> (Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, ch. 74)

It is quite easy to agree with Karl Barth that the 'proof of the existence of God', as put forward by Anselm of Canterbury in his major work, the *Proslogion*, is not based on philosophical aspirations – but on theological premises.[1] The prayer that introduces the book – the longest chapter in the entire book – certainly points in this direction, in that it finishes the first chapter

[1] Here I would like to refer to Bent Flemming Nielsen's *Die Rationalität der Offenbarungsteologi* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1988). His insightful interpretation of Karl Barth's reading of Anselm's *Proslogion* has inspired the following article.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930610000475 Published online by Cambridge University Press

with the following concluding remarks: '*Nam et hoc credo*: *Quia nisi credidero, non intelligam*' (*Pros.* 1). Indeed, it seems quite difficult to oppose the idea that one has to do with a theological thought-procedure, which – with the unique rationality of the theological thought process – seeks to achieve certainty in the truths of faith. As Barth correctly notes: 'There is absolutely no question at all of a requirement of faith. Anselm wants "proof" and "joy" because he wants *intellegere* and he wants *intellegere* because he believes. Any reversal of this order of compulsion is excluded by Anselm's conception of faith.'[2] In so far as Karl Barth's own exegetical method (or general hermeneutics) seeks first and foremost to let the text itself determine his reading, one should be careful not to dismiss Barth's interpretation of Anselm. In the theoretical introduction to the second edition of Barth's commentary on the Letter to the Romans Barth reveals his own exegetical method. It is precisely this method which is used when Barth turns to the *Proslogion*:

> True apprehension can be achieved only by a strict determination to face, as far as possible without rigidity of mind, the tension displayed more or less clearly in the ideas written in the text. Criticism (κρινειν) applied to historical documents means for me the measuring of words and phrases by the standard of that which the documents are speaking – unless indeed the whole be nonsense. . . . Every-thing in the text ought to be interpreted only in the light of what can be said, and therefore only in the light of what is said.[3]

Thus when Anselm introduces his work with a prayer, seeking certainty of knowledge of the thing he already believes, Barth takes Anselm's own proclamation of faith to be the cornerstone in the following train of thought. As Anselm writes: '*Sed desidero aliquatenus intellegere veritatem tuam, quam credit et amat cor meum*' (*Pros.* 1). The perfect tense clearly demonstrates that faith (and love) produces a deep longing for understanding. The starting point is the reality of his faith. The goal is the certainty of understanding. What is most important to Anselm is the wish to fully comprehend the truths of his faith by using the reason inherent in his faith. As Barth writes: 'Fundamentally, the *quaerens intellectum* is really immanent in *fides*.'[4]

Even so, it is necessary to stress that this is not fideism. The *Proslogion* is a work driven by a deeply rational and intellectual understanding of the logic of language. Even if faith is the foundation for certainty of knowledge it is nevertheless a faith which uncompromisingly seeks to understand. It is

[2] Karl Barth, *Anselm: Fides quaerens Intellectum* (London: SCM Press, 1960), p. 16.
[3] Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 8.
[4] Karl Barth, *Anselm: Fides quaerens Intellectum* (London: SCM Press, 1960), p. 16.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930610000475 Published online by Cambridge University Press

this faith seeking knowledge which drives Anselm's thoughts on through the work. As Brian Davies writes in his article on Anselm's ontological proof of the existence of God (after a very short explanation of the views of Barth): 'For all that he says about the importance of faith, however, Anselm manifestly thinks that some religious beliefs, including the belief that God exists, can be defended in what we may recognize as a philosophical manner'.[5] If one does not necessarily choose to understand the word 'defended' as tending towards apologetics one must certainly agree with Brian Davies. The very shape and style of the *Proslogion* is strictly rational and as such it resembles the style of thinking which is predominantly found in philosophical investigations. But if one chooses to maintain that the *Proslogion* is a work of theology and that theology, in its own right, can be rationally stringent there is absolutely no reason to understand the first chapters of the *Proslogion* as determined by a philosophical thought pattern. What is it, then, in this work of Anselm which provokes the idea of a philosophical starting point? Could it perhaps be supposed that this is caused by the stringent rationality, which is found in the sharp and precise linguistic formulae provided by Anselm? Is the reason for this confusion based on the finesse with which Anselm formulates the truth that his heart already believes and loves? If this is the case then the confusion of a work of theology with a philosophical treatise happens within the sphere of thoughts mediated by an intellectual use of language and definitions. This is quite understandable. Language is the natural medium of both philosophy and theology. What separate the two disciplines are their presuppositions – not their medium.

The following is an attempt to understand how Anselm conceives language and truth in order to clarify the foundational presuppositions which determine chapters 1–4 of the *Proslogion*. First it is necessary to understand the premises of Anselm's theology: what were the problems and question which were inherent to the Platonic heritage of which Anselm was a part? Second, one must take a closer look at Anselm's own theory of language and truth. Third and finally, the *Proslogion* chapters 1–4 must be read with the Anselmic understanding of truth and language *in mente*. Hopefully this will clarify some of the important theological steps taken by Anselm, steps taken from within a faith which is earnestly seeking to understand what it already believes and loves.

[5] Brian Davies, 'Anselm and the Ontological Argument', in Brian Davies and Brian Leftow (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Anselm* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 158.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930610000475 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Platonic problems and questions

Anselm is firmly situated in the Western intellectual tradition. If one subtracts his theological foundations from his writings it is obvious that he is deeply influenced by the line of thought proceeding from Plato. Here Anselm was profoundly influenced by Augustine. As Gareth Matthews writes: 'Anselm seems to have used Augustine, not only as a doctrinal authority, but also as a model for his own literary style. R. W. Southern has offered convincing evidence that the very cadences of Anselm's syntax, and not just the conclusions he reaches, give homage to Augustine.'[6] The connection between Augustine and Plato is quite complex but it cannot be doubted that Augustine was profoundly influenced by Plotinus – even if he did not have an extended knowledge of the writings of Plato himself.[7] He nevertheless seems to have identified the views of Plotinus with the views of Plato. This was not uncommon at the time. 'All the Neoplatonists share the same basic conviction, with different nuances, that they would find all the doctrines they professed in Plato's writings, when these are suitably interpreted.'[8] Both Anselm and Augustine proceeded to interpret the question of the Good itself, which is a Platonic problem, in terms of the Christian scriptural tradition. Even so, the basic questions of the Neoplatonists determine the way their answers are conceived. Therefore Matthews can conclude that 'the Platonic stamp' on both Augustine and Anselm 'is difficult to miss'.[9] What can be provisionally concluded is that both Anselm and Augustine belong to the Platonic tradition in so far as they both attempt to deal with the questions and problems present in the heritage of Plato. It is quite important to realise that the answers which are provided by Anselm's own writings might diverge from the answers provided by Plato himself, but that he nevertheless considered Platonic problems to be quite real and important problems which remained to be solved.

The general conception of Plato's philosophy has changed much within the last thirty years since the ground-breaking work, *Plato and the Foundations of Metaphysics*, by Hans Joachim Krämer. It is quite impossible to understand the philosophy of Plato without considering the *Unwritten Doctrines* and the central regulative idea of 'The Principles'. *The Unwritten Doctrines* have as their central concepts the principles of Unity and Multiplicity, 'beyond which a

[6] Gareth Matthews, 'Anselm Augustine, and Platonism', ibid., p. 62.

[7] Karl Jaspers, *Plato and Augustine* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1962), p. 69.

[8] Giovanni Reale, *Toward a New Interpretation of Plato* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1997), p. 33.

[9] Gareth Matthews, 'Anselm, Augustine, and Platonism', in Brian Davies and Brian Leftow (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Anselm* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 82.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930610000475 Published online by Cambridge University Press

problem cannot be posed'.[10] Being as such is thus Unity within Multiplicity understood as the limitation and determination of the material principle by the formal principle. Even so, the principles themselves are beyond Being. This means that the principle of Unity is intimately connected to the possibility of knowledge as it is the formal and intelligible principle, which makes any coherent concept possible. In the writings of Plato as well as in the *Unwritten Doctrines* the 'Good itself' is an all-important concept. Any understanding of Plato must therefore take this concept into account. The axiological significance of the Theory of Principles is that the Good is connected to the Principle of Unity insofar as it makes possible the order of knowledge. As Krämer writes in his interpretation of *The Republic* in light of the *Unwritten Doctrines*:

> The Good itself, hence, acts as the foundation and the source of order (that is, of unity in multiplicity!) as well as of unity. It is easy to understand, therefore, that the *essence* (*τι εστιν*) *of the Good*, which Plato, in the *Republic* abstains from revealing, *consists in unity itself*.[11]

It is clear that the primary concern of Plato is the coherent unity, which makes knowledge and order (intelligible Being) possible. Knowledge, Being and Unity are thus intimately connected in relation to the Good and to the *Unwritten Doctrines*.

Turning from the *Unwritten Doctrines* to the written works of Plato one can now find a deeper level of coherence in the dialogues. The impasse of the Platonic *aporia* which is found in many of the dialogues now serves as less of a puzzle. It is not only a consequence of Plato's unwillingness to disclose his entire philosophy in written form – it also serves the functions of regulative idea and as finger pointing towards the true answers contained in the *Unwritten Doctrine*, which can only be revealed as 'true questions' in the dialogues.[12] When it comes to finding a dialogue which ends in *aporia* – and thus points towards the true questions – then, perhaps, there is no work better suited than the *Theatetus*. In the *Theatetus* the central concern is the question of how true knowledge is obtained (or, put differently, what is true cognition)? The final definition of true knowledge, which is given by Theatetus himself, is 'true opinion accompanied by an explanation' (*alethes doxa meta logou*, 201c). Or, in other words: a true proposition accompanied by a stringent linguistic

[10] Hans Joachim Krämer, *Plato and the Foundations of Metaphysics* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990), p. 77.

[11] Ibid., p. 98.

[12] See Jakob Leth Fink, *Apori og fornuftskritik hos Platon* (SLAGMARK–tidsskrift for idéhistorie; Gylling: Narayana Press, 2006).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930610000475 Published online by Cambridge University Press

mediation, which is congruent with the proposition. This corresponds to the supposition that *logos* (the explanation or rationality of the statement) is the elements of the explanation brought together in a certain way (202b). The multiplicity of elements are brought together in a coherent Unity, which produces both knowledge and Being as knowledge and Being is the result of the formal Unity of the multiplicity. As Socrates himself says: 'Elements cannot be explained and cannot be known, even though they can be sensed; compositions, on the other hand, can be known and explained and are the object of true opinion' (202b).

Even if the question of true knowledge is never completely solved in the *Theatetus* the dialogue certainly points towards the answer that true knowledge is connected to the proper coherent unity of the elements of language, which is the form of true statements. The problem faced in the *Theatetus* is that a coherent unity is also possible for mere opinion (*doxa*) and not just for true statements. In this sense the true statement, which produces knowledge, is the correct unity of multiple elements, *which discloses its Being as truth in relation to its form*. The question seems to be if there exists a 'thinking' or a 'language', which not only transfers meaning, but already 'in itself' reproduces or presents Being in the sense that the conceptual distinctions correspond to differences in Being and thus makes the world intelligible.[13] The concluding *aporia* of Theatetus is a result of the lack of such statements. What should be obvious is that the *Theatetus* points towards the *Unwritten Doctrine* and the Principles of Multiplicity and Unity in its understanding of language and propositions. It ends up by presenting the outline of the criteria necessary for having true knowledge. This true knowledge is dependent upon the Principles and thus works within the system of Plato – but the true form of such a statement is never given in the dialogue. True knowledge thus remains outside the grasp of the *Theatetus*, but is nevertheless presented as the outline of the solution to the *aporia*.

The question is whether Anselm's *Proslogion* – when read within the context of his *De Veritate* – actually manages to produce just such a statement? Or differently, is the *Proslogion* a work which understands itself as standing in the tradition of Platonic thought in that it seeks to answer the epistemological questions outlined by Plato? In so far as the first chapters of *Proslogion* actually manage to produce a statement of the type outlined in the *Theatetus* then it certainly fits within the tradition of Platonic thought. In order to decide this it is necessary to focus on Anselm's understanding of language and truth before turning to the *Proslogion* itself.

[13] Jørgen Hass, '*Hvad ved vi om viden?*', in *Theatetus* (Museum Tusculanums Forlag; Copenhagen: Københavns Universitet, 2007), p. 179.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930610000475 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Truth and true statements in *De Veritate*

Before turning to the *Proslogion* it is important to look briefly at the way Anselm understands language. The dialogue *De Grammatico* deals explicitly with Anselm's philosophy of language, as do several passages from *De Veritate*. What will be attempted here is a quick look at Anselm's semantics and a more thorough analysis of his understanding of truth as it is presented in *De Veritate*. The objective is to reach a deeper understanding of how Anselm understands his own argument from *Proslogion* 1–4, where the name of God (*aliquid quo maius nihil cogitari potest*) takes the form of a statement, which forces the thinker's thought into a logical and semantically necessary space. The *Proslogion* thus combines Anselm's thoughts on 'names' and on 'true statements'.

When it comes to language Anselm is profoundly influenced by Augustine. As Gareth Matthews pointed out, this even shows in Anselm's syntax.[14] Peter King writes: 'Anselm subscribes to the Augustinian view of language as a system of *signs*.'[15] As is well known, the Augustinian understanding of signs covers utterances, inscriptions and even phenomena such as smoke, which indicates a fire. The first explicit examples of a distinction between 'signifier' and 'signified' is found in Augustine, who uses the terms *signans* and *signatum* to indicate the relation between signs and what these signs signify.[16] The essence of the sign is its referential function – the fact that it signifies another entity. In short, the sign carries within it both its relationship of reference to the signified and the connection of this reference with the referred entity. The relation of reference is what one might refer to as the *meaning* of the sign. This is the founding premise of Anselm's philosophy of language. From these basic suppositions the system becomes increasingly complex.

Anselm operates with three fundamental types of sign: (a) the sensible sign (sign which can be perceived by the senses including spoken and written language); (b) the mental conception of sensible signs (the imaginary form of letters or sound of the spoken word); (c) the non-sensible signs (concepts or immediate mental images of an imagined object or relation).[17] 'Anselm clearly thinks that (a) and (c) count as languages and he treats them as such; he explicitly calls the linguistic elements of each "words" no matter whether they are spoken, written or thought.'[18] The sign signifies in so far as it produces an understanding of the signified. Here one might point

[14] See n. 5.

[15] Peter King, 'Anselm's Philosophy of Language', in Brian Davies and Brian Leftow (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Anselm* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 85.

[16] Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics: The Basics* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), p. 34.

[17] King, 'Anselm's Philosophy of Language', p. 85.

[18] Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930610000475 Published online by Cambridge University Press

out a parallel to Plato's definition from *Theatetus*, where true knowledge is proposition accompanied by a sufficient explanation. Signification is a true signification if it is accompanied with an understanding of the signified. The question is whether the sign or statement signifies correctly? The sign stands in a more or less causal relationship to the understanding produced by the sign – the important element being the understanding produced. This is certainly the case when it comes to (a) and (b). But (c) is rather to be understood as direct understanding. 'Hence conventional languages are parasitic on the natural and universal language of thought.'[19] This means that Anselm distinguishes between two types of thought, or two types of understanding. The first type is the understanding mediated through the causal relation of the sign and the second is direct understanding. According to Peter King, Anselm solves the problem in the following way:

> He distinguishes between two ways in which we think about things: (a) through mental images, especially fitting when the thing in question is physical object; (b) through a 'rational conception', such as when we think of humans as 'rational mortal animals'. In both cases, Anselm says that the thought is a 'likeness' (*similitudo*) of that thing.[20]

The problem that appears with this solution is that the direct connection between the idea of the entity and the words (or signs) does not let itself be grasped within this distinction. This is why Anselm proposes the regulative idea of the Divine Word, which is the creator of everything, as the direct connection between the thinking and the sign. This entails that language group (c) is beyond the reach of the human mind. What Anselm does is to place the Divine Word at the exact same place where Plato leaves the reader in a state of *aporia* in the *Theatetus*. True knowledge is dependent on the Divine Word. The sensible sign and the mental understanding of the sensible sign works as instruments for the true understanding (or true knowledge) – the direct connection between the signifier and the signified. What is at stake is the difference between the thing thought and the reference of the sign. Anselm is perfectly aware that it quite seldom is the signs themselves (the words, letters or syllables) which are thought of when a certain entity is imagined:

> Instead, thinking of something is a matter of having that very thing in mind – Anselm encourages us to speak of the things as 'existing in the understanding' – and hence is nonrepresentational. Yet to get something

[19] Ibid., p. 86.
[20] Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930610000475 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> into the mind, that is, to think of it at all, we use a variety of more or less accurate means, ranging from mental images to rational conceptions.[21]

The 'means' are, among others, Anselm's theory of names and his understanding of true statements as they are developed in *De Veritate*.

For Anselm names are simple references. The name 'Karl Barth' refers to Karl Barth when it brings a mental conception of Karl Barth to mind. Karl Barth can thus be said to exist in the understanding in so far as the name brings an idea of Karl Barth to mind. It does not necessarily follow that Karl Barth exists in reality. Anselm is quite clear on this issue. He writes in the *Proslogion*: '*Aliud enim est rem esse in intellectu, aliud intellegere rem esse*' (*Pros.* 2). One problem which remains is that of concepts such as 'evil' or 'nothing', which are names that denote non-entities. According to Anselm these concepts only exist on a theoretical level and cannot be said to exist in reality. It is possible to speak about 'nothing' or 'evil' but these concepts have no reality of their own. They cannot be related to the Divine Word, which is the criterion for the truth of a concept. This leads to Anselm's theory on the relationship between names and actual reality. The difference between the signs and the direct connection between the mental image and the imagined entity is related to the difference between a word when it refers to God and the same word when it refers to the world. The words 'good' or 'loving' change their meaning when they refer to God and are thus totally different from when they refer to, say, a cat or a human. Whatever words are used to describe humans do so in an incomplete manner when compared to the way these predicates gain a deeper meaning when they refer to God. In the *Monologion* 17 Anselm writes:

> *Cum enim aliquis homo dicatur et corpus et rationalis et homo, non uno modo vel consideratione hæc tria dicitur. Secundum aliud enim est corpus, et secundum aliud rationalis, et singulum horum non est totum hoc quod est homo. Illa vero summa essentia nullo modo sic est aliquid, ut illud idem secundum alium modum aut secundum aliam considerationem non sit; quia quidquid aliquo modo essentialiter est, hoc est totum quod ipsa est.*

This obviously entails that words used about God have an equivocal relationship to the conceptual understanding of man as it is impossible to be sure of what the concept actually denotes in its divine use. As Peter King writes: 'Now the semantics underlying this process are not entirely clear, but we can take it as a reflection on how we are not always completely aware of the boundaries of our concepts with which we think about things.'[22]

[21] Ibid., p. 87.
[22] Ibid., p. 96.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930610000475 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The problem with the view of Peter King is that he analyses Anselm's understanding of language philosophically and not theologically. If one looks at it from a theological perspective then it is a case of a subordination of all language under the autonomous Word of God, which acts as the guarantee of true meaning. In *De Veritate* Anselm refers to this supreme Truth as *De Summa Veritate* (*DV* 10), which is the ultimate level of correctness (*rectitudo*) attributed primarily to God as the *eternal truth*. This expression corresponds to his term for God in the *Monologion*, which is *Summa Essentia*, and to the *Summum Bonum* ('quod est ipsa aeternitatis') in *Epistola De Incarnatione Verbi* 15.[23]

With this in mind it is now time to turn to the problem of how Anselm analyses statements. For Anselm, even the name of God (*aliquid quo maium nihil cogitari potest*) can be viewed as a statement. It can thus be interpreted in the same way as Anselm interprets other statements – even if it is much more potent than ordinary statements.

The first thing which strikes the reader of *De Veritate* is Anselm's peculiar understanding of the truth of a proposition. What Anselm does is to distinguish between two different ways in which a sentence can be true. The obvious truth of a proposition rests in its correspondence with objective reality. In the words of the student in *De Veritate*: '*Nihil aliud scio nisi quia cum significat esse quod est, tunc est in ea veritas et est vera*' (*DV* 2). Anselm's reply is that this is certainly correct, but that there is another truth-dimension within statements. In the words of the person of the Teacher in *De Veritate* 2:

> *Non enim accepit significare esse rem cum non est, vel non esse cum est, nisi quia non potuit illidari tunc solummodo significare esse quando est, vel non esse quando non est. Alia igitur est rectitudo et veritas enuntiationis, quia significat as quod significandum facta est; alia vero, quia significat quod accepit significare. Quippe ista immutabilis est ipsi orationi, illa vero mutabilis. Hanc namque semper habet, illam vero non semper.*

Anselm perceives statements to have a *natural* truth, which is the inherent truth of the statement no matter what objective reality might look like.

> By 'natural' he means something so constitutive of a thing that it cannot be lost without the thing which has this nature also ceasing to exist. Hence, a combination of words which has no natural truth of signification (i.e. has

[23] One might note that '*non est possible naturam aeternitatis pluralitatem admittere*' (*EDIV*, ch. 15), which again points to the absolute principle of Unity and its connection with intelligibility, which is constantly at work within the Platonic tradition. As Anselm notes: '*Aeternitates autem plures intelligi nequeunt*' (*EDIV*, ch. 15).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930610000475 Published online by Cambridge University Press

no meaning) is not really a proposition, since it lacks what is constitutive of every proposition.[24]

As Peter King comments: 'Truth for Anselm, is a normative notion: something is true when it is as it ought to be. Thus truth is in the end a matter of correctness (*rectitudo*), the correctness appropriate in each instance.'[25] This means that truth is an inherent property or quality of a proposition. Anselm's view thus breaks with the modern notion of philosophical realism. The correspondence between the proposition or statement and objective reality is not the primary criterion of truth for Anselm. Instead, for Anselm, 'the truth of a statement consists in its doing what statements should do, namely, signify the world the way it is for affirmations; *mutatis mutandis* for denials'.[26] To describe the relationship between these two different conceptions of the truth of statements one might explain it in this way. The first, or natural, level of truth in any statement is captured in the relationship inherent in the statement or proposition (does the statement 'water is wet' actually have the correct sense or meaning, which should present the supposition that water is wet). Besides this there is the second or accidental level of truth of a statement, which is constituted by the statement's actual relation to the objective reality, where it is possible to test whether or not water actually is wet. 'Truth of reference belongs to a proposition accidentally rather than naturally.'[27]

Even if the second definition of the truth of statements seems intuitively more in accord with the modern understanding of truth, Anselm nevertheless maintains that the first definition of the truth of a statement also must be counted as true. 'Truth does not consist in correspondence, even if it depends on it; truth consists in correctness, and as such is a property of tokened sentences.'[28] If one returns to Anselm's distinction between the immediate form of the statements (the sensible signs and the understanding they produce in the mind) and the real meaning, which the sentences participate in when they refer directly to their object (the pure relation between signifier and signified), it is clear that it is the same problem which presents itself again. What the human understanding must hold as a provisional truth is the internal relationship between the elements in a statement. The next step to the true meaning of the statement lies with the Word of God and is

[24] Jasper Hopkins and Herbert Richardson, *Truth, Freedom, and Evil: Three Philosophical Dialogues* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1967), p. 14.
[25] King, 'Anselm's Philosophy of Language', p. 101.
[26] Ibid., p. 102.
[27] Hopkins and Richardson, *Truth, Freedom, and Evil*, p. 14.
[28] King, 'Anselm's Philosophy of Language', p. 103.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930610000475 Published online by Cambridge University Press

not directly accessible to man. The human statements carry within them a constant insecurity as it is impossible to know the proper reference of our statements. This places Anselm within the Platonic *aporia* of *Theatetus*. The coherence of the elements of a statement gives a certain knowledge – but in order to gain certain or true knowledge it is necessary to find a statement which carries its own being within itself and thus is irrefutable in that it must refer directly to its own being and truth. Is there a statement which carries within it its own irrefutable existence? Anselm has hinted at the direction of his own answer by placing the Word of God as the criterion for any such statement. It is a question of faith. Anselm believes that the Word of God is the all-important principle, which sustains all other statements. Anselm assumes, through his faith, that the Word of God is the foundational premise for any true knowledge.

It is at this point that *Proslogion* 1–4 becomes crucial. Here Anselm presents a statement which actually affirms its own being and is able to contain the impossibility of its own negation within itself. The statement is only possible in so far as Anselm's theory of language presupposes the reality of the Word of God, through a faith that seeks understanding.

Intermezzo: Russell and existence

Before moving on to the first four chapters of *Proslogion* it is important to take a look at the main arguments against the ontological proof of the existence of God. Most famously the proof was disputed by Gaunilo, Aquinas and Kant. Nevertheless, this short intermezzo will mainly concern a more modern linguistic critique – namely, the views of Bertrand Russell as they are put forth in his paper on 'General Propositions and Existence'. Russell's point about the existence of an entity as proposed in a proposition is the following. A proposition can be true or false – independently of existence. 'If it happened that there were no Greeks, both the proposition that "All Greeks are men" and the proposition that "No Greeks are men" would be true.'[29] Propositional functions, on the other hand, are distinguished from propositions by the fact that they demand empirical proof in order to be verified because they deal with the *possibility* of their reality. Truth is thus an accidental value when one is dealing with propositional functions. 'Take "*x* is a man". There is at least one value of *x* for which this is true. That is what one means by saying "There are men", or that "Men exist". Existence is essentially a property of a propositional function. It means that that propositional function is true in at least one

[29] Bertrand Russell, 'General Propositions and Existence', from *The Many-Faced Argument*, ed. John Hick and Arthur C. McGill (New York: Macmillan Co., 1967), p. 220.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930610000475 Published online by Cambridge University Press

instance.'[30] That 'one instance' must then be verified because it is essentially a possibility stated implicitly within the sentence. Existence is thus to be found outside the inner workings of the sentence or propositional function.

How does this compare with the thoughts of Anselm? As was demonstrated, Anselm believes that there are two different levels of truth in any proposition or statement. There is the stringent logic or sense within the statement – does the statement correctly do what it should, namely, attempt to say something about something else? This level of truth is completely independent of actual reality. It merely concerns the statement's own inner structure. The second level of truth is accidental and concerns the way the statement corresponds to reality. This is clearly considered by Anselm to be accidental and to be found within the realm of possibility. Here Anselm is more or less in agreement with Russell's interpretation of propositional functions, even if he never explicitly considers the difference between propositions and propositional functions. The main difference between the two is that the second level of truth is dependent on the reality of the Word of God, which is the connection between the statement and the created reality. Russell seems to assume that empirical reality is able to confirm or deny our propositional functions. Anselm is more sceptical about this and considers such an assumption as an expression of faith in the Word of God, which is the guarantee of objective reality.

Thus there are two differences between Russell and Anselm. Anselm sees no difference between propositions and propositional functions because his first notion of truth has to do with the inherent rationality and structure of the statement or proposition. Does the statement correspond with its own purpose of being a correct statement in that it is understandable? This is Anselm's first concern. Second, Russell was deeply influenced by the tradition of English empiricism. Empirical reality is the condition on which a sentence is declared true or false. Russell thus remains an empirical realist in that he presupposes the correspondence of reality with the understanding produced by true propositional functions. Anselm is more sceptical of the correspondence of sentences with empirical reality and affirms faith as the connection between language and reality. Of these two differences the second difference seems to be the more fundamental as one could claim that the first difference is connected to Anselm's sceptical attitude towards philosophical realism.

Proslogion 1–4

The *Proslogion* has a specific understanding of language at its core. This is evident from the definition Anselm gives of his quest for knowledge in

[30] Ibid., p. 223.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930610000475 Published online by Cambridge University Press

chapter 1: '*Deinde quibus signis, qua facie te quæram*' (*Pros.* 1). The question is what *signs* (signifiers) can be used to give or transmit to Anselm the understanding that his faith seeks. Anselm's own answer is found in the second chapter. It is the formula, which Karl Barth called the 'name of God' in *Proslogion*, namely: '*Aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari possit*' (*Pros.* 2).[31] This formula necessitates a specific understanding of God's reality. 'Wherever Anselm got his formula from, however, it is clear that he does not construe it as taking God to be something than which nothing, in fact, is greater. Anselm is saying that nothing could *conceivably* be greater than God, that to claim that something might be greater than God is to assert what is intrinsically absurd.'[32] The Fool (*insipiens*) is forced into a certain understanding of God through the linguistic construction of the formula of the being of God. He (*insipiens*) understands what he hears when Anselm says that God is the one above whom nothing greater can be conceived. Through these formulas it is clear that one is placed within the domain of language. What matters are the signs which are perceived and understood by the Fool as they correctly formulate a stringent rational statement. As was demonstrated earlier, this is precisely Anselm's first criterion of truth. The statement does what it is supposed to do when it – in itself – produces a clear and precise understanding: '*Quod intellegit in intellectu eius est, etiam si non intellegat illud esse*' (*Pros.* 2). The statement (the Name of God) is thus true according to Anselm's first understanding of truth. The next sentence of great importance is, unfortunately, slightly ambiguous: '*Si enim vel in solo intellectu est, potest cogitari esse et in re, quod maius est*' (*Pros.* 2). This sentence can be interpreted in two ways. Either Anselm is saying that it is better (greater) to exist in reality than it is to exist in the understanding; or he is saying that it is possible to imagine something, which is greater than that which only exists in the understanding. 'It is, however, worth noting that, when elaborating on the reasoning of *Proslogion* 2 in another work, Anselm does not stress the idea that it is better to be *in re* than to be only *in intellectu*. Instead, he explains how it can be thought that there is something greater than something that is only in the mind.'[33] The problem is thus whether it is possible to *think* of or *form a mental concept* of something, which is greater than what only exists in the understanding. This must then be understood from within Anselm's theory of language. The understanding, which is in the mind, is certainly true in Anselm's sense and should not be downgraded. Anselm's point is that there is a further truth level, which might also correspond to the statement, which is the *accidental* possibility of

[31] Barth, *Anselm: Fides quarens Intellectum*, p. 73.
[32] Davies, 'Anselm and the Ontological Argument', p. 159.
[33] Ibid., p. 161.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930610000475 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the statement having extra-linguistic reality. This is a further expansion of the truth of the statement in that it is an extra qualification of the statement that it is able to correspond to what it seeks to signify. What Anselm is saying is that the statement 'God is that above which nothing greater can be conceived' is an exceptional statement in that it actually necessitates that *both truth criteria are fulfilled*, in that it is *unthinkable* that the statement – on both levels of truth – is untrue. The first level of truth necessarily overflows and spills into the other level of truth. The Fool is forced by the intra-linguistic truth of the statement to accept the other level of truth and admit that God exists *in re*.

How does Anselm manage to demonstrate this? What he does is return to the first understanding of truth as the strictly linguistic and rational necessity. Chapter 3 expands on the impossibility of rationally formulating a mental concept – or structuring a coherent sentence – that produces a concept, which would be greater than that above which nothing greater can be thought. To formulate such a statement or sentence would be completely prohibited by Anselm's understanding of truth. It could never live up to the first criterion of truth, which is the rational form of the statement. The first level of truth would be impossible for such a statement, which naturally rules out the possibility of such a statement having the second level of truth. As Anselm writes: '*Quare si id quo maius nequit cogitari, potest cogitari non esse: id ipsum quo maius cogitari nequit, non est id quo maius cogitari nequit; quod convenire non potest*' (*Pros.* 3). The negation of the statement that God is that above which nothing greater can be conceived is thus ruled out. It is only possible to affirm the statement, which fulfils the truth criteria set up by Anselm. One is thus left with Anselm's conclusion from chapter 4: '*Aliter enim cogitatur res cum vox eam significans cogitatur, aliter cum ipsum quod res est intellegitur*'. The importance of this sentence once again leads back to Anselm's theory of language. The words of the statement seem intuitively to be correct and can thus be thought but this does not entail that the immediate relation to the understanding is guaranteed. The direct connection between the words and what they signify is only given at the moment when it is realised that God exists when he is described as the one above which nothing greater can be conceives, as God is the connection that guarantees the reality of the reference. '*Nullus quippe intelligens id quod deus est, potest cogitare quia deus non est, licet hæc verba dicat in corde, aut sine ulla aut cum aliqia extranea significatione*' (*Pros.* 4). This certainly only goes for the exceptional existence of God, which is capable of securing the merging of the two levels of truth as understood by Anselm. '*Et quidem quidquid est aliud præter te solum, potest cogitari non esse*' (*Pros.* 3). Anselm, of course, realises that it is quite possible to say that God does not exist, but he maintains that such statements are to be found on

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930610000475 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the lowest level of language, which is just a collection of words devoid of any truth-value. Anselm understood the direct reference (the direct conception of the thing signified) as being far beyond the reach of the spoken or written word, even if it could also be classified as language. One might say that it is this level of language that Anselm has reached through his proof in the *Proslogion*. It is precisely the denial of the existence of God that is found at the most superficial level of language, which has absolutely no connection to the two truth levels that Anselm shows to be merging in the Name of God. The denial is quite meaningless.

The truly interesting perspective is that Anselm's position still maintains a certain level of ambiguity – an ambiguity that can only be subsumed through faith. Anselm found that when ordinary names were used with reference to God it was impossible to be sure if they maintained their usual meaning. Indeed one had to assume the exact opposite. Probably the meaning of the words would shift to a considerable degree when used about God as they would then assume their original meaning. This original meaning is nevertheless hidden from the ordinary human use of language. The goodness of God is thus the true and eternally real goodness whereas humans only have a provisional access to this proper level of understanding. When Anselm writes in chapter 1 that he does not seek to enter the majesty of God ('*Non tento, domine, penetrare altitudinem tuam . . .*') because his understanding would be unable to comprehend this level of truth, but that he only wishes to gain an understanding of the truth of God, then this is to be understood as a guideline for the rest of his investigation. This means that there is no part of *Proslogion* that provides an unambiguously positive understanding of God's being. It is rather a question of the certainty of understanding the impossibility of thinking God as non-existent if one actually believes. At the same time, the understanding is assured through the statement that God is the one above whom nothing greater can be conceived that the propositions derived from faith in God must be true. This means that the uncertainty which accompanies all uses of language finds a new level of certainty in so far as one lives through faith in God in the form of the Name of God as revealed in the *Proslogion*. The statement entails the affirmation of its own reality – both in Anselm's intra-linguistic sense and in 'reality', which were the two different levels of truth operating in Anselm's theory of language. This makes perfect sense in that Anselm understands truth to be definitively subsumed in the being of God. Anselm's theory of language makes it possible for the reader of Anselm to recognise the truth of the following statement: 'Something has rectitude because it accords with its purpose. Something receives its purpose from whatever caused it. God causes all things. So whatever is said to be true is true in virtue of being caused by God in accordance with His will, and God

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930610000475 Published online by Cambridge University Press

is truth because He caused all things and establishes the standards by which they are to be evaluated.'[34] This quote also demonstrates that, ultimately, the truth of the statement 'God is the one above which nothing greater can be conceived' rests with God himself. This is why faith is the decisive premise for Anselm's proof of the reality of God's being. Still, faith in the reality of God through the inherent rationality of language and statements makes it possible to understand the truth of God, which cannot be said to be unreal as language opposes the negation of God's being.

Conclusion

Anselm's *Proslogion* is undoubtedly a theological masterpiece. Since its inception in 1077 it has fascinated a number of significant thinkers. Discussions concerning the premises of the text – is it based on theology or philosophy? – are still ongoing and no definitive solution has yet been presented. This article has attempted to demonstrate that a strictly theological interpretation of Anselm's thoughts is very plausible. Anselm operates with the theological presupposition that the Word of God and God's being is merged in such a way that true understanding and knowledge is conditioned by the axioms presented by faith. The confusion with philosophy appears because Anselm operates with a strict sense of rationality and uses this in a sophisticated combination with a specific theory of language. It is this focus on the power of language that allows Anselm to stand side by side with the greatest of philosophers when it comes to thoroughness of his attempt to demonstrate how certain knowledge can be attained.

It is precisely the question of how to reach a position of certain knowledge – a question that has accompanied all philosophical investigations since Plato's *Theatetus* – that Anselm attempts to answer from within theology. In the *Theatetus* Plato asked the question: how can true knowledge be attained? Can certainty of knowledge be reached? Can we find statements that have as an inherent property a certain affirmation of the correctness of the statement in such a way that it can be called true knowledge? A statement that cannot be doubted but forces one to accept its truth no matter what? In the *Theatetus* one is faced with an *aporia*. No definite answer is given. The outline of a possible answer would be that a true statement, which produces knowledge, is the correct unity of multiple elements, *which discloses its Being as truth in relation to its form*. The question seems to be, whether there exists a 'thinking' or a 'language' which not only transfers meaning, but already 'in itself'

[34] Sandra Visser and Thomas Williams, 'Anselm on Truth', in Brian Davies and Brian Leftow (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Anselm* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 219.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930610000475 Published online by Cambridge University Press

reproduces or presents Being in the sense that the conceptual distinctions correspond to differences in Being and thus make the world intelligible. Even if Plato does not provide the answer he certainly manages to demonstrate the urgency and importance of the question. Anselm provides the answer. The Name of God in *Proslogion* is such a statement that carries within it the necessity of its own truth. The inherent logic of the statement necessitates that the first level of truth operating in Anselm's theory of language is fulfilled. According to Anselm the statement is true.

On the other hand, a negation of the statement is completely impossible according to Anselm's theory. It is simply impossible to negate the existence of God if one assumes God to be identical to the Name of God in *Proslogion*. By demonstrating the impossibility of its negation the truth of the statement is secured. As it assumes God to be the guarantee of true knowledge and certainty and also is a statement about God which provides a direct recognition of its own truth, Anselm is forced to affirm the existence of God. Everything else is impossible. The truth of the statement transcends the first level of truth by being based on theological premises in that it accepts the idea of God as guarantee of direct understanding.

It is here that Anselm differs significantly from Russell. Russell would never consider existence to be a property of statements. Generally, neither would Anselm. Here they both agree. Russell would consider reality to be capable of vindicating the truth claims of propositional functions. Anselm would deny that this could be described as certain in any way. There is no guarantee that reality in any way corresponds with language or has the capacity to vindicate truth claims. This rests on faith. Russell assumes this to be the case. Anselm does not – at least not directly. The faith which Anselm has in the Word of God as the guarantee of truth claims is affirmed in the impossibility of denying the truth of the truth claims of faith. Existence is thus not a predicate of statements in general, but it is a property of the Name of God in *Proslogion* in so far as the Word of God makes it true. As this is assumed in faith – it is certain. What Russell misses is that epistemological certainty is solely a property of faith. It is this sophisticated move that makes Anselm's thoughts strangely immune to Russell's criticism – but, in turn, makes Russell vulnerable to the *aporia* of Plato.

What Anselm demonstrates is thus several things. First of all, he shows that faith is a foundational premise for certain knowledge. It is faith that lies at the foundation of his demonstration in *Proslogion*. It is only through the assumption of the axioms of faith that a statement that carries with it its own truth and reality is made possible. Second, he shows that theology finds itself to be intimately tied to language and linguistic problems. By demonstrating that faith operates within this space Anselm can disclose the inner rationality

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930610000475 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of faith. There can be no doubt that faith finds itself on exactly the same intellectually congruent level as philosophy. When the linguistic formulas for the axioms of faith have been produced, reason guides the thinker through the same movements of thought that philosophy navigates through. Third, Anselm actually attempts to answer the ultimate philosophical questions of epistemology – and he manages to succeed. *Proslogion* is not 'just' a document about the existence of God. It is about certainty of understanding and true knowledge. Is it possible to have certain knowledge? The surprising result of Anselm's *Proslogion* is that we can and that this certainty of knowledge is found within the sphere of faith. Certain knowledge rests in God. There can be no doubt that Anselm of Canterbury is one of the great thinkers of Western intellectual history. Nor can there be any doubt that as a theologian he surpasses many and one can only agree with Karl Barth that theology is to be learned at the feet of Anselm of Canterbury. That a theologian has been able to answer the ultimate epistemological questions in such an elegant way is something that can only produce the most profound pride in any believer. That he furthermore did this within the premises of theology and in less than six pages is a testimony to the beauty and simplicity of the rationality of theology. All of it was due to the faith that steadfastly and lovingly seeks understanding.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930610000475 Published online by Cambridge University Press