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## A Comparison of Anselm of Canterbury and Thomas Aquinas' Approach to the Existence of God

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### **Abstract**

This study sets out to compare Anselm of Canterbury's approach to the existence of God in his **Proslogion**, with that of Thomas Aquinas in his various proofs (the five ways) in the **Summa Theologica**. This exercise gives special attention to their various positions, with particular emphasis on self-evidence, or the need for, and possibility of proofs, and to the intellectual condition of the Atheist.

**Keywords:** Existence, Faith, Reason, Atheist, Self-evidence, Proof.

### **Introduction**

Before embarking upon this comparison of Anselm and Aquinas, it is pertinent to clearly state that first, they lived at different times and were immersed in, and influenced by different intellectual world views. For instance questions that forced themselves on Aquinas and his contemporaries (for example concerning the way in which natural 'reason' functions in the spheres of theology, and the proper demarcation of the realms of faith and reason) simply did not occur to Anselm, and we cannot expect him to be answering questions he did not, and in a sense could not, put to himself. Anselm's ideas on this whole question are in un-crystallized state, and we can be suspicious *a priori* of any interpretation

that offers a tidy and unambiguous explanation of his position on the existence of God. At the same time, it is legitimate and useful (though also a risky and delicate task) to analyze the virtualities or implicit intentions of Anselm's thought and try to discern whether they lend themselves to one type of development or another. For example we might ask whether if Anselm were to return among us, he would recognize Aquinas as his intellectual heir.

### **Anselm's *Proslogion* argument for the existence of God**

Anselm begins his *Proslogion* with an invitation for 'insignificant man' to 'fly for a moment from his affairs', [to] 'escape for awhile from the tumult of his thoughts... to abandon self for awhile to God and rest a little in him'<sup>1</sup>. Augustine had written that "You have created us for yourself Oh Lord, and Our hearts are restless until they rest in you." The next paragraph is an address to God to teach the addresser how and where to seek God, where and how to find him.<sup>2</sup> I think that this preamble sets the tone and manner in which we are to read and understand Anselm's project of providing a *proof* for the existence of God. Unlike Aquinas, Anselm lived at a time when the works of Aristotle had not yet been known in the West. The strict delineation of the sphere of *faith* and *reason* had not yet been effected in thought. Anselm's thought is still very much under the strong influence of the African Bishop of Hippo, St. Augustine, as be-speaks the original title of the *Proslogion* which ran: *Fides Quarens Intellectum*. The style and model is very much that of Augustine. Compare for instance with Augustine's *De Libero Arbitrio*<sup>3</sup>, 11.ii. Anselm ends his prologue with a very Augustinian formula from Isaiah Chapter 7, Verse 9. "For I do not seek to understand so that I may believe; but I believe so that I may understand. For I believe this also that 'unless I

1 Saint Anselm. *Proslogion* with a Reply on Behalf of the Fool by Gaunilo and The Author's Reply to Gaunilo Translated with an Introduction and Philosophical Commentary by M. J. Charlesworth, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 1979). Chapter 1, pg. 111

2 *Proslogion*; chapter 1, pg. 111.

3 Augustine of Hippo, *De Libero Arbitrio*, 11. ii. P. L. xxxii.1242 trans. M. Pontifex, *the problem of Free choice*, (London, 1955), pg 77-78.

believe, I shall not understand."<sup>4</sup> There is here primacy of belief over reason. Belief or faith is a precondition for the understanding sought by reason

And yet Anselm sets out to address the fool, and in laying out these series of logical arguments, that what he certainly believed by faith, he could show by rational means: that God, *that than which a greater cannot be thought* exists.<sup>5</sup>

Anselm's formula is certainly derived from Augustine, but it is also part, and parcel of Judaeo-Christian faith. In the second chapter of the *Proslogion*, Anselm, more or less, believes that the formulation of the arguments as it stands is self-evident, and does not need any other justification outside itself.<sup>6</sup> His argument is aimed at a **specific type of unbeliever**. This point has to be emphasized. The type of unbeliever that Anselm's work is aimed at could be termed the *factual atheist*. The factual atheist would be the unbeliever who, while admitting that he/she knows what it would be like for God to exist, denies that God does not exist. The *logical atheist* on the other hand is he/her for whom, no matter how defined, the notion of God is strictly meaningless. So that according to the second type of atheist, we do not, and can never know what it would be like for God to exist. Since Anselm did not formally and explicitly distinguish the methodologies pertinent to the two domains of *faith* and *reason*, difficulties arise in his shades of meaning and argumentation. Only by clarifying his intent in this way, I think, can we appreciate, and find meaningful, the logic of the argument underlying the *Proslogion*.

The gist of St. Anselm's argument runs like this:

1. Something *exists* so truly that it *cannot* be even thought *not* to exist.<sup>7</sup>
2. If that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought can be thought not to exist,<sup>8</sup>

4 *Proslogion*; chapter 1, pg. 115.

5 *Proslogion*; chapter II, pg. 117.

6 *Proslogion*; chapter II, pg. 117.

7 *Proslogion*; chapter II, pg. 111.

8 *Proslogion*; chapter III pg. 119.

3. Then, that-than-which-a greater-cannot-be-thought is not the same as that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought, which is absurd.<sup>9</sup>

It would appear that Anselm's argument means that "diverse things that are the same in some respects are caused to be the same in that respect by something extrinsic to them, and this cause possesses the characteristic in question through itself. Anselm seems to treat existence as an ordinary characteristic so that all the diverse things that exists thought they exist in different ways, are the same in this respect that is, that they exist. Anselm's proof is a formal deductive argument with a number of premises. He does not construe it to mean that the existence of God is self-evident in the strict sense in that its denial would be self contradictory. The *Proslogion's* argument differs from three previous arguments in the *Monologium* in the sense that its starting point is from faith. We believe as theists and Christians, that God is a being so great that no greater being than God can be thought of or conceived. Anselm's strategy is to show by reason that what we so construe in belief can be rationally proved.

### **Aquinas' Argument from the *Summa Theologica* for the Existence of God**

Aquinas, in five different works raised objections to Anselm's argument for the existence of God from the *Proslogion*. Here in chronological order, are Aquinas' works where his critique of Anselm are to be found:

*In Primum Librum Sententiarum dist. 3,q.1, a2, 4 & ad 4*

*In Boethii De Trinitate prooem, q. 1, a. 3,6 & AD 6*

*Questiones Disputatae de Veritate q.10, a. 12, 2 & ad 2.*

*Summa Contra Gentiles I, 10 & 11 and*

*Summa Theologica I a, q. 2, a. 1, 2 & ad 2*

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<sup>9</sup> *Proslogion*; chapter IV Pg. 119.

The last critique from the *Summa Theologica* is often taken as representing Thomas' position against Anselm's. This is what this study seeks to examine.

Several observations had been proffered of these critiques of Anselm by Aquinas. Some are of the point that Thomas only state, but does not offer any counter argument to Anselm's method, and also did show that such a conclusion does not follow. Aquinas' critique, many claim, do not show any advancement upon Gaunilo's objection but rather reproduces them in the face of the *Proslogion III* in *Pro-insipiente VIII*.

Unlike Anselm, Aquinas makes a clear distinction between *faith* and *reason*, and the *role* of reason prior to the act of faith. That Aquinas was able to make this distinction, is due to his reliance on and connection with Aristotle's thought. The works of Aristotle and of others of the Greeks had just been reintroduced to Europe and the West and no longer read through the prison of the mediating influence of the great Islamic scholar like Al-Ashari, Avicenna, Averroes and Algazel. Anselm did not have access to that privilege. Reason for the Greeks and specifically for Aristotle as taken by Aquinas serves to justify that presents itself for human understanding and in the case of Aquinas that which leads to faith as well as enable the faithful explicate the contents of faith in its light.

In the first three articles of question 2 of the *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas treats of God's existence. In the first article, *objection* one states that it would seem that God's existence is *self-evident*.<sup>10</sup> For things are said to be self-evident to us, the knowledge of which exists naturally in us, as we can see in regard of the first principles. Here we have Damascene as authority. We can also include Augustine of Hippo with his doctrine of *Divine Illumination*.

*Objection 2*. Those things are said to be self-evident which are known as soon as the terms are known... when the nature of a whole and of a part is known, it is at once recognized that

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas Aquinas; *Summa Theologica*, question II, Article 1 in Anton Pegis, *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, (New York: Random House, 1945). Pg. 18.

every whole is greater than its parts. But as soon as the signification of the name God is understood, it is at once seen that God exists. For by this name is signified that thing than which nothing greater can be conceived. But that which exists actually and mentally is greater than that which exists only mentally, it also follows it exists actually. Therefore the proposition God exists is self-evident. This *objection* would be Anselm's position in his *Proslogion*; Chapter 2. as reported by Aquinas.

*Objection 3*: For whoever denies the existence of truth grants that truth does not exist; and if truth does not exist, then the proposition: *truth does not exist* is true. And if there is anything true, there must be truth. And God is truth itself.<sup>11</sup>

In the *Sed Contra* Aquinas quotes Aristotle: 'No one,' he says, 'can mentally admit the opposite of what is self-evident, citing Aristotle's principle of *non-contradiction* which says *a thing cannot both be and not be at the same time in the same place*. But the opposite of the proposition: *God is* can be thought. Right here, Aquinas dismisses Anselm's Argument. So for Aquinas, that God exist is *not self-evident*.<sup>12</sup>

In the body of this article, Aquinas says that a thing can be evident in either of two ways: either self evident in itself, though not to us; or on the other hand; self-evident in itself and to us. A proposition is self-evident because its truth is included in the essence of the subject. For instance: *Man is an animal*, animal is contained in the essence of man, so if the essence of the predicate and subject is known to all, the proposition will be self-evident to all; as is clear with the first principle of demonstration – the terms of which are common and no one is ignorant of. If however there are some to whom the essence of the predicate and the subject is unknown, the proposition will be self-evident in itself, but not to those who do not know the meaning of the predicate and subject of the proposition. There are some notions of the mind which are common and self-evident

11 Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologia*, question II, Article 1 in Anton Pegis, *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, (New York: Random House, 1945). Pg 19.

12 Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologia*, question II, Article 1 in Anton Pegis, *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, Pg 19.

to the learned, as that, incorporeal substances are not in space. Therefore, Thomas thinks that the proposition *God exists*, of itself, is self-evident, for the predicate is the same as its subject, because God is his existence. This, Aquinas will go to prove in Question 3, article 4. And for Aquinas, precisely because we do not know the essence of God, the proposition is not self-evident to us, but needs to be demonstrated by things that are more known to us- though less known in their nature- namely, God's effects. In the reply to the first objection, Thomas says, to know that God exists, is, in a general and confused way implanted in us by nature, inasmuch as God is man's beatitude. For man naturally is known by him. And for Aquinas, this is not the same as to know that Peter is approaching; even though it is Peter who is approaching.

In the *Reply to Objection 3*, Aquinas says perhaps, not everyone who hears the name of God understands it to signify something than which nothing greater can be thought, seeing that some understand God to be body.<sup>13</sup> This answers *Gaunilo's* objection to Anselm's argument, when *Gaunilo* speaks of *the most beautiful Island*.<sup>14</sup> Also, here, in this objection, Aquinas makes a distinction between an object *in the mind* and an object *in reality*. Aquinas here would refute Anselm's logic, by saying that he, Anselm, is making a transition from *mental* reality to an *actual* reality.<sup>15</sup> Thus, constituting a category mistake.

For Aquinas, the existence of truth in general is self-evident to us, but the existence of primal truth is not self-evident to us.<sup>16</sup> Again for Thomas, God can be known through his effects<sup>17</sup>. And Thomas goes on in the third Article of question 2 of the

13 Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologica*, question II, Article 1 in Anton Pegis, *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, (New York: Random House, 1945). Pg. 20.

14 *Proslogion*; A reply to the foregoing by a certain writer on behalf of the fool (by Gaunilo), paragraph 6. Pg163 .

15 Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologica*, question II, First Article, Reply to objection 2. in Anton Pegis, *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, Pg. 20.

16 Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologica*, question II, First Article, objection 3, Answer to the *Sed Contra* in Anton Pegis, *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, Pg. 18.

17 Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologica*, question II, Second Article , Reply to objection 2 in Anton Pegis, *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, Pg. 20.

18 Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologica*, question II, Third Article, Answer to *Sed Contra* in Anton Pegis, *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, Pg. 22.

*Summa Theologica*. The first argument is that from motion.<sup>18</sup> This argument relies on our sense perception of the world, which informs us that there is motion. It utilizes the Aristotelian doctrine of causality, outlining potentiality and actuality. Moved and mover cannot go on in an infinite regress, so it is necessary to arrive at an unmoved Mover which is understood as God. Although Aquinas makes use of Aristotle's notion of the unmoved mover, he gives it an entirely different skew and meaning, applying it to the Christian Creator-God whose effect the world is.

The second way of the proof of God's existence is from the nature of *efficient cause*.<sup>19</sup> There is a hierarchy in the world of sense perception illustrating the order of efficient causes. There is no scenario where a thing is known to be the efficient cause of itself. It would be absurd otherwise, for a thing would have to be prior to itself, which is impossible. So there is the need to admit of a first cause among efficient causes.

The third argument is taken from *possibility and necessity*.<sup>20</sup> In nature there are things that are possible to be and things not possible to be. If at one time nothing was in existence, it would have been impossible for anything to have begun to exist, and even now, nothing would have been in existence, which is absurd. Therefore not all beings are merely possible, but there must exist something the existence of which is necessary. Otherwise there would be an infinite regress for things to have their necessity caused by other things. So we must have a being whose existence is its own necessity, not receiving it from another, but rather causing the existence of others.

The fourth way is the argument from the hierarchy found in things.<sup>21</sup> Things are found to be more or less good, true, noble and the like. But more or less are said of different things as they

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<sup>19</sup> Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologica*, question II, Third Article, Answer to *Sed Contra* in Anton Pegis, *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, Pg. 22.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologica*, question II, Third Article, Answer to *Sed Contra* in Anton Pegis, *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, Pg. 22-23.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologica*, question II, Third Article, Answer to *Sed Contra* in Anton Pegis, *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, Pg. 23.



resemble in their different ways something which is the maximum, as a thing is said to be more or less according as it more nearly resembles that which is in gradation. Therefore, there must be in being something which is to all beings the cause of their being, their goodness, and any other perfection.

The fifth and final way is the argument from the governance of the world.<sup>22</sup> Things in nature that lack knowledge for instance natural bodies, act for an end as evident from their acting ways. It is not fortuitous that they achieve their end, but rather by design. Whatever lacks knowledge cannot move towards an end, unless directed by some being endowed with knowledge and intelligence.

### **Evaluation and Conclusion**

Anselm must have been aware of the two extremes of rationalism and of faith represented by Berenger and by Peter-Damian, and so was conscious of 'the dangers of exaggerating reason vis-à-vis faith and of faith vis-a-vis reason. Also, Anselm did not formally and explicitly distinguish the objects and methods of the two spheres of faith and reason. This lack of demarcation leads him often into confusion. The delineation of the two domains will later come in the 13<sup>th</sup> century with the influence of the Aristotelians, who would put reason to use as a preamble to faith.

Aquinas delineates three ways that faith can utilize reason. First, to demonstrate those truths which are preamble to faith, and have a necessary place in the science of theology. Second, 'to give a clearer notion of certain similitude, of the truths of faith...'. And third, 'to resist those who speak against the truth either by showing that these statements are false, or by showing they are not necessarily true'.<sup>23</sup>

Anselm's position rests upon the primacy of faith. We must recognize that like St. Augustine, Anselm allowed reason no independent validity. For both, reason was an instrument

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22 Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologica*, question II, Third Article, Answer to *Sed Contra* in Anton Pegis, *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, Pg. 23.

23 Gordon Leff. *Medieval Thought: Augustine to Ockham*, (London, Merlin,1958). Pg.99.

demonstrating what was already believed. Of itself, reason could not add to certitude, although it could give additional evidences of its truth.<sup>24</sup> Richard McKeon goes even further to make faith for Anselm a prerequisite for any kind of knowledge at all. He says that for Anselm, it is important that Faith precedes understanding, since of the two sources of human knowledge, reason and faith, faith can exist without reason, but reason cannot exist without faith. In rational enquiry, there must be a foundation of faith in the principles of the enquiry, and in the principles of the understanding itself.

Anselm does not make such an explicit distinction between the two spheres, but all the same it is not too much to say that he is groping his ways confusedly towards such a distinction. In fact, though we should wish to make Anselm into a precocious Thomist, there are some interesting passages in his writings that hint at the kind of position that Aquinas was later to adopt. For instance, in *Cur Deus Homo*, Anselm admits that the incarnation goes beyond the powers of the human mind, but that we can show that higher reasons are hidden in the mystery. Even if we do not know them there are reasons hidden in the mystery of the incarnation. The same point is made in the *Monologion* with regards to the Trinity that though inexplicable, demands belief as one would reach the limits of his own reason in the realization that such a thing exists, even though one cannot explain it.

Incomplete, confused and undeveloped as Anselm's ideas are, he is feeling his way tentatively towards the theory of analogy that will play a central role in Aquinas' theology, and in general towards the distinction between the proper spheres of Faith and Reason which Aquinas and subsequent thirteen century Aristotelians were to make so clearly. But unfortunately Anselm simply did not have the concepts and distinction available to make his intention clear. He was thinking at a time before the introduction of the whole Aristotelian philosophical *corpus* and he did not have a complete conception of what

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<sup>24</sup> Richard McKeon ed. *Selections From Medieval Thinkers*, (New York, 1929). i. 142.

'natural reason' or philosophy was capable of, what it can comprehend, and what its boundaries were. "Reason" for Anselm would not have precisely the same meaning and the same resonances as it had for Aquinas and for 13<sup>th</sup> century philosophers. Also, Anselm was not able to distinguish between the sphere of theology and that of philosophy as he was not acquainted with the Aristotelian conception of "science" with all its elements of material and formal objects, the role of the principles, the notion of 'subalternation' etc. which was to become in the hands of the 13<sup>th</sup> century thinkers such a portentous instrument of clarification, but also of obfuscation and mystification. Anselm could not clearly state as he might have wished, the relation between faith and reason, but we now can know with clarity those intentions as that reason was to some extent capable of understanding God and the things of God prior to faith and independently of faith.

I think that Anselm lacked the terminology that Aquinas had, especially derived from Aristotelian metaphysics. Yet, Anselm's thought, though incomplete, undeveloped, and a little wanting in its logical categories, was gradually making its way towards the distinction that Aquinas was so able to make with greater facility and clarity. *Reason* could not have had the same connotation for Anselm as for Aquinas. Though Anselm was very much impregnated by Augustinian ideas, he was able to Part Company with Augustine. But he did pave the way to subsequent encounter between *faith* and *reason* as found its highest expression in Aquinas.

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