

The Ontological Argument (Anselm)

Anselm, a native of Italy who died Archbishop of Canterbury, can be regarded as the first great Schoolman... He wondered whether or not some argument could be found which should be at the same time simple and self-sufficient... his formulation has a distinctive character which has won for it a place of its own in the history of Theism...

Proslogium, c. ii. *That God really exists; although the Foolish man said in his heart, "There is no God."*

Therefore, Lord, Thou who givest understanding to faith, grant to me that as far as Thou knowest it to be expedient I may understand that Thou art, as we believe, and that Thou art what we believe Thee to be. Our belief is this—Thou art a Being than which no greater can be conceived, *quo nihil majus cogitari potest*. *

Is there, indeed, no such nature because *the Foolish man has said in his heart, There is no God?* (Vulgate, Ps. xiii. ver. 1; A.V., xiv. ver. 1). But certainly that very man, when hearing the term, understands what he hears; what he understands is in his understanding, even though he does not go on to understand that such a Being exists.

For there is a difference between having a thing in the understanding and understanding that the thing is in existence. When, for example, a painter prepares in his mind what he is about to produce, he has a conception in his understanding, but he understands that what he has not yet produced is not yet in existence.

When, however, he has painted his picture, he both has it in his understanding, and also understands that the thing which he has now produced is in existence. Even the Foolish man, therefore, is convinced that something than which no greater can be conceived is in his understanding, because when he hears this he understands it, and whatever is understood is in the understanding.

Now certainly than that which no greater can be conceived cannot be in the understanding alone, for if it were only in the understanding it could then be further conceived to be also in reality, which would be a greater thing. **

* Anselm's word *cogitare* is translated "conceived," "thought," "thought of"; the word "imagine" being less appropriate to the intellectual character of the operation in this connexion. *Intelligeri* is translated by "understand."

** In *majus* Anselm includes *melius*. In c. ii. of the *Monologium* he says, "I do not mean greatness in space, like a body, but greatness in goodness and worth, like wisdom." So that what he means is that a thing which is both in our thought and also in reality is a better thing, a thing of more value, than if it were in our thought only: a picture painted has worth beyond that of a composition which remains only in the artist's imagination... There is advantage in re-reading the whole argument with the word "better" or "superior" instead of "greater."

(Selections from *The Literature of Theism...* Second Ed., by Alfred Caldecott and H. R. MacIntosh, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1909, 1, 2-4, Text and Paragraph Structure Modified)