

Introduction to the *Monologion* and *Proslogion*

Philosophers have long been so intrigued with Anselm's celebrated "ontological argument"—and understandably so—that it has been all too easy for them to ignore the rest of the *Monologion* and *Proslogion*. But in fact it is impossible to appreciate either the scope or the true character of Anselm's natural theology without careful attention to the whole of both works. In what follows, therefore, I have attempted to provide a road map through the *Monologion* and the *Proslogion*, paying special attention to the internal structure of each work and the connections between the two. Along the way I have interspersed commentary in which I try to show how the various parts of the works fit into Anselm's project as a whole and to answer questions that frequently occur to readers encountering Anselm for the first time.

I.

The *Monologion* begins with several arguments for the existence of God, arguments that Anselm thinks will convince even an unbeliever. Now right at the outset we are faced with an obvious question. Isn't the enterprise of natural theology—the attempt to prove the existence and nature of God by reason alone, without relying on revelation—just a kind of intellectual parlor game? After all, Anselm was a monk, writing for his brother monks. Obviously they were not on the edge of their seats as they worked through the *Monologion*, in agonizing suspense to see whether God really existed after all. They already believed in God and would go on believing whether a successful argument for God's existence was forthcoming or not. So at first glance Anselm's project in the *Monologion* might seem rather fishy.

A careful look at the contents of the *Monologion* actually reinforces this suspicion. Anselm was passionate and engaging, we are told, and he could write beautiful and captivating prose when he set his mind to it. But for long stretches of the *Monologion* Anselm shows us very little of this passion, and his only concessions to rhetoric seem perfunctory and half-hearted. Instead we find him dispassionately constructing arguments and analyzing language; and while his arguments certainly stimulate the mind, they do little to captivate the heart. And to make matters worse, Anselm already knows what conclusions he must reach in the arguments he constructs and what meanings he must find in the language he analyzes. One begins to wonder whether natural theology is nothing but a philosophical crossword puzzle, a test of ingenuity with a ready-made solution.

So why bother doing natural theology at all? Or more to the point, what is *Anselm* up to when he does natural theology? The obvious answer is that he wants to know the truth. But this answer explains very little until we recognize that for Anselm the truth is not some sort of wispy ideal but an actual concrete *person*. The truth is God; to know the truth means to know God. And so the ultimate aim of natural theology is not knowledge in the sense of *information* but knowledge in the sense of *acquaintance*. Anselm intended his arguments to provide us with a way of becoming acquainted with God.

Now if the truth is a person, we can expect it to have hard edges, as I like to put it. To understand what I mean by "hard edges," consider the analogy of getting to know a friend. I

did not become acquainted with my friends through a quick flash of effortless insight; they are far too complicated for me to come to know them so easily. They do not simply conform to my expectations as if they were characters I was making up out of my own head. They are complex, subtle, nuanced, sometimes baffling, but always unmistakably themselves. Thus, getting to know them means getting to know these hard edges, the rich and varied traits they have quite independently of whether I happen to find out about them, traits that I may discover but certainly do not create.

If it is difficult for us to get to know our friends, with whom we share a common human nature, we can certainly expect that getting to know the person who is truth will be very hard work indeed, since he enjoys an existence far superior to and unimaginably different from our own. Anselm does that work in those difficult passages of bare-bones argumentation. He is trying to come to know a personal truth of such complexity that he needs all the discipline and patience he can command in order to make progress.

One should therefore not wonder where Anselm's passion has gone when he is doing natural theology. The passion is there all along. Anselm cares passionately about loving God, and so he cares passionately about knowing God. But the God he longs to know stretches human reason to its limits. To return to my earlier metaphor: in a landscape of hard edges, it pays to watch your step. The person who carefully considers every move may appear less passionate than the one who rushes eagerly ahead, but she is more likely to reach her destination. The truly passionate person is the one who cares so deeply about reaching her destination that she is willing to ponder every difficult step along the way.

II.

The motto "faith seeking understanding" is often associated with Anselm; in fact, it was the original title of the book he later renamed *Proslogion*. As philosophers typically explain it, the idea of faith seeking understanding means that Anselm begins by believing in God, but merely believing does not satisfy him. He wants to *understand* what he believes. That is, he wants reasons to believe it, proofs that it is true. The implication is that faith strikes Anselm as a little shady, whereas understanding is quite respectable. So the believer who can replace his faith with understanding has made progress in a very desirable way.

But from what I have said so far it should be clear that this way of thinking about faith seeking understanding misrepresents what Anselm is doing. Consider again the analogy between discovering the truth and getting to know a person. Faith is like the initial attraction you might feel for someone you have just met. When you feel such an attraction, you want to get to know that person better. Understanding is like a full-fledged friendship, an intimate knowledge of the friend in all his complexities. Thus, the project of faith seeking understanding is like the activity of working to develop a friendship.

When faith seeking understanding is interpreted in this way, it is clear that Anselm is not hoping to *replace* faith with understanding. You do not work at a friendship in order to get rid of that initial attraction; indeed, if all goes well, the attraction becomes stronger as you get to know your friend better. I say "if all goes well" because of course in human friendship, you

can find that the initial attraction dies when the person turns out not to be what you had hoped. But there is no such risk in faith seeking understanding, Anselm believes, because the better you come to know God the more you will see that he is worthy of all your love. So faith is the passion that sets Anselm on the arduous road to understanding; and understanding, far from replacing that passion, feeds it, focuses it, and makes it all the more powerful. It should be no surprise, therefore, that at the end of the *Monologion*, after all the arguments have been weighed and a measure of understanding has been achieved, Anselm is still talking about faith, and how we can tell living faith from dead faith.

III.

Since Anselm's aim is to acquaint us with the personal truth that is God, he recognizes that merely proving the existence of God is not of much value. We want to know not merely whether God exists but what he is like. Anselm therefore devotes chapters 5-65 (by far the largest section of the *Monologion*) to discussing the divine attributes. He first (in chapters 5-14) discusses God's relation to his creatures, taking pains to emphasize God's complete independence from his creatures and their complete dependence on him.

In chapters 15-27 Anselm explicates and argues for his understanding of God's simplicity, eternity, omnipresence, and immutability. I wish to draw your attention to two noteworthy features of these discussions. First, Anselm often presents arguments hypothetically. That is, he lays down a hypothesis, shows what that hypothesis implies, and then accepts or rejects the hypothesis depending on whether those implications are true or false. Often, in fact, he will use such a hypothetical investigation to show that the hypothesis is true if it is understood in one sense but false if understood in another sense. This procedure is usually clear enough when it is carried out on a small scale, but it can be confusing when (as in chapters 20 and 21) an entire chapter is one elaborate hypothetical investigation. In chapter 20 Anselm argues that if God is omnipresent and eternal, he exists in *every* place and time; then in chapter 21 he turns around and argues that if God is simple and immutable, he exists in *no* place or time. It is not until chapter 22 that he explains how both of these conclusions can be true, as long as we understand the expressions in the right way.

This point brings us to the second important feature of Anselm's discussions in chapters 15-28 (and indeed throughout the *Monologion*). As I have already pointed out, Anselm seems excessively concerned with questions about the proper use of language. For example, what exactly does 'nothing' mean when it is said that God "created all things from nothing"? What exactly does 'everywhere' mean when it is said that God "is present everywhere"? In part this is simply a concern for accurate expression that Anselm shares with most other philosophers. After all, it is not perfectly obvious at first glance what it would mean to say that God created everything "from nothing," and if Christians are going around saying this without knowing what it means, they are simply mouthing empty words. Moreover, some of the things that the expression *might* mean are very odd (as Anselm shows), and it is important to guard against misinterpretation.

But even more important is this: by analyzing certain key expressions he has inherited

from Scripture and tradition, Anselm can gain much greater clarity about the nature of God himself. So, for example, the problem with misunderstanding the claim that "God created everything from nothing" is not simply that one might hold an odd view, but that one might think unworthily about God and his relation to his creatures. Systematic reflection on the language of Christian doctrine is therefore not "mere semantics"; it is always in the service of a better understanding of God. So when you are faced with a passage of linguistic analysis whose point seems obscure (and I admit there are many of them), ask yourself questions like these: "What views of the divine nature is Anselm trying to guard against here? And why does he regard such views as misunderstandings? Is he trying to illustrate connections with other divine attributes? Is he worried about the appearance of an inconsistency with something else Christians typically say about God?" If you can answer these questions, you will find that what initially seemed pointless takes on a new importance.

IV.

The understanding of God at which Anselm arrives can seem no less puzzling than the process by which he arrives there. In particular, it seems that Anselm plays fast and loose with Scripture, taking the Biblical witness at face value when it happens to agree with the results of his arguments, but more often reinterpreting it when it disagrees with those results. There is a great deal of truth in this charge, but Anselm would not regard it as an objection. In fact, I think he would point to it as another reason why natural theology is indispensable. Consider first a very obvious case. Scripture often refers to God as a rock. We immediately recognize this as metaphorical. How? Because (Anselm would say) reason tells us that whatever else God might be, he simply cannot be a rock.

So if we are to sort out the metaphorical from the literal, we must bring reason to bear on our reading of Scripture. And that means that we must do natural theology. That is, we must use our reason to develop an understanding of God that will enable us to recognize when Scripture is using metaphor—not so that we can then dismiss the metaphor as mere rhetorical ornament, but so that we can recognize the literal truth that is being metaphorically expressed. Anselm wrestles with this task throughout the *Monologion* and *Proslogion*. He does not simply keep silent about apparent discrepancies between his conclusions and the teachings of Scripture in the hope that the reader will not notice them. In fact, he goes out of his way to introduce the most recalcitrant passages and then show what reason has to say about them.

Anselm is convinced that if our conception of God does not come from reason, it can come only from our own imagination. This conviction leads us to another reason why natural theology is indispensable. If the God I acknowledge and praise is a construction of my own fancy, I am an idolater, in fact if not in intention. And at a more fundamental level, my relationship with the ultimate truth about the world I live in is askew. The only thing that can save me from being out of synch with reality in this way is reason.

Anselm's confidence in reason is no longer widely shared. But it is a consequence of his conviction that the truth is a person. For surely we can get to know persons; we do so all the time. Of course we never attain an exhaustive knowledge even of our closest human friends,

but through attentive observation we can discover a great deal about them. And what observation does in our acquaintance with human beings, reason does in our knowledge of God.

Anselm's confidence in reason also arises from his conviction that God created human beings in his own image, and that our ultimate happiness is to be found in knowing and loving God. Now having reason is no small part of what it means to be in the image of God. So Anselm believes that God—who is Truth himself—gave us our reason, patterned it after himself, and designed it expressly so that it could come to know him. Our reason is therefore fundamentally at home with the truth.

Notice that the two convictions that justify Anselm's confidence in reason derive from his Christian faith. So we have another sense in which Anselm's project is aptly described as faith seeking understanding: faith not only gives him the passion that impels him to investigate natural theology, it also gives him the confidence that his investigation will pay off in the end.

V.

In chapters 29-65 of the *Monologion* Anselm turns his attention to Trinitarian theology. It sometimes seems that Anselm thinks he is giving philosophical proofs of various elements of the doctrine of the Trinity, just as he gave philosophical proofs of the existence and attributes of God. But if that is what he is doing, there is something remarkably suspicious about the ease with which he manages to "prove" not merely the basic point about the threefold nature of God but even the most abstruse details of Trinitarian dogma, right down to the peculiar technical terminology ("consubstantial," "begetting," "spirating," and the like).

In fact, however, Anselm does not suppose that these arguments would be convincing to the unbeliever in the way that the proofs of the existence of God are supposed to be; and he certainly does not suppose that he, or any other philosopher, would have come up with them if God had not already revealed himself as a Trinity. Nonetheless, it must be admitted that Anselm here shows a greater confidence in the powers of reason than some other Christian philosophers. For many Christian philosophers have held that when it comes to the mysteries of the faith (like the Trinitarian nature of God), reason can at best defend them against objections and show that they involve no logical impossibilities. Anselm, however, holds that once our reason is enlightened by faith, it can come to see that these mysteries are in some sense fitting and inevitable. In other words, from the standpoint of someone who already accepts the Christian revelation, Anselm can explore the doctrine of the Trinity and show not merely that it is coherent but that it in fact makes a good deal of sense—that if only you had known how to examine the matter properly, you would have seen that something like the doctrine of the Trinity had to be true.

In the closing chapters of the *Monologion* Anselm turns his attention to the rational soul, which among all creatures is the closest image of God and therefore the vehicle through which we can best come to know God. He argues that the soul was created precisely in order that it might come to know and love God, and on that basis he constructs an argument for the immortality of the soul. Anselm concludes by considering the three theological virtues—love

(chapters 68-71), hope (chapter 75), and faith (chapters 76-78)—and by offering some concluding remarks about God.

VI.

When Anselm looked back over the *Monologion* he was struck by how complicated a chain of argument it involved. So he began to look for an easier way to reach the conclusions he had argued for in the *Monologion*: a single argument that would prove everything he wanted to prove, without any need for additional supporting arguments for every different conclusion. Anselm's search for this master argument became something of an obsession with him; in fact, he tells us that he began to see it as a temptation and tried (unsuccessfully, as it turned out) to stop thinking about it.

The master argument finally came to him. It is the argument that has come to be known as the "ontological argument" and is laid out in chapter two of the *Proslogion*. The basic idea is almost perversely simple. God is, by definition, that than which nothing greater can be thought. But simply from that definition we can conclude that God does indeed exist. How so? Because, Anselm says, it is greater to exist in reality than to exist merely in the mind. Therefore, if we say that God exists only in the mind but not in reality, we must say that we can think of something greater than God. But God is that than which nothing greater can be thought, and obviously we cannot think of something greater than that than which nothing greater can be thought. So, since the assumption that God does not exist in reality leads to a contradiction, we can conclude that God does in fact exist in reality.¹

Once the ontological argument is in place, Anselm has no difficulty in using it to prove the divine attributes as well. He announces his general strategy in chapter 5: God is whatever it is better to be than not to be. It is better to be just than not just, eternal than not eternal, omnipotent than not omnipotent, and so on. To prove that all of these attributes do indeed belong to God, Anselm simply uses the ontological argument over and over. For example: God is that than which nothing greater can be thought. It is greater to be omnipotent than not omnipotent. So suppose that God is not omnipotent. Then we could think of something greater than God. But obviously we *cannot* think of anything greater than God, since he is that than which nothing greater can be thought. Therefore, God is omnipotent.

One can easily go back and substitute other divine attributes for omnipotence and see that Anselm's master argument—if it works at all—really does generate a whole host of

¹There is a similar argument in chapter 3. The exact relationship between the two arguments—or the two versions of the same argument—is a matter of much philosophical debate. It is clear, however, that the chapter 3 argument has a stronger conclusion. In chapter 2 Anselm concludes simply that God exists, but in chapter 3 he concludes that God cannot be thought not to exist (or, in more modern terminology that is only roughly equivalent, that God exists *necessarily*). Some philosophers have argued that the chapter 3 argument is not vulnerable to the objections often brought against the chapter 2 argument.

conclusions without any need for other arguments.² It produces so many conclusions, in fact, that Anselm is faced with a serious problem. For some of the divine attributes seem to conflict with others. To take one example, omnipotence seems to mean that God can do everything. But God is also supposed to be just, which seems to mean (among other things) that he cannot lie or break a promise. So which is it: is God omnipotent, and therefore able to lie and break promises, or is he just, and therefore not able to do everything after all?

Anselm carefully investigates these and other apparent contradictions throughout the rest of the *Proslogion*. In the case of justice and omnipotence, for example, he argues that God's omnipotence means that he has all power. But lying and promise-breaking are not evidence of power at all; they are evidence of weakness, and if God is all-powerful, he has no weakness. Therefore, God's omnipotence is not merely *consistent with* his inability to lie and break promises; it actually *entails* that inability.

VII.

The usual reaction on reading or hearing about the ontological argument is the feeling that somehow, somewhere, Anselm has slipped something past you. The first and in many ways the keenest attempt to show how the argument goes wrong was written by a monk named Gaunilo, who is known to us solely because of his little "Reply on Behalf of the Fool." Anselm had argued in the *Proslogion* that even the Fool (of whom the Psalmist wrote, "The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God'") would have to admit that God exists, once he thought seriously enough about the concept of that than which nothing greater can be thought. Gaunilo, arguing on the fool's behalf, insists that the fool would not have to admit any such thing. Gaunilo's "Reply on Behalf of the Fool" is included in this volume along with Anselm's emphatic reply to Gaunilo's criticisms.

²But precisely because Anselm moves so quickly in establishing the divine attributes, his arguments raise many questions that are left unanswered. Fortunately the more extended arguments in the *Monologion* usually provide the necessary explanations. The Index will enable the reader to find the passages in the *Monologion* that supplement the arguments in the *Proslogion*.