

# The Ontological Argument. Anselm vs. Descartes

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# THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT IN ANSELM AND DESCARTES

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*Abstract*

Among the rational arguments for God's existence there is the ontological argument, originally put forth – in its classical form – by the scholastic theologian and philosopher Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) and subsequently reiterated, in slightly altered versions, by some of the modern thinkers. The present paper aims to outline a comparative presentation of the ontological argument as formulated by Anselm and Descartes, respectively, and to investigate the ways in which the two Christian philosophers perceived the relationship between faith and reason, between unconditional acceptance of divine Revelation and its expression in the terms of discursive thinking.

**Keywords:** God's existence, ontological argument, faith, reason, scholastic.

*„And so, Lord, do thou, who dost give understanding to faith, give me, so far as thou knowest it to be profitable, to understand that thou art as we believe; and that thou art that which we believe. And, indeed, we believe that thou art a being than which nothing greater can be conceived.“*

*(Anselm, Proslogion II)*

## I. Introduction

One of the most widely debated topics in the philosophy of religion – the theological-philosophical issue of the relationship between

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faith and reason –, has been a constant concern for scholastic thinkers, as well as some major philosophers of modern times. Inquiry and debate on this topic resulted in the attempts of certain theistic scholars at providing rational arguments for the existence of God although, especially with scholastic thinkers, this remained a postulate accepted by faith, on the grounds of divine revelation. Among the rational arguments for God's existence there is the ontological argument, originally put forth – in its classical form – by the scholastic theologian and philosopher Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) and subsequently reiterated, in slightly altered versions, by some of the modern thinkers.

The present paper aims to outline a comparative presentation of the ontological argument as formulated by Anselm and Descartes, respectively, to investigate the ways in which the two Christian philosophers perceived the relationship between faith and reason, between unconditional acceptance of divine Revelation and its expression in the terms of discursive thinking.

How does faith stand in relation to reason? Need faith be justified rationally, or does it provide the ultimate grounds for postulating God's existence, and it is precisely reason that finds itself "in search for understanding?" Can God's existence be proved rationally, can it be argued for by resorting to the laws of logic? Pondering each of these existential questions, medieval Christian philosophers as well as modern ones provided different, yet complementary views on the relationship between unconditional faith and the rational understanding of it; between reason's surrender and self-giving in faith, and the justification of faith through reason; between the belief "that God exists" and the existential "stakes" of belief "in God". To some theistic philosophers (such as the Christian existentialist S. Kierkegaard), the act of faith is completely free and therefore incompatible with any attempt at a rational justification; other thinkers, however, opted for "faith seeking understanding" (Anselm), or even for adherence to religious beliefs based on reason. Within this philosophical context, rational arguments intended to prove the existence of God express, in various ways, the depth and scope of the spiritual inquiry undertaken by theistic philosophers who either followed the Augustinian and Anselmian ideal of understanding one's own faith (already accepted unconditionally and

independently from any arguments), or sought for grounds on which to rest their epistemological certainties (as Descartes did). The ontological argument, as well as the historical one, the cosmological one, the moral one, the teleological one, etc. are as many ways in which Christian philosophers perceived and considered their own faith and/or attempted to root their faith in rational grounds.

In its various forms, the ontological argument in favour of God's existence justifies the belief in the existence of Divinity through the notion of God to be found in our mind. The phrase "ontological argument" was coined by Kant, who takes a critical stance on Descartes' version of the argument.

## **II. Anselm's version of the ontological argument and the Anselm-Gaunilo debate**

In the history of Christian philosophy, the first formulation of the ontological argument, in its "classical version", was put forth by the scholastic theologian and philosopher Anselm of Canterbury who, adhering to the Augustinian view on faith-reason relationship, proceeds to construct a logical argument by which his intellect may "understand what it believes". "Faith seeking understanding,"<sup>2</sup> Anselm's ideal which he repeatedly states in his *Proslogion*, governs his philosophical undertaking and imparts deep spiritual significance to it. Anselm defends his argument in the form of a prayer, in the manner of Blessed Augustine's *Confessions*; thus the "father of scholasticism" confesses, by this very choice, that the One whose existence he argued for, is not merely an object of philosophical research, but first and foremost, the supreme Person and the object of faith. According to Anselm, the purpose of his argument is not to justify/ motivate why he acknowledges God's existence, but to elicit the rational understanding of a truth already accepted by an act of unconditional faith.

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<sup>2</sup> As Anselm originally intended to entitle his treatise „Proslogion“.

I do not endeavour, O Lord, to penetrate your sublimity, for in no wise do I compare my understanding with that; but I long to understand in some degree your truth, which my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand. For this also I believe, that unless I believed, I should not understand. (Anselm 1997, 6)

Although it is written in a more poetic style, rather than a philosophical one, and given the form of a prayer, Anselm's ontological argument fully observes the rules of formal logic; according to Gereby Gyorgy<sup>3</sup>, the conclusion to his reasoning is correctly and properly inferred from the premises. Thus the criticism put forth by various philosophers against his argument attacks not the form of this argument, but the truthfulness of his premises. In assessing his argument, Anselm's critics do not question whether the premises logically lead to the conclusion that God exists, but whether these premises need to be justified in their turn.

According to Baumgarten (2002), the "logic" of Anselm's argument should not be approached from the standpoint of strict rules of formalization and natural deduction, because this argument – namely, his reasoning based on faith, and not leading to faith – was put forth within a completely different framework: that of "ratio fidei", of the ponderings of a mind enlightened by grace on a truth that transcends the mind and is revealed by God.

According to this perspective, attempts at the formalization and logical analysis of Anselm's ontological argument may validate or invalidate a line of reasoning, may reveal that its premises are sound or on the contrary that they themselves need to be justified, but these facts do neither decrease nor increase the merit of reflection (thought) which is, in its deepest sense, the mind's elevation reaching for the mystery of faith, and not a limitation of faith confining it within the horizon of discursive thinking.

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<sup>3</sup> See Gyorgy Geréby, "What Anselm and Gaunilo told each other". *Przedglad Tomistyczny*, 2009, 15: 1-22.

With all its different interpretations – at times divergent, but essentially complementary – the classical version of the ontological argument can be syllogistically put this way:

1. We understand the notion of God as “a being than which nothing greater can be conceived” (*Deus est quo... maius cogitari non potest*) – the definition.
2. According to the Bible, “the fool has said in his heart, *There is no God*” (*Dixit insipiens in corde suo: “non est Deus”* – Psalm 13: 1; Psalm 52: 1).
3. “The fool”, however, understands what he says in his heart.
4. “The fool” himself has in his mind (his understanding) the notion of “a being than which nothing greater can be conceived”.
5. “The fool” believes that “the being than which nothing greater can be conceived” exists only in the understanding, not in reality.
6. What exists both in the understanding (mind) and reality is greater than what only exists in the mind.
7. “The fool’s” opinion, according to which “the being than which nothing greater can be conceived” only exists in the mind (understanding) would lead to the conclusion that we can conceive of something greater than “the being than which nothing greater can be conceived”: that is, a being “than which nothing greater can be conceived”, existing both in the mind and in reality.
8. Denying the existence of God is, in itself, logically incoherent.
9. Thus God exists both in reality and in the understanding (mind) („...ergo, vere es, Domine, Deus meus...”).

Such reasoning by „*reductio ad absurdum*” starts from the concept of God – understood according to the definition put forth by Anselm at the very beginning of his explanation, a concept also present in the mind of the „fool” – in order to infer the existence of God in reality. If reality is rational, reason operates according to the rules of formal logic, and logic cannot break the law of non-contradiction, then a self-contradictory premise can only lead to a false assertion as its conclusion. Therefore, the Biblical text calls the one who denies God’s existence a “fool” (irrational), as he ignores the law of non-contradiction, and contrary to the laws of logic his statement is inconsistent: something “than which

nothing greater can be conceived", can actually be conceived of. The "unreasonable one" formulates such fallacious reasoning precisely because he is "unreasonable"/ "fool" (*insipiens*) – Anselm deems – and he grants to something that is created (the concept in the mind) more importance than he grants to the Creator.

Reference to the Biblical verse about the "fool" denying God's existence emphasizes the aim of the argument: namely, a rational defence of a basic truth of the faith, professing this truth by contrasting it with the otherness ("the fool"/ "the unreasonable, irrational one"), rather than an attempt at discovering a truth for oneself (as with Descartes' case).

Chronologically, the earliest objection to Anselm's argument was raised by the monk Gaunilo who, in his "Treatise in behalf of the fool," imagined a thought experiment where the structure of Anselm's argument is used to prove the existence of a perfect island (similar to the mythical Atlantis). Thus, Gaunilo claims, the actual existence of the perfect island can be inferred from the concept of a perfect island existing in one's mind. However, since such an island only exists in the mind, it follows that Anselm's argumentative method is fallacious, and leads to false conclusions. So Gaunilo does not doubt the logical validity of Anselm's reasoning:

Gaunilo's counter-argument proves that Anselm's argument is too good. Anselm found such a strong argument, that it cannot be limited at demonstrating the actual existence of God. (Geréby 2009, 38)

Answering the monk in his "Apology in reply to Gaunilo", Anselm reiterates his original argument, resorting to the conceptual distinction between the phrase "that than which a greater cannot be conceived" and his definition of God as "the being than which nothing greater can be conceived" (Anselm 1997, 42). As some contemporary commentators point out, Gaunilo might raise the same objection to this reply, so that ever since "both of them have been sitting somewhere opposite each other, two saintly Benedictine genii, and for every move of Anselm, Gaunilo reapplies it, to which move Anselm repeats his

ingenious argument, and they will continue to do so – until judgement finally comes.” (Geréby 2009, 42).

The originality and philosophical worth of Anselm’s ontological argument lies therefore in his attempt at inferring the actual existence of God as the “being than which nothing greater can be conceived”, from the concept of God existing, in this form, in the human mind (including the “fool’s”). Unconditional belief in God, acquired by grace – such faith was also accepted by Gaunilo, whose criticism was directed not against the conclusion of the argument, but against the way it had been reached<sup>4</sup> – informs understanding/ reason and is, in its turn, scrutinized by the mind enlightened by the same divine grace.

### III. The context of the Cartesian ontological argument

Whereas in the medieval age, the very initiator of the scholastic method – Anselm of Canterbury – directed his philosophical thinking towards the possibility for faith to seek understanding, centuries later, at the dawn of modernity, another seminal thinker – René Descartes – placed belief in a perfect, infinite, eternal Being at the core of his *Meditations* on knowledge and existence. Although they belonged to vastly different philosophical ages, the two Christian thinkers, both creators of thought paradigms that dominated entire historical periods, addressed and passed down, each in his own version (depending on each one’s philosophical context and personality), the same spiritual concern that underlies every epoch, and reconciles generations and historical periods: namely, the belief in God. The recurrence of this topic in philosophical thinking seems to suggest that, as Plato would have put it, beside “what has becoming, but has no being”, there always persists “what has being but has no becoming.”

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<sup>4</sup> “It was a fool against whom the argument of my *Proslogium* was directed. Seeing, however, that the author of these objections is by no means a fool, and is a Catholic, speaking in behalf of the fool, I think it sufficient that I answer the Catholic” – this is how Anselm opens, with great oratorical elegance, his apologetic reply to his opponent.

Although the two theistic thinkers converge in their interest in providing rational arguments for the existence of Divinity, the methods they employ, their cultural context, and the aim pursued by their arguments place them within different epochs, different lines of thought, at times even partially contradictory ones (given the complexity and ambivalence of Descartes' attitude towards the scholasticism of his times). Whereas the scholastic theologian of Canterbury accepted belief in Divinity prior to intellectual inquiry and independently from it, Descartes scrutinizes through his "methodological doubt" even the fundamental tenet of theology – the existence of God – and then reasserts it through a strictly rational gnoseological process, not in order to "understand what he believes", but in order to find a foundation enabling epistemological certainties to exist. Does Descartes engage in an ontological commitment in the unconditional act of faith, in his personal relationship with a personal God – a commitment on which he would later meditate with his intellect? In the two main writings where he argues for the existence of a divine Being – *Discourse on Method* and *Metaphysical Meditations* – the philosopher does not suggest a clear answer to this possible question, but merely formulates an epistemology whereby the existence of a real, certain God is absolutely necessary. To Anselm, God was the ultimate goal of faith and understanding; Descartes needs God in his epistemological adventure on which he embarks, by renouncing certainties then regaining them, because unless the concept of God is asserted, all "clear and distinct ideas" might be not just uncertain, but completely false, mere illusions with no intellectual value whatsoever.

As a rationalist philosopher, Descartes rejects certainty based on empirically verifiable data and proposes reason as the sole certain source of knowledge. But in order to operate exclusively according to reason's principles and not be influenced by elements exterior to reason, the philosopher's spirit must be detached, through the method of "doubting", from everything it had believed before, everything it had uncritically "taken for granted." All preconceived notions planted in the mind by education or cultural context, all emotions, the information received from senses, everything not exclusively based on the intellect had to be, therefore, scrutinized through consistent "methodological

doubt"; the purpose, however, was not to remain entrenched in scepticism, relativism or agnosticism, but precisely to obtain – if at all possible for human reason – the certainty of knowing the truth.

His original "method," based on "rules," leads the philosopher to reach, through doubting, a first certain truth (a first certainty): his own existence. "Dubito, ergo cogito; cogito ergo sum." But his own existence could not provide the ultimate epistemological criterion in his search for the certainty regarding realities outside his spirit, as "res cogitans" could be wrong, in several ways, about the acquired knowledge (ideas addressed briefly in the *Discourse on Method* and enlarged upon in his *Meditations*). Thus, from the certain truth of one's own existence, one may derive – as shown in the *Discourse on Method* – the existence of a Creator: "sum, ergo Deus est." Therefore if, as argued in *Metaphysical Meditations*, God exists and He is not a malicious, deceitful "evil genius," knowledge of "clear, distinct ideas" can provide the certainty of access to the truth. "Clear, distinct ideas" (therefore, true ones) have their efficient cause in God.

#### IV. Descartes' ontological argument

In two of his major philosophical works, *Meditations of First Philosophy* (*Meditations* III and V) and *Discourse on Method* (part IV), Descartes carries out an original demonstration of God's existence, based on several versions of the ontological argument. The content of Cartesian texts presenting the ontological argument differs not only from the Anselmian fragment in *Proslogion* 2, but evinces slight differences even among themselves; however these texts have a shared purpose: grounding the conclusion that God exists, in the notion of God (clearly a version of the argument which Kant later termed "ontological").

Having presented, in three distinct parts, his "method" of searching for truth, the French philosopher outlines, in the fourth part of his *Discourse on Method*, a course of reasoning, which he subsequently elaborates in *Metaphysical Meditations*: he demonstrates his own existence starting from doubt, and God's existence starting from his own existence. Adhering to ontological dualism, Descartes puts forth the

distinction between “res cogitans” and “res extensa”: in his view the authentic essence is the spiritual one. If “res cogitans” is able to doubt, this means it thinks; if it thinks, then it exists; and if he, as a finite, imperfect intellect (imperfection inferred from the possibility of doubt, which is inferior to certain knowledge), finds within himself the innate idea of an infinite, perfect Being, then God exists.

Musing on doubt and on the fact that my own being was not perfect (...), I endeavoured to look where I had learned to conceive of something perfect, unlike myself, and I found it obvious that this had to possess a truly perfect nature (...) But this could not be the case with the idea of a Being more perfect than me, because it was impossible to assert that it originates in nothingness. Because it is no less contradictory to say that what is more perfect is a consequence of, and depends on something less perfect, than to say that something comes from nothingness; therefore I could not have this idea from myself. So the only possibility left was that the idea had been put into me by something (a nature) truly more perfect than I was, indeed something having every perfection of which I could have any idea, that is – God. (Descartes 1990, 131)

In *Meditations of First Philosophy*, the existence of God is argued for in two different texts (“Meditation III” and “Meditation V”) which, according to Ludger Oeing-Hanhoff<sup>5</sup>, are two distinct ways of arguing: an *a posteriori* one, based on causality (in “Meditation III”) and an *a priori* one, based exclusively on the content of the notion of God as an infinite Being, possessing every perfection (“Meditation V”).

According to the *a posteriori* reasoning in “Meditation III”, the conclusion that “God exists” can be derived from the idea of God, present in the human spirit – an innate notion, independent from any form of empirical knowledge: the efficient cause of his idea can be no other than God Himself.

Considered in the literal sense, ideas are representations, understood as re-presentations, presentifications or images of the things that can be known through them and in them, or the things as they are represented in the consciousness. (Oeing-Hanhoff 1973, 81)

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<sup>5</sup> See Ludger Oeing-Hanhoff, “Note sur l’argument ontologique chez Descartes et Bonaventure”, *Archives de Philosophie*, 36 (1973): 643-655.

Thus the primary principle of knowledge is, according to the philosopher, the idea of God's existence (both in understanding and in reality, as Anselm would put it), and certainties can be based on it. The spirit first finds in itself the idea of God, and only afterwards does it come to the idea of its own existence. The infinite is not, in this sense, a negation of the finite (in this case, it is only indefinite), but the finite is "a negation of the infinite" (84).

Unlike this *a posteriori* reasoning, the *a priori* ontological argument in "Meditation V" infers God's existence from the very idea of God, based not on the principle of causality, but on the contents of the concept of an infinite, perfect Being. According to this line of reasoning, the idea of a perfect Being who lacks the attribute of existence, which is one of the perfections, would be logically inconsistent and thus false. This version of the ontological argument presupposes, as in the case of Anselm, a "reductio ad absurdum", but in a different way and based on a different definition given to the concept of God. To Anselm, God was "the One than which nothing greater can be conceived," while Descartes sees in the Divinity the notion of a perfect Being who cannot lack any of the attributes. Thus the notion of actual and ever-present existence is entailed by the very idea of God, and the proposition "God does not exist" would break the law of non-contradiction. For this reason, Descartes thinks, we know of the existence of God with a greater degree of certainty than having "clear, distinct ideas" in the field of scientific knowledge, although in his view, the laws of mathematics are the representative expression of epistemological certainty.

If I consider this more carefully, I manifestly find that God's existence cannot be separate from His essence, not even inasmuch as it can be separated from the essence of a right triangle (...), or inasmuch as the idea of a mountain can be separated from the idea of a valley; so that it is no less abhorrent to conceive of a God (that is, an absolutely perfect Being) who lacks existence (that is, who lacks one of the perfections), than to conceive of a mountain without any valley. (Descartes 1993, 61)

### V. Conclusions: Anselm's *vs.* Descartes' ontological argument – a comparative approach

Formulated with different nuances by Anselm and Descartes, resumed in various versions by many philosophers and criticized by many others (including theists), the ontological argument in favour of God's existence is certainly one of the most complex undertakings of this kind in the history of religion. Although they belong to different historical and philosophical epochs, Anselm the scholastic (a saint of the Roman-Catholic Church) joins the modern rationalist philosopher Descartes in their common endeavour to argue, through intellect, for a truth that actually transcends intellect: the existence of God. The manner in which the two philosophers aim to demonstrate the existence of Divinity – a method which, since Kant, has been known as the "ontological argument" – is essentially the same (although slight distinctions undeniably have their importance): they both ground the conclusion that God exists in the human intellect.

To both Anselm and Descartes, the idea of God implies not only the existence of the sole Divinity, but also the existence of particular attributes of this Divinity. Anselm and Descartes start, in their reasoning, not from the vague notion of a cause for the created world, but they draw their conclusions based on clear "definitions" of this – definitions whose absence would invalidate the ontological argument: "the One than which nothing greater can be conceived" (Anselm), respectively "the perfect, sovereign Being" (Descartes). If the "definition" put forth by Anselm were rejected, then his entire argument would collapse. Similarly, without the classical theist notion of God as a "perfect Being" and the postulate of existence as one of the perfections, the Cartesian ontological argument could not stand any criticism and, moreover, could not even be formulated.

According to both Anselm and Descartes, the idea of Divinity found in the mind is an innate one. Although he does not state this explicitly, Anselm contrasts the idea of "a being than which nothing greater can be conceived" with a painting's image in the mind of a painter who intends to make it. Unlike the medieval philosopher, Descartes directly formulates the tenet that the idea of a "perfect, sovereign Being" is

innate (the context of the polemics between empiricists and rationalists made this attitude possible): "...true ideas, which were born with me, of which the first and foremost is the idea of God." (63)

The differences between the two versions of the ontological arguments are peculiar to the thought of each of these two philosophers, and also reflect some of the cultural characteristics of their respective epochs. This is why a comparative approach of their arguments for the existence of God is very important in the exploration of the two philosophical stances (of the philosophical particulars peculiar to each of the two ways of reasoning, of the sense and significance of the conceptual apparatus employed by the two authors etc), and also provides today's philosophers with a chance to approach the spiritual horizon of the scholastic times and early modernity, respectively. If the Anselmian "definition" of God leads to the conclusion that God necessarily exists in reality (because otherwise, something greater than Him could be conceived of, which is absurd), to Descartes the idea of a non-existent God is also logically inconsistent, but for different reasons – namely the understanding of Divinity as a "perfect Being" (the Cartesian "definition" of God) includes the concept of existence, as God's existence is identical with His essence.

Unlike Anselm, who builds his argument against the Other (the "fool" who denies Divinity), the only goal pursued by Descartes is epistemological, aiming to gain further knowledge through the possibility of acquiring certainties, rather than win over a possible opponent. The Cartesian thinking, which is typically modern, starts from himself (his own existence, demonstrated through the possibility of doubt etc.) and ends up returning to himself.

Perhaps the most important difference between Anselm's and Descartes' manner of arguing for the existence of God lies in their different attitudes towards the act of faith, or the relationship between faith and reason. Anselm believes and trusts God unconditionally, and his entire argument is addressed to God in whom he believed. He searched for God because he had found Him, and believed in order to understand rationally. With Anselm, reason understands faith, while faith seeks understanding; reason inquires because the act of faith precedes it, and would be unable to do so unless faith guided it.

Descartes doubts “methodologically”, taking doubt as his departure point. His doubt, however, aims not at skepticism but at acquiring through reason, some certainties in knowledge – certainties of which the first and foremost is God’s actual existence.

Both Anselm and Descartes believe and confess – thus joining in the spiritual endeavour of many other philosophers of all times – that concern with religious faith and the relationship with the personal Absolute remains, to any spirit thirsting for Truth, an inexhaustible source for reflection and intellectual progress, for inquiry, for dialogue (with God, with one’s own spirit, with other philosophers...) and for existential questions.

The idea of “the One than which nothing greater can be conceived,” of the “perfect Being” – “*Essentia immutabilis et aeterna*” (Oeing Hanhoff 1973, 88) – guarantees, according to the two philosophers, the actual existence of God as an eternal, immutable Person (a dialogue Partner, in Anselm’s philosophical treatise...):

Firstly, because I cannot conceive of anything else but God, whose existence may necessarily pertain to its essence. Secondly, because I cannot conceive of two or several such gods. And, admitting now that there is One who exists, I clearly understand that He has necessarily pre-existed all eternity, and that in the future He will continue to exist for all eternity. (63)

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