

Anselm (born 1033CE. died 1109 CE)

Eriugena died in 877 CE. His works were condemned in 1226 by Pope Honorius III as an example of the heresy of pantheism. The empire of the Franks was breaking up due to dynastic rivalries and civil wars. The resulting disorganization of the Frankish principalities made them vulnerable to foreign invaders, especially the Scandanavian Vikings. They had no misgivings about plundering churches and monasteries. So, the intellectual life that has been supported by monasteries and churches was nearly obliterated.

As often happens with conquering peoples, the Norsemen (“Normans”) who established their rule by 911 CE soon assimilated the language, customs and religion of France. Around 1040 CE, “Normandy” experienced a cultural revival. About this time, an Italian theologian named Lanfranc established a school at the rebuilt Benedictine monastery in the Norman town of Bec.

The school became one of the most famous due mostly to the work of someone whom Lanfranc managed to attract: Anselm of Cantebury (originally he was from Italy). His residence at Bec was from 1060 – 1093. In 1078, he was made abbot of the monastery. William Rufus who had inherited the throne of England from his father William, king of the Normans, who had conquered England in 1066, made him archbishop of Cantebury. Things did not go smoothly between Anselm and William Rufus. William was eager to have an archbishop who would not interfere with his ambitions to use the revenues of Cantebury for his own purposes. Eventually, Anselm had to enlist the Pope to block William’s and then his brother Henry’s efforts to control the appointment of bishops.

In spite of these controversies, Anselm managed to write several major treatises that established his fame. He was not entirely

original in his attempts to defend Christian doctrines. The main thrust of his writings was so similar to the ideas of Augustine that he has been called the “second Augustine”.

However, he did some novel things. For one, he attempted to create strict deductive arguments, proofs using “necessary reasons”, for many Christian doctrines. He was not a strict fideist, the sort of religious writer who insists that faith is the only means by which one may be certain of the ideas of one’s religion. Instead of arguing that the use of Reason was just inappropriate and irrelevant in matters of religion, he maintained that Reason and faith are compatible, even though faith is necessary as a precondition of understanding. (“I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand”). In part, it is because of his insistence on the importance of rational argument in matters of religion that he is considered the first of the great medieval philosophers.

So, he tried to demonstrate, not only the existence of God but even such doctrines as the Trinity and the Incarnation, which most later theologians considered prime examples of indemonstrable doctrines, matters of pure faith.

In his *Monologion* and *Proslogion*, he tries to argue from premises that he takes to be self-evident that there is a god who has the attributes of the Christian God: infinitude, immutability and (in *Monologion*) Triunity. In *De Concordia*, his aim is to show how God’s foreknowledge, grace and omnipotence are compatible with human freedom (though he has no doubt that they are compatible). In *Cur Deus Homo* (Why God became Man) he aims to construct a logically compelling explanation of the Incarnation. Initially, he argues for it simply on the grounds of appropriateness. Humanity was damned through the sin of a man.

So, it was appropriate that a man should restore the chance of salvation and it was appropriate that the devil, who had ruined a

man, should be defeated by a man. Anselm realized that this reasoning would not convince anyone who did not already believe in the incarnation. So, he also tries to demonstrate the “necessity” of god’s becoming incarnate, that this proposition necessarily follows from self-evidently true premises. He begins with premises that are generally acknowledged by faith, not just by Christians but also by all theists, especially Jews and Muslims, who recognize the authority of the Bible.

God intended Man for beatitude (supreme happiness) but original sin was a harm against God, which could not be repaid simply by obedience to God since that was already owed to Him. No satisfaction that a man could offer would be adequate to repay a harm done to God. So, it would seem that God’s purpose has been frustrated. But god’s purposes cannot be frustrated. An adequate satisfaction can be offered only by a man who is also God (because of the extent of the satisfaction required). It is therefore necessary that there be a God-man. God must become incarnate.

Like Augustine, Anselm was a Platonist. Unlike Augustine, he had little use for systematic neoplatonists like Plotinus or Proclus. His Platonism is essentially that of Plato himself. This fact is illustrated in his Monologion proof for the existence of God. In essence, the proof goes as follows.

Some things possess the same attribute in different degrees, e.g. beauty or goodness. This common attribute is an attribute of highest degree and exists through itself rather than in something else. In things, there are various degrees of goodness. So, there is goodness in the highest degree and this attribute exists of itself. So, there must be that which is maximally great of itself. If there were several things that existed through themselves, the common attribute of existing through itself is something. So, this attribute must belong to exactly one thing: God.

Anselm thought that this argument is a good one, but he was not entirely satisfied with it, especially because it is highly complex. In Proslogion, he develops what later (thanks to Immanuel Kant) became known as the ontological argument. Anselm says that he worked for a long time on developing this argument. After many failed attempts, he says that one day it suddenly “offered itself” to him. In fact, it is very likely that he remembered something that Augustine had written in a treatise called *On the Moral Behavior of the Catholic Church and of the Manichees*, where he characterized God as a being “than which nothing better can be or be conceived.” In his argument, Anselm prefers to use “greater” instead of “better” and to say that God is “that than which nothing greater can be conceived”.

He presents the argument as an indirect address to the “fool” of Psalm 14 who “hath said in his heart, there is no God”. Even this fool, Anselm says, can hear and understand the words “that than which nothing greater can be conceived” and this fool will have to admit that what he understands exists at least as an idea in his mind or understanding. All that he might be denying is the existence of this being outside his mind. But, Anselm argues, it is impossible to deny that this being exists outside one’s mind. Quoting Anselm:

(1) Hence, even the fool is convinced that something exists in the understanding, at least, than which nothing greater can be conceived. For, when he hears of this he understands it, and whatever is understood exists in the understanding. (But) assuredly that than which nothing greater can be conceived cannot exist in the understanding alone. For suppose that it exists in the understanding alone: then it can be conceived to exist in reality, which is greater. (From the end of ch 2 of Proslogion)

(2) Therefore, if that than which nothing greater can be conceived exists in the understanding alone, (then) the very being than which nothing greater can be conceived exists in the understanding alone

(then) the very being than which nothing greater can be conceived is (after all) one than which a greater can be conceived. But obviously this is impossible. Hence, there is no doubt that there exists a being than which nothing greater can be conceived and it exists both in the understanding and in reality. (From the end of Ch 2 of Proslogion)

(3) And it (that than which nothing greater can be conceived) 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. There is then so truly a being than which nothing greater can be conceived to exist, that it cannot even be conceived not to exist. (From Ch 3 of Proslogion).

(4) Whatever else there is, except thee alone, can be conceived not to exist. To thee alone, therefore, it belongs to exist more truly than all other beings, and hence in a higher degree than all the others ... Why, then, has the fool said in his heart, there is no God, since it is so evident to a rational mind that thou dost exist in the highest degree of all? Why except that he is dull and a fool? (From Ch 3 of Proslogion)

Notice that paragraphs (1) and (2) contain one argument. Paragraphs (3) and (4) contain another. The argument in (1) and (2) involves the notion that a thing is greater if it exists in reality than if it does not. The argument in (3) and (4) involves the notion that a thing is greater if it necessarily exists in reality than if it does not. It is the argument in (1) and (2) that has come to be called Anselm's ontological argument. The argument in (3) and (4) is often disregarded.

Anselm himself may have regarded the argument in (1) and (2) as a preliminary statement of the argument in (3) and (4). This seems to be so, given the reply he made to a criticism of a monk of Marmoutier named Gaunilon.

Gaunilon in his essay *On Behalf of the Fool* objected that if something is greater simply by existing in reality than not existing in reality then many things besides God could be proved to exist, for example, a perfect island. But this is absurd. So, who would be the greater fool - the man who accepts such arguments or the man who offers it.

In his answer to Gaunilon, Anselm says that only God is such that His nonexistence is inconceivable. However excellent an island may be, its nonexistence is still conceivable. Anselm is implying that something than which nothing greater can be conceived is greater than anything else, not just because it exists in reality but because it is conceived to exist necessarily, so that its nonexistence is inconceivable.

But why is God the only thing that exists necessarily? Why not Gaunilon's perfect island? Would not the perfect island also have to exist necessarily? To this, Anselm says that even an island than which a more excellent cannot be conceived would have to be conceived as existing in time. Even if we suppose that the island exists, we can conceive of the non existence of the island at some of the times at which it exists. Given any time at which the island exists, we can conceive that the island did not exist before that time and, so, that it began to exist at that time. By contrast, God cannot be conceived to have a beginning or an end since we can conceive of something greater than anything that could have a beginning or an end. There could be no possible beginning or possible end to that than which nothing greater can be conceived.

But are we in fact able to conceive of that than which nothing greater can be conceived? Gaunilon argued that we could not. He said that the words “that than which nothing greater can be conceived” point to something unique and to something so incomparable that, upon hearing them, he could detect nothing in his understanding but a groping for their significance. So, he found no difficulty in conceiving of the nonexistence of whatever it might be that these words signify.

Anselm replied that we obviously form some conception of that than which nothing greater can be conceived; otherwise, we could not think about it, such as the impossibility of its beginning to exist. If Gaunilon were right in saying that this being cannot be conceived then we could not even say what it is that cannot be conceived. Yet we can do this by using these words, even if we cannot fully comprehend what they refer to.