

A. WHY BELIEVE?



The Ontological Argument

SAINT ANSELM

Saint Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) was the most important Christian philosopher and theologian of the eleventh century. He is most famous for his “ontological argument” for God’s existence found in his work, *Proslogion*. But he is also famous for his work in philosophical theology, specifically his discussion of God’s nature, human freedom, sin, and redemption.

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Chapter I A Call for the Mind to Contemplate God

... I gratefully acknowledge, Lord, that you created your image in me so that I would remember you, conceive of you, and love you. But this image has been so worn away by my corruption, so obscured by the filth of my sins, that it cannot serve its purpose unless you renew and reshape it. I won’t try to reach your heights, Lord, since I could never make my understanding reach that high. Yet I still want somehow to understand your truth, which my heart believes and loves. For, rather than seeking to understand so that I can believe, I believe so that I can understand. In fact, one of the things that I believe is that, “unless I believe, I cannot understand” [Isa. 7:9].

From *Proslogion*, translated by Ronald Rubin. Reprinted by permission of the translator.

Chapter II God Truly Exists

So Lord—you who reward faith with understanding—let me understand, insofar as you see fit, whether you are as we believe and whether you are what we believe you to be. We believe you to be something than which nothing greater can be conceived. The question, then, is whether something with this nature exists, since “the fool has said in his heart that there is no God” [Ps. 14:1, 53:1]. But, surely, when the fool hears the words “something than which nothing greater can be conceived,” he understands what he hears, and what he understands exists in his understanding—even if he doesn’t think that it exists. For it is one thing for an object to exist in someone’s understanding, and another for him to think that it exists. When a painter plans out a painting, he has it in his understanding, but—not yet having produced it—he doesn’t yet think that it exists. After he has

painted it, he has the painting in his understanding, and—having produced it—he thinks that it exists. This should convince even the fool that something than which nothing greater can be conceived exists, if only in the understanding—since the fool understands the phrase “that than which nothing greater can be conceived” when he hears it, and whatever a person understands exists in his understanding. And surely that than which a greater cannot be conceived cannot exist *just* in the understanding. If it were to exist *just* in the understanding, we could conceive it to exist in reality too, in which case it would be greater. Therefore, if that than which a greater cannot be conceived exists just in the understanding, the very thing than which a greater cannot be conceived is something than which a greater *can* be conceived. But surely this cannot be. Without doubt, then, something than which a greater can't be conceived does exist—both in the understanding and in reality.

Chapter III **It Is Impossible to Conceive** **That God Doesn't Exist**

In fact, this thing so truly exists that it can't be conceived not to exist. For something that can be conceived to exist but can't be conceived not to exist is greater than one which can be conceived not to exist. Hence, if that than which a greater can't be conceived can be conceived not to exist, then that than which a greater can't be conceived is not that than which a greater can't be conceived. But this would be a contradiction. Therefore, something than which a greater can't be conceived so truly exists that it can't be conceived not to exist.

And this thing is you, Lord our God. Therefore, you so truly exist, Lord my God, that you can't be conceived not to exist. And this is as it should be. For, if one's mind could conceive of something better than you, a created thing would rise above its creator and pass judgment on it, which would be completely absurd. Yes, anything other than you can be conceived not to exist. Therefore, you alone have the truest, and hence the greatest, being of all; nothing else has being as true or as great. Then why has the fool said in his heart that there is no God, when it is evident to a rational mind that your being is the

greatest of all? Why—unless because he is stupid and a fool!

Chapter IV **How the Fool Can Say in His** **Heart That Which Can't** **Be Conceived**

But how could the fool say in his heart something that he couldn't conceive of? And how could he fail to conceive of what he said in his heart, when saying something in one's heart is the same as conceiving of it? If—or, rather, since—he did conceive (since he spoke his heart) but did not speak in his heart (since he could not conceive), there is more than one way to say something in the heart or to conceive of it. We conceive of something in one way when we conceive of words that signify it, but in another when we understand what the thing itself is. In the first way, we can conceive of God's not existing; in the second way, we cannot. No one who understands what God is can possibly conceive that He doesn't exist—although he can say that “God does not exist” in his heart, if he regards the words as meaningless or takes them in unusual senses. For God is that than which a greater cannot be conceived. He who really understands this correctly understands God so to exist that He can't fail to exist, even in our conception. Therefore, he who understands God to be that than which a greater can't be conceived cannot conceive of His not existing.

I thank you, Lord. I thank you because what I once believed through your generosity I now understand through your enlightenment. If I now wanted not to believe that you exist, I wouldn't be able to prevent myself from understanding that you do.

Chapter XV **God Is Greater Than Can** **Be Conceived**

Therefore, Lord, you are not only that than which a greater cannot be conceived: you are also something greater than can be conceived. It is possible to conceive that there is something of this sort. And, if you are not this thing, it is possible to conceive of something greater than you—which is impossible.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Anselm believes God to be “something than which nothing greater can be conceived.” What do you think he means by this phrase? Is this how God is typically thought of?
2. What does it mean to say that something exists in the understanding?
3. Why would existence in reality be greater than existence in the understanding? Can you think of anything that would be greater if it existed in the understanding than if it existed in reality?
4. What is Anselm’s distinction between two different ways of conceiving in chapter IV? Can we really conceive of something than which nothing greater can be conceived in the way Anselm thinks we can?

The Existence of God

SAINT THOMAS AQUINAS

Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) was a Dominican monk and widely considered to be the greatest Christian philosopher to have ever lived. Aquinas is famous for interpreting Aristotle’s corpus and developing Aristotelian doctrines in a way that was consistent with the teaching of the Church. He is well known for his discussion of the relationship between faith and reason, as well as his development of proofs for the existence of God.

Summa Theologica,
Question 2, Article 1*Against the Ontological Argument*

... Now once we understand the meaning of the word “God” it follows that God exists. For the word means “that than which nothing greater can be meant.” Consequently, since existence in thought and fact is greater than existence in thought alone, and since, once we understand the word “God,” he exists in thought, he must also exist in fact. It is therefore self-evident that there is a God. . .

Reply. . . . Someone hearing the word “God” may very well not understand it to mean “that than which nothing greater can be thought,” indeed, some people have believed God to be a body. And

even if the meaning of the word “God” were generally recognized to be “that than which nothing greater can be thought,” nothing thus defined would thereby be granted existence in the world of fact, but merely as thought about. Unless one is given that something in fact exists than which nothing greater can be thought—and this nobody denying that existence of God would grant—the conclusion that God in fact exists does not follow . . .

Summa Theologica,
Question 2, Article 3*Whether God Exists*

Objection 1. It seems that God does not exist. For, if one of a pair of contraries were **infinite**, it would completely obliterate the other. But, when we use the word “God,” we mean “something infinitely good.” Therefore, if God were to exist, nothing would be bad. But there are bad things in the world. Therefore, God does not exist.

From *Summa Theologica*, translated by Ronald Rubin. Reprinted by permission of the translator.