

St Anselm on the Being of God

MOSES AARON T. ANGELES, M.A.

I

Much ink has been spilled about St Anselm's¹ argument on God's Existence, christened "Ontological Argument" by Immanuel Kant.² As a matter of fact, we may consult any book on the history of philosophy and on Philosophy of Religion and most certainly find there a discussion on this ubiquitous topic. The argument proved to be unique and straightforward, and because of that the name "Anselm" is forever remembered in the annals of philosophy and theology.³ From this phenomenon, we can conclude indubitably that indeed, St Anselm occupies a special place in the pantheon of thinkers the West has ever produced. However, his very genius

¹ St Anselm, archbishop, theologian, and philosopher, was born at Aosta, north of Italy, in 1033. He was a son of a Lombard gentleman, Gundulf, and a noblewoman, Ermenberga. After a restless youth, in 1059 he entered the monastery of Bec in Normandy, whose prior was Lanfranc, who was to precede him in the See of Canterbury. During the next 30 years he wrote several philosophical and theological works that have been very influential. He was elected abbot of Bec in 1078, and in 1093 King William II consented to nominate him to the archbishopric of Canterbury. He died in 1109 in Canterbury.

² Cf. John Marenbon, *Medieval Philosophy: An Historical and Philosophical Introduction*. (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 120.

³ In recognition of his contributions to Theology, the Scholastics regarded St Anselm to be the "Second Augustine", and eventually historians of philosophy considered him as the "Father of Scholasticism."

and popularity betrayed his contribution to philosophical and theological reflection. For sure, St Anselm was a profound thinker, whose arguments are wonderful and interesting to discuss, but at the same time, to quote Hartshorne's remarks, "unfashionable to study."⁴

Perhaps no other argument on the existence of God is more popular than the so called "Ontological Proof." In the Medieval Ages, the Franciscan theologian St Bonaventure accepted it and further expounded it.⁵ For the Seraphic Doctor, God is not really God if he does not exist in the first place. "If God is really God, then God is."⁶ On the other hand the Dominican theologian St Thomas Aquinas refuted it.⁷ There exists a sharp contrast on the same problem between St Thomas and St Anselm, though they agreed on some fundamental principles. Aquinas was convinced that Anselm's *a priori* approach in the Monologion and the Proslogion is unpersuasive. He clearly understood, just as the monk Gaunilon conceived, that the mere linguistic understanding of God's description of God as that which nothing greater can be thought to exist cannot provide a logical proof to the requisite conception

⁴ Charles Hartshorne, *Anselm's Discovery: A Re-Examination of the Ontological Proof of God's Existence*. (La Salle: Open Court, 1964), p. 2.

⁵ Cf. St Bonaventure, *The Breviloquium*. IV:1-6. Upon establishing the existence of God through St Anselm's reflections, St Bonaventure even went further and discussed the possible predications on the Godhead. Here, he argued how to express properly in terms and concepts the faith every Catholic should hold on to about the Divinity.

⁶ "Si Deus est Deus, Deus est." Ibid.

⁷ Cf. St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, Q. 2., Art. 3. While this is the common knowledge about the position of St Thomas, we have to accept it with reservation. It may be true that St Thomas proved the existence of God through the cosmological argument, but a passage in the *Summa Theologiae* affirms, though with distinction, Anselm's argument. In Ia, Q. 2, Art. 1, reply to Obj. 1, St Thomas said: "To know that God exists in a general and confused way is implanted in us by nature, in as much God is man's beatitude." (Emphasis mine) This passage, the researcher thinks, has the possibility of nullifying the idea that St Thomas was totally opposed to that of St Anselm's *a priori* argument. The author will delve deeper into this problem later.

of God. Anselm's idea therefore cannot work. That is why Aquinas opted for the *a posteriori* method.⁸

But no other philosopher made St Anselm's claim a hot topic for debate and discussion than Rene Descartes, the one who is regarded to be the father of modern philosophy. Descartes reformulated the Anselmian position and thus invited a widespread attention to it.⁹ It was him that capitalized on the basic assumption that "Existence is a Predicate or a property,"¹⁰ and this has become the locus where all modern discussions of the ontological argument revolve. He claimed that existence is one among the defining predicates of God. He said: "The supremely perfect being must exist, for existence is an essential attribute without which no being would be unlimitedly perfect."¹¹

However, the great philosopher from Königsberg, Immanuel Kant, challenged the validity of the Cartesian claim. He accepted at a certain level Descartes' position that existence, insofar as it is an idea, belongs analytically to the notion of God, just as the idea of having three angles is analytically contained in that of a triangle. However, it does not necessarily follow that the subject, with all its predicates and attributes, actually exists. As Kant explicitly states: "To posit a triangle, and yet to reject its three angles, is self-contradictory; but there is no self-contradiction in rejecting the triangle together with its three angles. The same holds true of the concept of an absolutely necessary being."¹²

⁸ For a detailed examination and analysis of Anselm's argument and Aquinas' reaction against it, confer Gyula Klima "Saint Anselm's Proof", in G. Hintikka (ed.), *Medieval Philosophy and Modern Times*. (Dodrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000), pp. 69-88.

⁹ It must be stressed that Descartes indebtedness to St Anselm cannot be established without much difficulty. When his friend and colleague Mersenne questioned him about the relation of his argument to that of St Anselm's, he replied: "I will look at St Anselm at the first opportunity." Cf. N. Kemp Smith, *New Studies in the Philosophy of Descartes*. (London: Macmillan, 1952), p. 304.

¹⁰ Cf. *Meditations on First Philosophy*, V.

¹¹ Ibid. Other forms of the Cartesian reformulation can be found in *Discourse on the Method*, IV and *Meditations on First Philosophy*, III.

¹² *Critique of Pure Reason*, "Transcendental Dialectic", Book II, Chap. 3, Sec. 4.

Other philosophers came, either supporting or relegating the Ontological Argument, into the picture, like Benedict Spinoza¹³, John Locke¹⁴, G.W. Leibniz¹⁵, and of course, G.W.F. Hegel.¹⁶ It is very interesting to learn how potent St Anselm's proof has been in inciting the interest of great thinkers who followed him. However, as it was already mentioned, there is a dire consequence to this. St Anselm stated his argument in a few paragraphs and elaborated it with a few more pages when he answered the criticisms of Gaunilon; yet, even these very few pages have been far too many to read for those who have accepted it loosely, and toilsome to study for those who are against it. Because of the theme's evident popularity, we have lost sight of its context and significance in the life of its author. It is very likely that our knowledge of it is fragmented, detached from its original framework and isolated from its historical disposition. It is therefore of utmost importance to first establish the context of the argument, the objective of its author, and most of all, to describe the character of the man named Anselm.

II

The life of St Anselm comes down to us because a certain monk assumed to himself the task of recording, assessing, and deliberating the events that surrounded the saintly archbishop of Canterbury. This monk was Eadmer, a Benedictine monk who was a member of the community of the Cathedral Church of Canterbury. He painted a man who was constantly in communion with the Divine, a man of prayer, a man who would be proclaimed a saint after his death. The *Vita Anselmi* of Eadmer proved to be extraordinary. As a historian himself, Eadmer did not follow the usual way of hagiographies existent during those times.¹⁷ But the most

¹³ Cf. *The Ethics*, Prop. XI.

¹⁴ Cf. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, p. 529-531.

¹⁵ Cf. *New Essays Concerning Human Understanding*, p. 502-505.

¹⁶ Cf. *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Vol. III, p. 62-65.

¹⁷ *The Life of St Antony* written by St Athanasius is a classic in hagiography. Here, St Athanasius portrays a man who has completely detached himself from the world and thus, he is always at one with God. The inclusion of divine visions,

important aspect of the *Vita Anselmi* was St Anselm's contribution and influence while Eadmer was writing it. Eadmer narrated that one day Anselm asked him to see him in private. This was a time when the preliminary drafts of the *Vita Anselmi* were almost complete. Anselm asked him what he was doing, but Eadmer was reluctant to admit it. Thinking that he was quite privy with it, Anselm, being his superior, instructed him to either stop what he was doing or show it to him. Eventually, Eadmer gave in. But his fears were quickly vanquished when Anselm, being an author and a scholar himself, suggested some corrections and revisions in his work. Eadmer was happy with what transpired. But a few days later, Anselm once again summoned him instructing him to destroy the work. He told him that he was most unworthy to be celebrated in such a manner. Eadmer fought with his conscience, should he obey him or should he keep his work so that the memory of his beloved abbot be perpetuated? He reached a compromise by destroying the original manuscript after making a careful copy of the text. We owe therefore the *Vita Anselmi* to an act of deceit within an authentic friendship!

In the *Vita Anselmi*, Eadmer first and foremost portrayed St Anselm as a man of prayer, a man who was greatly devoted to God.¹⁸ St Anselm did not grow tired in living as a monk, as a son to the Rule of St Benedict. In fact, he wrote letter after letter to his friends and acquaintances about the good and attractiveness of the monastic life. It is only in constant prayer – preferably a prayer done in solitude – that man can communicate with God, dispelling the limits of language and the liminality of human expression. As Ward pointed out: "Prayers are meant to be said in solitude, and the aim is to stir

miracles, and wonders directs the reader to pay homage and respect to the saint concerned. Eadmer has done the same, but the miracles and wonders in the Life of St Anselm are separated from the actual text, he included these events in the appendix. This gives us the idea that Eadmer is trying to be objective in narrating St Anselm's life. In a certain sense, Eadmer's work is a biography and not strictly a hagiography. Cf. G.R. Evans, *St Anselm of Canterbury*. (London: Continuum, 2001), p. 2.

¹⁸ Though he has an important role in the Church of Canterbury, St Anselm was greatly distressed when he assumed the office of Archbishop. As a man deep in prayer, he regarded it as detrimental to his spiritual life. In fact, he refused to accept it in more than two occasions.

the mind out of its inertia to know itself thoroughly and so come to contrition and the love of God.”¹⁹ Doing Theology, for St Anselm, is to retire into the inner chambers of the heart (*In cubiculum meum*)²⁰ and not simply a discussion and elaboration of higher theological themes. It is very evident that he even incorporated his own spiritual journey in his work. The purification of the heart and the cleansing of one’s mind from worldly affairs (*otium, quies, sabbatum*) are in fact the major occupation of any monk. Only a pure heart can see God.

Thus, by quieting the desires and closing the mind from the worldly allurements, the mind is stirred up to pray (*excita mentem*) and thus understand (*excitandum legentis mentem*) the providential work of God. Prayer is not only a lifting of the mind to God but at the same time a disposal of man’s whole being in God. Purging the mind from the irrelevant prepares the understanding as the self stands before God as his Creator and Redeemer. This is faith seeking understanding (*fides quaerens intellectum*), a mind not only fortified by understanding, but first and foremost, by faith. St Anselm states this most emphatically in the *Proslogion*:

“I do not endeavor, O Lord, to penetrate thy sublimity, for in no wise do I compare my understanding with that; but I long to understand in some degree thy truth which my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand. For this also I believe, – that unless I believe, I should understand.”²¹

But possessing faith is not the end of it. Though believing in God is part of the equation, it is not the final phase – rather it is only the beginning. But the beginning of what? As a follower and a staunch promoter of the Augustinian tradition, he would direct the mind to further our love and fear of God. This love (*compunctio cordis*) is the realization of man’s abasement, his sinfulness, before the God of Love. We can clearly see in his prayers and meditations how St Anselm reaches out his hands toward

¹⁹ Benedicta Ward’s Introduction to *The Prayers and Meditations of St Anselm with the Proslogion*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 51.

²⁰ Proslogion 1.

²¹ Proslogion I.

God and how he feels his terrible separation because of sin and iniquities. This is explicit in his *Prayer to God*:

"Almighty God, merciful Father, and my Good Lord,
have mercy on me a sinner.
Grant me forgiveness of my sins.
Make me guard against and overcome
all snares, temptations, and harmful pleasures.

May I shun utterly in word and in deed,
Whatever you forbid,
And do and keep whatever your command.
Let me believe and hope, love, and live,
According to your purpose and will."²²

As a spiritual writer himself, this kind of writing was conventional, but it was at once unique and extraordinary because of the deep sense of security he had. St Anselm was a man of faith, God would not forsake him – God would always be at his side.

"Hope of my heart, strength of my soul,
Help of my weakness,
By your powerful kindness complete
What in my powerless weakness I attempt.
My life, the end to which I strive,
Although I have not yet attained to love you as I ought,
Still let my desire for you
Be as great as my love ought to be."²³

As a man of prayer, St Anselm was clear about how every individual should stand before the Almighty God. Man must be aware of how he falls short from submitting himself to God's purpose and will. Moreover, he must be aware that death awaits

²² *Prayers and Meditations of St Anselm, Prayer to God* I:1-10.

²³ *Prayers and Meditations of St Anselm, Prayer to Christ* II: 11-15. A profoundly Platonic conception of the Supreme Being, a most Transcendent Being, is thus, as it were, bound and joined together in human experience, and a God who is ultimately unknowable and cannot be grasped by human understanding is presented in human terms. We find therefore in St Anselm a masterful synthesis of faith and understanding, of philosophy and theology, and this was made possible because of his method – Prayer.

for those who consciously deny the grace of the Almighty. St Anselm strongly argues that sin, following the Augustinian conception, is the extreme love of self to the contempt of God, and man must realize this with sincerity and authenticity. Only then, can the grace of God work as he turns away from sin back to his Creator. St Anselm was most profound about this in his Prayer to St Nicholas:

“Alas! – sin; a name to be shuddered at,
 A thing to be detested, no misfortune can be compared to it.
 The blind man did not see the trench into which he fell,
 The fool thought he ought to do what he did.
 But he who sins willingly, seeing and knowing,
 Throws himself over a precipice.
 Death and torments, however great such torments may be,
 In them is no dishonour, because they are ordained.
 But sin has in itself its own dishonour,
 And brings with it eternal unhappiness.
 For it were better to choose eternal torment,
 Which in itself does not bring eternal dishonour,
 Than sin, which joins dishonour to eternal sorrow.
 And certainly, unhappy man,
 You ought to avoid the dishonour of sin in itself,
 More than whatever torments there are in eternity.
 For in sinning, by a most dishonourable perversity,
 You prefer yourself to God your Creator,
 Than which nothing is more unjust;
 Whereas in bearing torments,
 According to a most perfect pattern,
 The creature submits himself to the one who created him,
 Than which nothing is more just.”²⁴

From the above discussion, we can clearly see how St Anselm prayed his theology fervently and devotedly up to the extent that we can no longer see the distinction between theology and prayer. It is therefore a prerogative that he set the “Ontological Argument” in the context of prayer. For the moment we try to separate it from its original context, we are at once betraying the very spirit of St Anselm’s thought. As a man of prayer, he could not conceive

²⁴ *Prayers and Meditations of St Anselm, Prayer to St Nicholas XIV: 201-225.*

of a philosophy of God, of an argument, that is devoid of meditation and contemplation.

III

It has been already argued that it is a necessity to treat St Anselm's theology in the context of prayer, and of course the Ontological Argument to prove the existence of God is no exception. He expressed this in the *Monologion* saying: "Certain brethren have often and earnestly entreated me to put into writing some thoughts that I had offered them in familiar conversation, regarding meditation on the Being of God, and on some other topics connected with the subject, under the form of a meditation on these themes."²⁵ It must be noted that he mentioned the same thing in the *Proslogion* saying: "Thinking, therefore, that what I have found would, if put it into writing, be welcome to some readers, of this very matter, and of some others, I have written in the following treatise, in the person of one who strives to lift his mind to the contemplation of God, and seeks to understand what he believes."²⁶ In both works, St Anselm explores, through meditative writing, the existence and nature of God, the attributes of the Divine as preeminently beautiful, supremely powerful, omniscient, just, merciful, and good, anchoring himself completely in the tradition of Augustinian Platonism. The project is to expound the mysteries of the Godhead by meditating on faith based on reason, and with silent reasoning, the mind is able to somehow penetrate into the unknown.

In the *Proslogion*, before he establishes his fool-proof argument on the existence of a Divine Being, St Anselm exhorts the mind to the contemplation of God. He explicitly instructs his readers to put aside worldly cares and exclude anything that may hinder the mind to seek God. Indeed, all our labors will be in vain and our attempts futile if we fail to purge first our mind. Man cannot seek God, unless God himself first teaches him. Man cannot find God, unless He first reveals Himself to him. God created man in his image and likeness, and that is a reminder that man must

²⁵ *Monologion*, Preface.

²⁶ *Proslogion*, Preface.

be ever mindful of Him, always directing his thoughts on God, that he might praise Him, thank Him, and love Him. The faithful does not seek to understand that he may believe, rather, he believes that he may understand. For unless he believes he will never understand. His exhortation is as follows:

“Up now, slight man! Flee, for a little while, thy occupations; hide thyself, for a time, from thy disturbing thoughts. Cast aside, now, thy burdensome cares, and put away thy toilsome business. Yield room for some little time to God; and rest for a little time in him. Enter in the inner chamber of thy mind; shut out all thoughts save that of God, and such as can aid thee in seeking him, close thy door and seek him. Speak now, my whole heart! Speak now to God saying, I seek thy face; thy face, Lord, will I seek. And come thou now, O Lord my God, teach my heart where and how it may seek thee, where and how it might find thee.”²⁷

The quest for a single proof is at once an intellectual endeavor and a spiritual journey. St Anselm dwelt on the paradoxes of human experience on God, and from it, he propelled the mind to seek God. Man is yearning for God, yet he is frustrated the moment he realizes that God is way beyond the understanding. God is the God of Light, yet instead of illuminating the mind, man is lost in confusion. “I strove toward God, and I stumbled on myself. I sought calm in privacy, and I found tribulation and grief in my inmost thoughts. I wished to smile in the joy of my mind, and I am compelled to frown by the sorrow of my heart.”²⁸ From hereon, St Anselm calls for the assistance of faith. “Teach me to seek thee, and reveal thyself to me, when I seek thee, for I cannot seek thee, for I cannot seek thee, except thou teach me, nor find thee, except thou reveal thyself.”²⁹

The second chapter of the *Proslogion* opens with a philosophical argument departing from the words of the Psalmist: the Fool who has said in his heart there is no God.³⁰ Now, “this very

²⁷ Proslogion 1.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Psalms 14: 1.

fool, when he hears of this being of which I speak – a being that which nothing greater can be conceived – understands what he hears, and what he understands is in his understanding; although he does not understand it to exist.”³¹ We concede to the idea that God is that which nothing greater can be thought. And even the fool has to agree with it because he can understand the words the moment he hears it. It must be accepted therefore that “that which nothing greater can be thought” must exist, at least, in the mind. But, St Anselm continues, “It is one thing for an object to be in the understanding, and another to understand that the object exists.”³² Here the analogy of the painter was utilized to expound on his point. “When a painter first conceives of what he will afterwards perform, he has it in his understanding, but he does not yet understand it to be, because he has not yet performed it. But after he has made the painting, he both has it in his understanding, and he understands that it exists, because he has made it.”³³ A painter preparing a picture has it in his mind, but it does not exist unless he first painted it. Now, that what exists both in thought and in reality is obviously greater than what exists only in thought as an idea. The actual picture is of course more eminent than the idea of the picture existing in the mind of the painter. The same is true with the idea of God. St Anselm was emphatic: “Assuredly, (that) which nothing greater can be conceived, cannot exist in the understanding alone. For, suppose it exists in the understanding alone: then it can be conceived in reality, which is greater.”³⁴ If God only existed in the mind, in the understanding, it would be certainly possible to conceive of a being greater than God who does exist not only as an idea, but also in reality. Therefore God as “that which nothing greater can be thought to conceive” is not really “that which nothing greater can be thought.” He therefore concludes, “That which nothing greater can be thought to exist” must not only exist in the mind but necessarily exist also in reality.

³¹ Proslogion II.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

It is at this juncture that St Anselm welcomed the criticism of a monk from Marmoutiers, Gaunilon. He pointed out that the argument was weak primarily because it did not prove the necessary existence of God. He emphasized that St Anselm's contention could be utilized to prove the existence of fantasies created by the mind, say for example, the existence of the most perfect and beautiful island.

"It is said that somewhere in the ocean is an island, which, because of the difficulty, or rather impossibility, of discovering what does not exist, is called the lost island. And they say that the island has an inestimable wealth of all manner of riches and delicacies in greater abundance than is told of the Islands of Blest; and that having no owner or inhabitant, it is more excellent than all the other countries, which are inhabited by mankind, in the abundance with which it is restored."³⁵

Following the pattern of St Anselm's argument, Gaunilon asserted that if the mind could conceive of the most perfect island, and it should be noted that even the fool can understand this, it would be only logical to conclude that this island must also exist in reality. For the island would not be really perfect if it only existed in the mind, it must also exist in reality. "You can no longer doubt that this island which is more excellent than all other lands exists somewhere, since you have no doubt that it is in your understanding. And since it is more excellent not to be in the understanding alone, but to exist both in the understanding and in reality, for this reason it must exist."³⁶

In response to the criticism raised by Gaunilon, St Anselm responded that his argument had force only in the unique case of God, as a "being nothing greater can be conceived." Towards the end of his reply, he had this to say against Gaunilon:

"In my former book I proved the real existence of a being than which a greater cannot be conceived; and I believed that this argument cannot be invalidated by the validity of any objection. For so great force does the signification of

³⁵ Gaunilon, *In Behalf of the Fool* VI.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

this reasoning contain in itself, that this being which is the subject of discussion, is of necessity, from the very fact that it is understood or conceived, proved also to exist in reality, and to be whatever we should believe of the divine substance.”³⁷

But it should be pointed out that in his reply to the monk from Marmoutiers, he once again exhorted Gaunilon to call upon faith in order to understand the strength of his argument. As a devoted Benedictine monk, St Anselm was not simply appealing to the powers of reasoning; rather he wanted, first and foremost, to anchor his idea on faith. And certainly, he was instructing his opponent to do the same thing.

“If a being than which a greater is inconceivable is not understood or conceived, and is not in the understanding or in concept, certainly either God is not a being than which a greater is inconceivable, or else he is not understood or conceived, and is not in the understanding or in concept. But *I call on your faith and conscience to attest that this is most false.*”³⁸

The originality of the Anselmian position is indubitable. All other proofs for the existence of God drafted by St Thomas Aquinas and cultivated further by thinkers who came after him are inferences from the effects of the Cause. They acknowledge the existence of God through the existence of objects in the world, the argument from the created back to its Creator. But the argument of St Anselm is anchored on the very Being of God, as a necessary being, not only as a concept but also real and actual. The author of the argument proved to be clever; he was able to graft the evidence of the argument within the argument itself. The God of St Anselm is indeed a towering God, a God that cannot be the subject of doubt and speculation.

IV

In Chapters III and IV of the *Proslogion*, St Anselm sought to reinforce the argument he elaborated in Chapter II. He explicitly

³⁷ Anselm’s Apologetic. In Reply to Gaunilon’s *Answer in Behalf of the Fool*, Chapter X.

³⁸ Ibid, Chapter I. Emphasis mine.

stated that God could not be conceived not to exist at all. If God could be conceived not to exist, it would be only logical to conclude that God is not "that which nothing greater can be conceived".

"And it assuredly exists so truly, that it cannot be conceived not to exist. For, it is possible to conceive of a being which cannot be conceived not to exist; and this is greater than one which can be conceived not to exist. Hence, if that, than which nothing greater can be conceived, can be conceived not to exist, it is not that, than which nothing greater can be conceived. But this is an irreconcilable contradiction."³⁹

It is an impossibility to conceive the non-existence of God, for what cannot be thought not to exist must necessarily be greater than what can be thought not to exist at all. He even argued that if the mind could conceive of a being greater than God, it would give rise to an absurd idea that the creature would rise above the Creator. He concluded that "To thee alone, therefore, it belongs to exist more truly than all other beings, and hence in a higher degree than all others."⁴⁰

But the impossible happens. Quoting a passage from the Book of Psalms, "the Fool said in his heart there is no God."⁴¹ How is it possible? St Anselm replies by distinguishing two ways of thinking: a thinking which involves the word being signified is conceived, that is, bringing the question into mind, and when the thing itself is being understood, that is, a thinking which grasps the thing which the terms signified. Only in the first sense, according to Anselm, can God be conceived not to exist. The fool was able to think that "that which nothing greater can be conceived" cannot exist, however, he failed to understand the meaning and signification of it. Had he being able to grasp the meaning of it, then, he could not have thought that "that which nothing greater can be conceived" did not exist at all. To prove his assertion, he used the analogy of fire and water. "For no one who understands what fire and water are can conceive fire

³⁹ Proslogion III.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Psalms 14:1.

to be water, in accordance with the nature of the facts themselves, although this is possible according to the words."⁴² It is possible for the mind to confuse fire from water in so far as the terms are concerned, but in so far as the referents are concerned, fire cannot be conceived as water, and vice versa. The same applies to the idea of God. "He who understands that God so exists, cannot conceive that he does not exist."⁴³

In the preface of the *Proslogion*, St Anselm wonders if he will be able to find a single argument about the existence of God that would require no other proof than itself alone. He was at the point of desperation because he could not establish any – he was always caught on a deadlock. But, with a stroke of luck, nay, with a stroke of the grace from God, he was able to stumble on an argument. He ended his argument in Chapter IV with a prayer thanking God for the illumination. "I thank thee, gracious Lord, I thank thee; because what I formerly believed by thy bounty, I now so understand by thine illumination, that if I were unwilling to believe that thou dost exist, I should not be able to understand this to be true."⁴⁴

V

From what has been discussed, it is very clear that St Anselm's philosophy must always be expounded and explained in the context and spirit of prayer. To discuss it as an "argument," as a "philosophic discourse," is to dilute the essence of his reflections. In the Preface of the *Proslogion*, it is evident that his objective was theological, spiritual, and meditative rather than argumentative, philosophical, and speculative. It was first and foremost a meditative exercise that directed the mind to the contemplation of God, to be able to grasp and understand what he believed. The mysteries of faith must be pondered upon so that the heart may be moved to experience God, and in turn love him more.

⁴² *Proslogion* IV.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

St Anselm's writings were always set in the form of prayer and were pointed towards self-knowledge, self-realization, compunction, and longing for God. And the ontological argument was also directed into this. He was praying while he was developing his thoughts, and his method even elevated God beyond doubt, suspicion, and skepticism. The Ontological Proof then, in the Anselmian sense, is not a proof at all. It does not even attempt to prove the existence of God because God cannot be even thought and conceived not to exist. St Anselm's attempt was the unfolding of the relevance of God in human lives, and ultimately, in human history. We are forbidden by St Anselm to think less of "That which nothing greater can be thought to exist" because as creatures, we are nothing but dust before the God.

Moreover, I am convinced that St Anselm did not even seek to convince the atheist that God existed. His purpose was to lead the Christian into a deeper and more authentic relation with God. And this was prayer of the saintly bishop towards the end of his work: "I pray, O God, to know thee, to love thee, that I may rejoice in thee. And if I cannot attain to full joy in this life, may I at least advance from day to day, until that joy come to the full. Let the love of thee increase, and there let it be full, that here my joy may be great in hope, and there, full in truth."⁴⁵ □

⁴⁵ Proslogion XXVI.