

On the Effects of Anselm's Personal Faith on the Ontological Argument

In this essay, I will argue that Anselm's ontological argument was created as a result of his personal faith in god, a thing made clear when we consider his use of the phrase "faith seeking understanding". To establish this, I will provide a simple explanation of the ontological argument. I will then parse the concept of personal faith into at least two of its constituent elements, and attempt to establish in what the phrase faith seeking understanding demonstrates the importance of personal faith in the ontological argument.

Anselm's ontological argument sets out to prove the existence of God by way of a *reductio ad absurdum* argument. It works like this. God is explained as "something than which nothing greater can be thought." (7). This is a being so great, no being can be thought to be greater. Anselm posits that whatever is understood in the mind, also exists in the mind. In that case, by understanding the concept of a being so great no being can be thought to be greater, it follows that this being exists in the mind. But existing in reality is greater than existing in the mind alone. If this being existed only in the mind then it would be possible to think of a being greater than it, namely that being which exists in reality too. And this is a contradiction. Therefore, this being exists in reality and this being is God.

While the ontological argument attempts to prove the existence of God, it is crucial to remember that Anselm already believes God exists. By the time he wrote the *Proslogion*, Anselm was well established in the ranks of the Benedictine order. Whether Anselm himself believes in God is not in question, a fact made clear in the prologue to the *Proslogion* where he describes the idea for the ontological argument as an argument "that would by itself be enough to show that God really exists". (2). In other words, in deciding to create the ontological argument, Anselm uses the knowledge that God exists as a starting point. To identify why Anselm considers it important enough to create a proof for what he already believes to be true, remarks must be made on what personal faith is, and if we may borrow a phrase from Thomas

Williams's introduction to his translation of the Proslogion, what testimonial faith is, and how we might distinguish the two.

I posit that personal faith is grounded in self-reflection and intuition. Self-reflection is the act of privately examining information in order that one may gain a deeper understanding of what that information says about a given subject. Furthermore, it is the act of developing an opinion on how one relates to that subject. Intuition is the metric by which one judges the merits of what self-reflection reveals. It follows that personal faith is inescapably grounded in subjectivity. That said, personal faith does not exist in a vacuum, and for better or worse, it is colored by one's experience. In Anselm's case, church doctrine and scripture play that role. These form the basis for testimonial faith. Although seemingly disparate manifestations of faith, personal faith and testimonial faith do not stand in opposition to one another as might seem to be the case. On the contrary, when taken together they add dimension and richness to the overall quality of faith, by providing different means by which one may examine and relate to their faith.

However, it is noteworthy that personal faith, or more precisely the resources of self-reflection and intuition afforded personal faith, carry natural limitations. Self-reflection and intuition will at best, provide confirmation that God exists but little do they provide an explanation as to how God exists. Personal faith is simply not calibrated to handle details and minutia. When one desires an explanation as to how God exists one needs to call on other resources. In that case we can finally understand personal faith as a dialogue conducted within the privacy of one's heart, which employs the inner resources of self-reflection and intuition. These create an effect that allows one to confirm the veracity of their suspicions about reality in broad-strokes. In Anselm's case, this is the confirmation of what church doctrine and scripture report are true, that God exists.

If personal faith is reliant upon self-reflection and intuition, the key to understanding how Anselm's personal faith plays a role in developing the ontological argument is by considering his

use of the phrase faith seeking understanding. He comments in the prologue to the Proslogion, faith seeking understanding was the originally intended title for the Proslogion. In the same prologue, Anselm elaborates on what faith seeking understanding means by describing himself as “adopting the role of someone trying to raise his mind to the contemplation of God and seeking to understand what he believes” (2). As already noted, Anselm doesn’t need convincing God exists, and that is not what the ontological argument is intended to do. Although it is true Anselm ultimately has an audience in mind he would like to reach, to me, this reachout seems to be an afterthought. Again, the key is the phrase faith seeking understanding which reveals the ontological argument to be an exercise in augmenting Anselm’s beliefs with intellectual clarification. This is Anselm’s chosen means to shore up the natural limitations of his personal faith, by clarifying the grounds on which he believes God to exist through the device of logic.

By contrast, it might have been adequate to simply fall back on testimonial faith to augment his personal faith with any necessary explanations as to why God exists. Anselm has a strong sense of testimonial faith too, but he it would seem his reliance upon it stops at using it to explain what God is. In that case, he must again turn to other resources to provide the details of how God exists. Those other resources turn out to be his human brain and the result is the ontological argument. We might even draw sharply defined contrasts between the different aspects of Anselm’s faith by explaining testimonial faith as informing Anselm what God is, personal faith confirming to him that God is, and the ontological argument explaining how God came to be. This is an oversimplification and the truth is undoubtedly more nuanced than this. But it’s worth stating the dynamic between the different aspects of his faith as such, since it is illustrative of how they work together and how the ontological argument follows from personal faith.

In conclusion, it is clear that Anselm has a strong sense of personal faith. So strong in fact, that he creates the ontological argument in the service of augmenting his faith with intellectual understanding instead of falling back on testimonial faith to supply him with

explanations of how God exists. The ontological argument was constructed primarily for the reason of shoring up the natural limitations of Anselm's personal faith. That he afforded himself the opportunity to try and convince the rest of us over the course of the following one-thousand years appears to be a mere bonus.