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Research Paper

PROOFS ON THE EXISTENCE OF GOD: NON CREDO UT INTELLIGAM, OR

ANSELM AND AQUINAS: REDEFINING NON-BELIEVERS AS IRRATIONAL FOOLS

St Anselm and St Thomas Aquinas, as Christians, believed that God exists because He has revealed Himself in His Word (Genesis 1:1) and in the world of His creation. It is interesting to note that the two most influential proofs on the existence of God came from two people who did not doubt His existence, and in fact believed in Him blindly, guided by faith alone. This engrained bias (faith) and belief in God would ultimately reveal their proofs and arguments to be directed toward a certain result. Anselm wrote that it is the nature of faith that desires knowledge; “credo ut intelligam” means it is “my very faith that summons me to knowledge.”¹ And it is indeed his devout faith and love for God that summoned him toward the knowledge of devising a way of proving His existence based purely on logic and reason (the Ontological Argument). In Chapter 1 of the *Proslogian*, Anselm writes:

I do not even try, Lord, to rise up to your heights, because my intellect does not measure up to that task; but I do want to understand in some small measure your truth, which my heart believes in and [loves]. Nor do I seek to understand so that I can believe, but rather I believe so that I can understand. For I believe this too that ‘unless I believe I shall not understand’” (Isaiah 7:9).²

It is in a similar manner that St Thomas, in *Summa Theologiae*, developed a series of proofs using the cause of effects – from the works of Plato and Aristotle – to prove the existence of God from things found in nature as the Unsurpassable, the First Mover, the

¹ Karl Barth, *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum* (Faith in Search of Understanding) (Cleveland: The World Publishing Co, 1960), 18.

² “Anselm on God’s Existence” *Medieval Sourcebook: Anselm: On the Existence of God*.
<<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/anselm.html>> (23 March 2005).

Primary Cause, the First Ruler, and the “Ultimate End To All Things.”³ From the *Proslogian* and the *Summa Theologiae* two ecclesiast philosophers using reason and logic devise a system of thought that proves the existence of God “undoubtedly,” but ultimately says nothing about God’s nature.⁴ His nature, they believe, is incomprehensible to humans but reflects the great Creator’s creation. Aquinas writes that “we are as blind as owls in the light of the sun” when it comes to knowing what God is.⁵

As Anselm and Aquinas created these reason-based proofs, it seems ironic that very little is said regarding their own reasons for creating these proofs; furthermore, it seems almost unreasonable and illogical to use reason and logic to prove the existence of a Supreme Being when nothing can be known about that Being. This paper hopes to provide a clear presentation of the two major series of proofs on the existence of God, their definitions, and a brief description of the lives of the two philosophers that devised these proofs not for their own faith, but in the hope that the “fool” who says “there is no God,” will ultimately be proved foolish from the rational, natural and ontological proofs of God’s existence.⁶ Looking at the lives and proofs of Anselm and Aquinas, light will be shed on how they attempted to prove the existence of God, and hopefully the reader will glean an understanding of the motives and reasons that led them to these proofs.

Little of Anselm’s secular life is known. He was born in 1033 in Italy, near Aosta, and at the age of 23 he left home because of a quarrel with his father. He spent his time roaming throughout France visiting schools and monasteries, gathering an education on the way. In 1060, Anselm joined the Benedictine abbey of Bec and quickly made a

³ Charles Hartshorne, *Anselm’s Discovery: A Re-examination of the Ontological Argument for God’s Existence*. (Lasalle: Open Court Publishing Co., 1965), 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Francis Selman, *St. Thomas Aquinas: Teacher of Truth* (Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark Ltd., 1994), 10.

⁶ “Anselm on God’s Existence”

name for himself under the tutelage of Lanfranc.⁷ In 1063, Lanfranc moved to the new monastery founded in Caen by William, the Duke of Normandy, and Anselm became prior at Bec.⁸ He held the position of prior until 1078 when he became abbot.⁹ At Bec, Anselm was able to write his thoughts on philosophy and theology down. His works while at Bec include the *Monologion* (1076), the *Proslogion* (1077-78) – which is the text where his famous ontological (based purely on reason) proof appears – and his four philosophical dialogues: *De grammatico*, *De veritate*, and *De libertate arbitrii* (1080-85), and *De casu diaboli* (1085-1090).¹⁰ When Lanfranc, then Archbishop of Canterbury died in 1093, King William the Conqueror, previously William (the Duke of Normandy), requested Anselm to replace Lanfranc as the new archbishop.¹¹ The rest of Anselm's life was either spent in dispute with William the Conqueror, William Rufus, and Henry I arguing about royal control of the ecclesiastical world or in exile from England. Anselm died in 1109.

In the year 1077, as the prior of the Benedictine abbey of Bec in France, Anselm made one of the “greatest intellectual discoveries of all time” while attempting to boil all of what Christians understand as God into one “single premise:” the existence of God can be proved using logic and reason and is in fact an “analytical proof.”^{12,13} This Ontological proof appears in *Proslogion*. Since Anselm believed that God is rational, and what He does is rational, and since humans are blessed with reason, we should then

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ “Life and Works” *Saint Anselm*. <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/anselm/>> (9 April 2005).

¹¹ “Anselm on God's Existence”

¹² John H. Hick and Arthur C. McGill, *The Many-faced Argument: The proof for the existence of God that is as provocative in the 20th Century as it was in the 11th Century... Anselm's Ontological argument* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1967), 3.

¹³ Charles Hartshorne, 3.

be able to some extent understand the rationality of God's actions. Anselm believed that the following proof had proved the existence of God so undoubtedly that even the thought of God not existing, cannot exist.¹⁴ By understanding or defining God as "that than which a greater cannot be conceived," Anselm assumes the premise that to exist only as a concept is inferior to existing in concept and reality. His proof would appear as follows:

Given that God is "that than which a greater cannot be conceived" and *if* it is greater to exist in reality and in concept than existing in understanding alone, *then* it is contradictory to say that God exists in human concept but not in reality, because then the one "that than which a greater cannot be conceived" is one than which a greater can be conceived, explicitly, a being that exists both in concept and in reality.^{15, 16}

Anselm adds the following justifications to his proof: even the fool who "[says] in his heart 'there is no God' (Psalm 13:1, 52:1) ... understands in his thought 'something greater than which cannot be thought' even if he does not think it exists." He continues by referencing an artist and a conceived piece of artwork that has not yet been created.

He says that:

For when a painter thinks ahead to what he will paint, he has that picture in his thought, but he does not yet think it exists, because he has not done it yet. Once he has painted it he has it in his thought and thinks it exists because he has done it ... And certainly that greater than which cannot be understood cannot exist only in thought, for if it exists only in thought it could also be thought of as existing in reality as well, which is greater ... if ... that which greater cannot be thought exists in thought alone, then that than which greater cannot be thought turns out to be that than which something greater actually can be thought, but that is obviously impossible. Therefore something that which greater cannot be thought undoubtedly exists both in thought and in reality.¹⁷

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ John H. Hick and Arthur C. McGill, 3.

¹⁶ "Anselm on God's Existence"

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

In Chapter III and Chapter IV of *Proslogion* he presents nearly identical proofs that show it is impossible to conceive that God does not exist, and how the fool who denies the existence of God is truly a fool who denies reason and logic.¹⁸ And, that even if humans deny God, they are involuntarily accepting the concept of God. Anselm ends his proof in a closing prayer, “My thanksgiving to you, good Lord ... For what I first believed through your giving I now ... understand through your illumination that even if I did not want to believe that you are, I would be unable not to understand it.”¹⁹

A little over a century after the death of Anselm, St. Thomas was born in 1225, into a noble family. His father, Landulf, the descendent of the great wealthy count of Aquino, sent his son, Thomas, to the famous abbey of St Benedict at Montecassino for schooling. Thomas soon left that school and traveled to Naples, where he was first introduced to Aristotelian thought; the standard discipline of the universities.²⁰ In 1242, to the dismay of his father, he joined the Dominican Order of Preachers and relinquished all possessions and revenues, and adopted the practice of strict poverty.²¹ Because of this, and the fact that his family did not support his decision to enter a “mendicant order” and become a “begging friar,” he was captured on his way to Paris by his brothers and put under house arrest for over a year.²² During house arrest his knowledge of Scripture grew extensively. In 1246, St. Thomas arrived in Paris, and soon left with St. Albert the Great, who became his mentor in Cologne. From 1254 to 1266, Thomas wrote extensively, and it was not until 1266 (very late in his writing career) that he began working on the piece that would become *Summa Theologiae*, the text that includes his

¹⁸ John H. Hick and Arthur C. McGill, 5-7.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 8.

²⁰ Francis Selman, 1.

²¹ *Ibid*.

²² *Ibid*.

five natural proofs on the existence of God. He died in 1274 after a prolific career of writing commentaries on books of Scripture; he spent very little of his time formulating and writing proofs on God.

According to Thomas Aquinas we know by natural reason that God exists but we cannot know what God is. In his *Summa Theologiae* he says that “God is altogether above everything, it does not follow that he cannot be known in any way at all but that he surpasses anything we can know about him, which means that we do not comprehend him.”²³ This idea of God as the Unsurpassable, the being that exists above everything else, is identical to Anselm’s. “To show that God exists, we have to begin with the things we see and do know” he asks, in other words, before he begins, what are we *given*, what can we *assume*, and what are the definitions of the terms we are using.²⁴ St Thomas believes that what God is, is impossible to know, but it is possible to know what God is not. He believes that one way to know that God exists is by the cause of effects. He establishes five arguments for the existence of God, or “the Five Ways,” which can all be found in Aristotle and Plato, and are not unique in themselves.²⁵

His first argument starts with what is given: there is motion in the world, things are moving.²⁶ The argument is as follows:

1. Things move, and movement is change.
2. Whatever moves has the potential to move.
3. It is impossible for potential to “actualize itself.”
4. And it is impossible for there to be an “endless series of actualizers”
5. Therefore, there exists a “First Actualizer.”²⁷

²³ *Ibid*, 7.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 7.

²⁵ *Ibid*.

²⁶ Norman L. Geisler, *Thomas Aquinas: An Evangelical Appraisal* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Co., 1991), 119.

²⁷ *Ibid*.

His fourth premise requires some clarification. He justifies this step by saying that an infinite series is impossible because successive movers move only when they are moved by the First Mover. Nothing moves the First Mover, so the First Mover is God.

His second proof is on the argument of “Efficient Causality” and is as follows:

1. “There is an order of efficient causes in the world.”
2. However nothing can be the cause of itself.
3. And “no series of efficient causes” can cause their own self.
4. Therefore, there exists a “First Efficient Cause.”²⁸

He justifies his second premise by saying that “if something were its own efficient cause, then it would be prior to itself, which is impossible.”²⁹ The third premise can be restated: no later cause can occur without a prior effect. Therefore the infinite chain has no beginning; consequently, later events can not happen.

His third argument is entitled “the Argument of Contingent Beings” or “possible beings,” and argues that there are beings where non-existence is impossible. Here is a summary of the proof:

1. Some things exist but can not exist
2. And “something has always existed” because if everything could not exist, then at some time nothing existed.
3. But possible beings do not come from nothing, that is, nothing causes nothing.
4. Therefore, there exists a “Necessary Being.”³⁰

According to Fr Francis Selman, “Thomas’ word for contingent is ‘possibles’ since they are things which can exist and not exist by coming into and going out of existence. If everything were like this there would not be anything, since what can be at one time was not; so there would be nothing because what is not can only come into existence through

²⁸ *Ibid*, 120.

²⁹ *Ibid*.

³⁰ *Ibid*.

something which already exists.”³¹ So for “contingent things to exist there must be some necessary thing,” and this necessary thing is necessary of itself, and is the cause of all contingent beings; thus, it is God.³²

His fourth proof is Platonic in style, and is as follows:

1. There are levels of perfection, and some things are either more or less perfect.
2. “More or less perfection” is understood only through comparison to something most perfect.
3. However, “the maximum of a kind is the cause of the rest of the kind.”
4. Therefore, there exists a “Most Perfect Cause” which caused everything else.³³

This proof is confusing in its wording, but its message is simple. The third premise is saying that “all things are good only because they participate in what is Good.”³⁴ Aquinas concludes from this that “there must be something that is the cause of being, goodness and every other perfection – God.”³⁵

St Thomas’ fifth and final proof is called the “Teleological Argument” and varies greatly from the first four which are causality arguments.³⁶ He says that given all things in nature act for an end, we can assume that this is intended because something that is unaware of its end (an acorn turning into an oak tree) is still directed toward an end by what he calls “Intelligence,” which is God.³⁷ Because only the mind bears intelligence and is capable of “[intending]” things, there must be a mind to all natural things that directs them toward an end. The proof is as follows:

1. “Every agent, including natural agents,” act or are directed toward a beneficial* end.

³¹ Francis Selman, 8.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Norman L. Geisler, 121.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Francis Selman, 9.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

* It is important that the end be “beneficial,” because that is how Thomas claims it is directed. (information supplied by Jane Butterfield (student in Honors 213, Spring 2005, Professor Bryan Smith))

2. What acts for an end bears intelligence.
3. However, “natural agents have no intelligence of their own.”
4. Therefore, they are directed toward their end by an “Intelligence”³⁸

St Thomas believes that the world is rational and works through reason. Because there are laws of nature that are logical, the very order of the universe manifests the wisdom of its Maker, he believes that we are able to know something about the Creator from His creation.³⁹ St Thomas also says that man’s nature desires to see God and that “since a natural desire would not be implanted in us in vain, it is unlikely that is not meant to be fulfilled in some way,” which he says “is in the vision of God.”⁴⁰ However, he believes that we cannot comprehend this in this life, because as humans we are unable to understand “that than which a greater cannot be conceived.”⁴¹ He believes that by the things found in nature, there must exist one first immovable Being, a primary cause, necessarily existing, not created; “existing the most widely, good, even the best possible; the first ruler through the intellect, and the ultimate end of all things, which is God.”⁴²

From Anselm’s proofs, a clear definition of what God is and what can be assumed is presented, and he uses reason and logic to redefine non-believers as irrational fools. Although he makes no suppositions on how God should be known, or how God should be manifested in a religion, he does reasonably prove the existence of a Supreme Being. In a similar way, using his knowledge of Aristotle and Plato, Aquinas played with the difficult concept of infinity and cause of effects, and deduced that there is a God, and that God is the Architect, the First Mover, the Perfect Good, and that He can be partially understood from his creations. Although there is little written about the reasons why

³⁸ Norman L. Geisler, 122.

³⁹ Francis Selman, 10.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Reasons in Proof of the Existence of God, 1270.

Anselm and Aquinas set out to prove the existence of a God that they believed in wholeheartedly; it seems that it was privilege that lead them to their education; it was reason and logic that led them to understanding; and, as they applied this understanding to their lives in religion, they found reason and logic justifying their faith.

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It seems appropriate at this time to digress slightly from the thesis of this paper, and reveal a possible problem in the proofs of Anselm and Aquinas. Anselm defines God as something that a greater cannot be known, or understood. This *given* definition poses a problem because it is not really *given*, that is, it cannot be proven. By defining God to fit his beliefs, he can then accurately justify his definition and beliefs, but not the existence of God. For example, imagine that you can conceive God. Then, by reason of Anselm, God is greater than your conception of God (but keep in mind that your conception of God is God), which would mean that God is either greater than Himself, which could be interpreted as polytheism, or that God can never be conceived, which yields no proof that He exists. Saying that God is greater than anything a human can think up, is not proving the existence of God, and by defining God as “that which a greater cannot be conceived” reveals the problems of his argument: Anselm’s faith and bias engineered this proof. Similarly, for Aquinas, he states *givens*, which can not really be proven (i.e. things change, nothing can be the cause of itself, something has always existed). It appears to me that Aquinas’s and Anselm’s arguments are based on faulty *givens*, and based to prove their points. In other words, their argument is proving their faith, which really says nothing about the existence of God, especially to someone who lacks faith, or rejects St Aquinas’s and St Anselm’s beliefs entirely. Perhaps it was the lack of science and

technology a thousand years ago that helped shape their faith and belief in God. I wonder if these two ecclesiast philosophers were living today would they still supply the *givens* they presented in their original proofs, given that so much of the unknown that used to be contributed to God (and helped shape their beliefs), is now known information that has proof and base in physics and science?

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