

# The Virtue of Contemplation and St. Anselm's *Proslogion* II and III

Dennis Sansom  
Samford University

*Saint Anselm's argument in Proslogion II and III has continuing relevance for philosophers and religious people as an illustration of the important virtue of contemplation. The particular way Anselm develops his argument, aside from whether its modal logic succeeds, develops an important aspect of theoretical rationality. Although there are generally two kinds of approaches to Anselm's argument in Proslogion II and III, namely, that which explores what it means for faith and that which dissects its logic, I present a third—its value as an exercise of contemplation. Anselm's Proslogion provides an excellent example of intellectual rigor applied to thinking about a reality which is known for its own sake (i.e., God). In this paper I first trace the development and importance of contemplation in Anselm's philosophical-theological method and follow with an examination of the importance of the virtue of intellectual contemplation. With this understanding, I then analyze Anselm's argument in Proslogion II and III as a contemplative act and show how important intellectual insights follow from it. Finally, I claim that Proslogion II and III as a demonstration of the virtue of intellectual contemplation remains relevant for philosophy and theology.*

## Introduction

My aim is to show that Anselm's argument in *Proslogion* II and III has continuing relevance for philosophers and religious people as an illustration of the important virtue of contemplation. Of course, we can still debate the merits of Anselm's argument, but my interest is to show that the particular way Anselm develops his argument, aside from whether its modal logic succeeds, develops an important aspect of theoretical rationality, an aspect which shows the mind working at its best and which brings a profound satisfaction to the human pursuit to know important and consequential realities, e.g., God.

In the Preface to *Proslogion* Anselm says that the content of what he wrote forced itself upon him, that the more he became focused on what he was thinking, the more certain it came to him to think a certain way about it. The book thus represents “the point of view of one trying to raise his mind to contemplate God and seeking to understand what he believes.”<sup>1</sup> Anselm is even reluctant to call the work a book; afraid that if he does the reader may think that he is mainly a researcher or recorder of third-party information. He prefers to call it a tract, drawing attention to its testimonial feature, to its description of the mind in the state of contemplation.

Although there are generally two kinds of approaches (whether favorable or critical) to Anselm's argument in *Proslogion* II and III, namely, that which explores what it means for faith and that which dissects its logic, I present a third—its value as an exercise of contemplation. Anselm's *Proslogion* not only provides an excellent example of someone's intellectual rigor

---

<sup>1</sup> Anselm, *Proslogion*, in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 83. Instead of calling Anselm's argument the “ontological argument,” a title given it by Kant in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, I refer to it as the argument of *Proslogion* II and III.

applied to thinking about a reality which is known for its own sake (i.e., God); it also affords its reader a similar experience of intellectual rigor about a reality of intrinsic worth.

In this paper I first trace the development and importance of contemplation in Anselm's philosophical-theological method and follow with an examination of the importance of the virtue of intellectual contemplation. With this understanding, I then analyze Anselm's argument in *Proslogion* II and III as a contemplative act and show how important intellectual insights follow from it. Finally, I claim that *Proslogion* II and III as a demonstration of the virtue of intellectual contemplation remains relevant for philosophy and theology.

### **The Development of Contemplation in Anselm**

By the time Anselm publishes *Proslogion* in 1078, he has developed a method of contemplation, which began under the influence of Lanfranc at the monastery of Bec in 1059. In *Proslogion* prayers, meditation, and philosophical-theological reflection come together as similar cognitive acts shaped by Anselm's contemplative practices. He titles the first chapter, "A rousing of the mind to the contemplation of God" and begins it with a prayer taken from Psalms 26:8, "I seek your countenance, O Lord, Your countenance I seek." He mentions in the Preface that he wants to raise the *mind* to contemplate and understand the reality of God. This effort continues what he attempts in the prior *Monologion*, whose subtitle is "An Example of Meditation of the Meaning of Faith." Anselm finds a way in contemplation to raise the mind to God.

Anselm enters the monastery of Bec to study with Lanfranc, who was recognized has one of the most influential logicians in Europe. Lanfranc lectured on Aristotle's *Categories*, and in his debate with Berengar of Tours over the Eucharist, he relied on Aristotle's discussions in the *Categories* on the relationship between accidents and substance and the difference between primary and secondary substances to make the point that in the Eucharist the primary substance of the bread and wine changes but the accidental properties of the bread and wine remain. However, Anselm is more interested in what Aristotle says about words, sentences, and the modal possibilities of propositional claims and writes a commentary on the *Categories*, called *De Grammatico*.<sup>2</sup> Although he acknowledges Aristotle's explanation of syllogisms to produce demonstrable knowledge, he focuses on the capability and means of language to communicate. He shows in the book his lifelong interest in what words do in communication with others and the correct ways to make qualifications about what exists. In fact, he calls it an introduction to dialectics. In a detailed discussion about whether "literate" and "white" are qualities (what things possess) or substances themselves, Anselm reasons that, if we understand their use, they must signify a substance, and if we reject this signification, then we do not understand them. The proper use of words in sentences about the modal possibilities of existing things conveys understanding not only about language but also about the realities. He says, "The meaning of the words is what really binds the syllogism together, and not just the words themselves."<sup>3</sup> We gain

---

<sup>2</sup> See R. W. Southern, *Saint Anselm: A Portrait in a Landscape* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 39-66, for an account of Lanfranc's influence on Anselm.

<sup>3</sup> *De Grammatico* in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, 128. It could be that Anselm works with Boethius' commentary on Aristotle's *Categories*.

knowledge not merely due to the structure of a syllogism but also because of the meaning of the words; and when words are rightly used about substances, we become more aware of the substances' reality and thus better able to explain them.

Close to the time Anselm writes *De Grammatico*, he publishes *Prayers and Meditations*. It is a book of twenty-two prayers and meditations of deep personal reflection (he expresses his melancholy in many of them), but it is also a careful parsing of words, sentence structure, and paragraph formation. He aims to communicate the intentions of prayers and meditations on God and also the needed linguistic clarity to make the intentions evident. They are ways to reason about faith, showing that the personal quest for intimate communication with God is closely aligned with philosophical inquiry.<sup>4</sup> David Hogg maintains that Anselm's use of rhythm, repetition, meter, and blending of Scripture in the prayers creates a unique aesthetic genre in which the rationality of faith becomes more evident to the reader.<sup>5</sup> Although the prayers are densely written (in fact, Anselm tells his readers to read them slowly when they are in a calm state of mind), their liturgical flow naturally draws the reader, who is already accustomed to the liturgy of worship and reading the Psalms, to ponder their rationality as well as their content.

As Anselm matures as a devotional monk, he also matures as a logician. For him the vocation of a monk to seek God in prayer and meditation compels him to develop greater logical and linguistic ways to deepen and communicate what he experiences in prayer and meditation. By the time Anselm writes *Monologion* and *Proslogion*, he has developed his dialectical method, a conjoining of meditation and logic. By using dialectical scrutiny in questioning what words and sentences can communicate, we are better able to explain and describe the objects of our meditation. For Anselm this scrutiny typically starts with asking questions and then analyzing the best ways to answer the questions. Dialectic is thus a dialogue between rival views (often people), advancing analysis by revealing the meaning of what we can say about such matters as God's existence, the nature of truth, the cause of evil, etc.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Virtue of Intellectual Contemplation**

My interest is not only to show that Anselm's argument in *Proslogion* II and III is a contemplative act, but also to show that it exemplifies an important virtue, one necessary to enrich human life. A look at Aristotle's account of intellectual contemplation helps us see this.

Aristotle claims that intellectual contemplation is the most important and most rewarding virtue. It fulfills the best part of human nature and thus brings the greatest sense of *eudaemonia* (happiness as "a rightly guided life"). Although Aristotle's presentation and development of the virtue of intellectual contemplation in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is subtle and also inextricably

---

<sup>4</sup> For a good discussion of *Prayers and Meditations*, see R. W. Southern, *Saint Anselm and his Biographer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), 34-57. Although specific dates are not given to the *Prayers*, Southern dates them close to *De Grammatico*.

<sup>5</sup> David S. Hogg's *Anselm of Canterbury: The Beauty of Theology* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2004), 29.

<sup>6</sup> See Hogg's *Anselm of Canterbury: The Beauty of Theology*, 55-66.

part of the book's overall structure and argument, the following, derived from Books VI and X, is its basic argument.

One of the main concerns in Book VI is to distinguish practical rationality from theoretical rationality, with their corresponding expressions of wisdom. Aristotle does not dwell much on the psychological distinctions between them; instead, he emphasizes the objects of their knowledge. He says, "One whereby we contemplate [theoretical] those things whose first principles are invariable, and one whereby we contemplate those things which admit of variation" (VI, i, 5).<sup>7</sup> We have the capacity to recognize and reason about first-principle realities, whose characteristics are that they exist and are invariable. The actual knowledge of such realities Aristotle calls *nous*.

Moreover, the content of this theoretical knowledge can be taught to others, in that we can derive knowledge claims from the *nous* (VI, i, 3). This happens because we can use the content of theoretical knowledge as major premises in demonstrable arguments from which we derive knowledge about the first-principles and, when duly restricted, knowledge of the world. The result of this activity is wisdom. "Wisdom must be a combination of Intelligence [*nous*] and Scientific Knowledge [*episteme*]: it must be a consummated knowledge of the most exalted objects" (VI, vii, 3). It is wisdom because it is both rationally demonstrable and about the most exalted objects.

Because we can identify and appreciate first-principle realities and can deduce conclusions from this knowledge, we should not only claim that these first-principle realities are knowable, but also that they enable us to generate further knowledge claims. Hence they are not ineffable *per se* or the objects of *via negativa*, for if they were, they could not become premises of demonstrable arguments. However, knowledge derived from contemplation provides the major premises from which the contemplative can infer knowledge, and, by ordering his or her life according to this knowledge derived from the objects of contemplation, the contemplative becomes wise. Wise people experience the successes of practical living because they have already contemplated, or meditated upon, first-principles.

In Book X, Aristotle claims that intellectual contemplation is a virtue superior to the moral virtues (e.g., courage, temperance, justice, etc.) and produces the greatest satisfaction to our desire to obtain a final aim—"the activity of the intellect that constitutes complete human happiness—provided it be granted a complete span of life, for nothing that belongs to happiness can be incomplete" (X, vii, 7). This activity superlatively rewards us because it is the divine within us (X, vii, 8). Admittedly, Aristotle does not spell out this claim in great detail, yet we should not assume that he has adopted the Platonic notion of the immortal substance of the mind. The divine in us is not an eternal substance (that would be too contrary to Aristotle's insistence on substances as formed matter, existing within the confines of time and place) but a capacity to think about eternal, invariable truths the way gods must think about them. As eternal beings,

---

<sup>7</sup> All English translations are from *Aristotle: In Twenty-Three Volumes, XIX, The Nicomachean Ethics, The Loeb Classical Library*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

their thoughts are invariable and truthful, and in contemplation, we do not become gods but participate in their kind of activity.

In summary, according to Aristotle, the benefits of the contemplative life are: 1) it grants self-sufficiency because we do not need any practical actions (X, vii, 4); 2) it generates and values pure leisure (X, vii 6); 3) it is the most divine activity possible (X, vii, 8); 4) it creates the greatest pleasures for us (X, vii, 9); and 5) it is the human activity most loved by the gods (X, viii, 13).

From Aristotle's account we see a distinct and unique value of contemplation. It combines two important human experiences—the experience of wonder and the effort to think truthfully. In contemplation we momentarily lose a preoccupation with ourselves and become impressed with the reality of invariable realities. Hence, we become more aware of an external realm of experience larger and greater in value than ourselves. Furthermore, it is inherent to the thinking process to think correctly (however that may be rendered) about the objects of our experience. Errors and falsehoods occur, and we resist them because they frustrate our natural desire to know the world. When we successfully contemplate invariable realities, not only recognizing their ontological status but also reasoning demonstrably about their status, we satisfy a basic and essential trait of our human experience as thinkers—we want to know. Of course, because of the time restraints of contemplation, we cannot contemplate all the time; however, it is natural for us to attempt it and we experience gratification when it works.

Even if one were a Hobbesian naturalist (or a variation) about the nature of the mind (a material receptacle subject to the pressures of matter in motion), one cannot underestimate the appeal of intellectual contemplation to our society. It is a common theme to our intellectual tradition that the more we rationally appreciate objects (whether God, art, or nature), the greater we fulfill a unique role in the universe. There have always been irrationalists and skeptics, but equally so, there have always been promoters of rational contemplation. In fact, it is from those who attempt to explain the arresting characteristics of the overwhelming experiences to which every generation gives recognition that our tradition has learned more to appreciate art, understand the wonder of the universe, cultivate the humanities, clarify the meaning of faith, and so on.

It is not possible to account for the full range of the maturation of Western culture without seeing the value given to contemplation. Alasdair MacIntyre points out that in Aristotle's view *phronesis* (practical wisdom) requires life in the *polis*, because it is only in communal living that we learn how to act in ways that fulfill our nature.<sup>8</sup> The truth of MacIntyre's point is that without a tradition of people who over a period of time develop certain rational skills, that enable people to reach a degree of self-identity, it does not make any sense to talk about what is required to fulfill human nature. What it is true to say of *phronesis* is true to say of intellectual contemplation: it represents a vital part of our cultural heritage because within our cultural traditions we have found certain experiences (which Aristotle would say are about those exalted,

---

<sup>8</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 97-102.

invariable realities) that require a contemplative rather than a pragmatic approach. The more we cultivate and exercise this contemplation, the clearer these realities become and the more they become part of our shared experiences.

Moreover, Bertrand Russell (no friend of metaphysical and religious speculations yet an interesting admirer of Anselm's "Ontological Argument") rightly makes a claim for the value of intellectual contemplation: "Philosophy is to be studied, not for the sake of any definite answers to its questions, since no definite answers can, as a rule, be known to be true, but rather for the sake of the questions themselves; because these questions enlarge our conception of what is possible, enrich our intellectual imagination and diminish the dogmatic assurance which closes the mind against speculation; but above all because, through the greatness of the universe which philosophy contemplates, the mind also is rendered great, and becomes capable of that union with the universe which constitutes its highest good."<sup>9</sup> Whether this "union" is part of our nature or not, our tradition nonetheless includes it in our self-definition as humans. We value those things which we can appreciate in their own right, and when we rigorously contemplate them, our other rational exercises take on a unique and worthy value as contributing to the experience of intellectual contemplation. One way we realize the value of education and life-experiences is to see how they have equipped us to concentrate clearly and accurately on those "exalted, invariable realities" for their intrinsic worth. In this light, intellectual contemplation serves an important role in the cultivation of human virtue, a virtuous society, and the enrichment of the human life.

### **Anselm's *Proslogion* II and III as An Exercise in Intellectual Contemplation**

*Proslogion's* reputation somewhat distracts us from Anselm's purposes for it. It has been handled primarily as a philosophical proof for God's existence. In fact the titling of chapters II and III as the "Ontological Argument" comes from Kant's assessing it according to the categories of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Because Kant positions his analysis of an argument for God's existence based upon the idea of God under what he calls the "transcendental dialectic" of pure reason (in which he exposes the illusions of reasoning), he attempts to show the argument's misuse of reasoning since it violates the confines and limitations of pure reason that prevent us from thinking we can postulate the existence of something merely by thinking of it.<sup>10</sup> There cannot be an ontological argument for anything. The idea of 100 dollars in a pocket does not entail that they are in reality in the pocket. We cannot predicate the existence of the content of an idea merely because we think it must exist. Ideas must have empirical content before they can refer to realities. Although God may be a perfect being, we cannot postulate God's existence based upon the logical extension of the idea that, as a perfect being, God must exist.

Unfortunately, much of the subsequent history of philosophy and theology has awarded Kant the victory over Anselm's argument for having refuted it, thus rendering it only a historical

---

<sup>9</sup> Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1912), 161.

<sup>10</sup> Kant discusses the ontological argument in Transcendental Doctrine of Elements: Transcendental Dialectic: Book II: Chapter III: The Ideal of Pure Reason: Section Fourth in *The Critique of Pure Reason*.

curiosity. It may be valid to reject an argument for God's existence that pretends to show that a perfect being must exist; however, this was never Anselm's intention or his argument. Kant himself mentions that he is addressing Descartes' ontological argument in which Descartes claims that existence is a necessary ingredient in the clear and distinct idea of a Perfect Being. However, Anselm's approach is different. *Proslogion* starts with an experience, mentioned in the Preface and chapter one, and then reasons that, because of such an experience, a necessary being must exist. It starts in meditation upon an invariable reality and then demonstrably shows in a two-part argument that God must exist in reality and in the mind and that God must exist as a necessary being. The issue of God's existence is more about how we characterize God's existence, than about how existence is a necessary predication of the idea of a Perfect Being. Anselm's argument has implications for ontology in that it shows that necessary existence is real, but it is grounded first of all on an act of contemplation upon an experience. This is a point Kant's dialectical assessment of the ontological argument misses altogether.

It is true that Anselm applies rigorous logical steps to his argument, that these steps in themselves are interesting and instructive, and that in the *Preface* he says, "I began to ask myself whether *one* argument might possibly be found, sufficient in itself to prove that God truly exists," but all this should not distract us from the work's primary purpose—"The awakening of the Mind to the Contemplation of God," the first chapter's title. The book starts like a prayer and Anselm addresses the argument to God; however, we misread it if we say the book is a simple fideistic devotional text. For Anselm, faith seeks understanding, and thus the move to demonstrable reason is as natural to faith as is the recognition of God as "that than which nothing greater can be conceived." This recognition that faith in God compels one to try to understand that faith is the hallmark of his Augustinian tradition.

Anselm is an Augustinian philosopher and Benedictine monk, who understands, following this tradition, that the more we apply the full capacity of our rational abilities to understand correctly intrinsically appealing realities, the closer the mind gets to the reality of God. Augustine said, "I desire to know God and the soul"<sup>11</sup> (*Soliloquies*, I, 1, 5), and for him, as well as for his famous disciple, the right epistemology for the task is contemplation.

When Lanfranc objects to Anselm that he does not quote enough sources, his reply is that everything he says is Augustinian. He implicitly quotes a tradition and thinks without footnotes. Anselm has so absorbed the Augustinian perspective that for him the life of the spirit is also the life of the mind.

Richard Southern maintains that three presuppositions underlie Anselm's argument, and that they are at the heart of the Augustinian tradition.<sup>12</sup> First, there are degrees of being, and "beings only in the mind" are of a lesser reality than "beings in the mind and reality as well." There is a hierarchy of being, with God as the highest being. Second, a necessarily existing being (i.e., God) has more reality than a contingently existing being in reality. Third, the word God refers to the same reality in two statements "God exists only in the mind" and "God exists

---

<sup>11</sup> Quoted from Robert Meagher, *Augustine: An Introduction* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), 36.

<sup>12</sup> Southern, *Saint Anselm: A Portrait in a Landscape*, 132-134.

outside the mind”; otherwise the identity would be just the identity of grammatical structure, not of reality *per se*. Theological language can speak unequivocally about God as the highest reality. Southern observes that these presuppositions are Platonic but have been shaped by Augustine’s Christian reworking of Plato. If so, then it is easy to see why for Anselm intellectual contemplation is also theological contemplation, for the more we think about reality *per se*, the closer we get to conceiving the reality of God as the unsurpassable being.

Moreover, Anselm has one advantage his fifth century spiritual and intellectual mentor did not have—the use of dialectic, which he had learned from Lanfranc at Bec. From Boethius of Rome, to Fulbert of Chartres, to Berengar of Tours, to Lanfranc of Bec, philosophical theologians had been making more precise the logical distinctions between necessary, probable, and contradictory relationships. The power of words are important in the Augustinian tradition, and with a method of dialectic, someone like Anselm could see how words, logically related in the right ways, could discern the reality of God. Not only can words inspire us about God, but they can also, through dialectic reasoning, describe the nature of God as whatever it is better to be than not to be.

It is no oversight on Anselm’s part that he does not support his points with quotations from Scripture or authorities. Thoroughly enmeshed in the monastic world of liturgy, scriptural readings, prayers, sermons, and studies, Anselm does not feel the need to reiterate what everyone has already read. In his world of written prayers, meditations upon scripture, and disputations on authorities, the use of dialectic is consistent and helpful. Through dialectic words gain exact meanings and yield new insights into the meaning of scripture and the clarifications of authorities. David Knowles makes a similar point, “As a basis, [Anselm] presupposes an unshakable faith in the revealed doctrines as expressed in precise and familiar traditional terms. His dialectic, therefore, is directed neither towards establishing revealed truth nor towards criticizing it; his primary aim is to penetrate with dialectic the truth held by faith.”<sup>13</sup> Anselm’s dialectic tries to understand better the implacable objectivity of the experience of God, not by categorizing the experience according to abstract formula, which might successfully work in other intellectual pursuits, but by reasoning consistently with the nature of the experience of a reality than which nothing greater can be conceived.

Anselm never sees logic as the mere measure of words’ meanings and their relations. For him, dialectic reasoning is not a tool to which reality should conform. Rather, it is an intellectual means by which the mind conforms to the experience of God. In the service of the knowledge of God, dialectic becomes intellectual contemplation of the highest order because it equips the person to know, with precision and succinctness, ultimate reality for its own sake. Through dialectic one contemplates in the highest form.

Of course, chapters II and III of *Proslogion* are interesting for what they say about the name of God, as an example of model logic, and as a representation of medieval thinking, but I

---

<sup>13</sup> David Knowles, *The Evolution of Medieval Thought* (New York: Vintage Book, 1962), 101.



also think they are interesting as a display of the virtue of intellectual contemplation, of thinking rigorously and precisely on a reality for its own sake.

*Proslogion's* argument is a good exercise in intellectual contemplation. By meditating upon God as "that than which nothing greater can be conceived," the logical implications of God as the "nothing greater" start to become clearer to our understanding. Anselm concludes that God must exist in reality as well as the mind, and that God's nonexistence is contradictory; hence God is a necessarily existing being. However, the meditation yields more fruit than just these two conclusions.

Robert P. Scharlemann observes that more can be said from the name of God than Anselm's two conclusions brought out in *Proslogion*. Taking his lead from Karl Barth's *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum*, Scharlemann draws out additional demonstrable conclusions from Anselm's argument.

We can also conclude the following (the first two choices are already in *Proslogion*: 1) in reality and the mind, and 2) a necessary being):

3a) We think: "We must think of God as necessarily existing, yet even so, he may not really exist because our thinking may be deceptive about reality."

3b) We think: "We must think of God as necessarily existing, and he does also necessarily exist."

Obviously 3b is greater than 3a. The phrase "nothing greater" would be meaningless if 3a is greater than 3b, because that would mean that being deceived is a more accurate way to know reality than knowing something truthfully to be in reality and not only the mind.

4a) God exists and cannot not-exist.

4b) God is free to exist or not to exist.

Clearly, 4b is greater than 4a. If 4a were possibly greater than 4b, then to be forced to be something is greater than freely to be something. In one sense, 4b appears to be a contradiction, which it would be if the point were to say that, when an object exists, it does not exist. However, that is not the point of 4b. The point is God's freedom. 4b indicates that God's freedom is greater than even the idea that God must exist, because divine freedom is so great that God freely could chose not to exist, hence revealing that the conditions of existence do not limit God's greatness.<sup>14</sup>

However, I think we can go further than does Scharlemann with the dialectic. Which is greater:

---

<sup>14</sup> Robert P. Scharlemann, *The Being of God: Theology and the Experience of Truth* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1981), 147-149.

5a) A God who is perfect and cannot suffer; or

5b) A God who is perfect and can suffer.

If 5a were greater, then we would divorce God from any real, historical sense of existence, because suffering colors all historical existence. Yet, if God cannot be involved in historical existence so as to remain perfect, then obviously God would be limited by historical existence, and thus not a greater being. 5b therefore must be about God.

6a) A God who is so powerful and cannot die; or

6b) A God who is so powerful that this God can die and stay God.

6b must be greater because it maintains that even death cannot cancel divine existence, that God can experience death and remain divine. If 6a were true, then as in 5a God would be limited by an experience that is metaphysically off-limits to God. This comparison has implications for the traditional doctrine of the Trinity in which God the Son experiences death as inherent to His mission, but also experiences resurrection as inherent to the work of the Holy Spirit.

7a) A God who is so sovereign that no human will can be contrary to God's will; or

7b) A God who is sovereign through the free will of creatures.

The implication of 7a is that the only way God can be sovereign is by strictly determining all states of affairs, even those which we would call voluntary human acts. This view means that God must control everything. However, it is a far richer and versatile understanding of sovereignty to think that God's will is never thwarted by the free will of creatures, that though they may rebel or ignore God's sovereignty, nonetheless, God uses their actions to further a goal.

8a) A God who is so much the Creator that this God cannot be affected by the creature; or

8b) A God who can be both Creator and creature.

If 8a were the greater, then we would conclude that God is great because we cannot know God in any way resembling our creaturely existence. This view resembles the apophatic theology found throughout many religious traditions, but apophaticism, in its literal sense, leads to agnosticism, for it means that we cannot find any facsimiles or analogies between creation and God. Obviously, it would be greater to think that God has created the world in ways in which such facsimiles and analogies can exist, and furthermore, that God has created the world with a capacity for God to become identified with it. This dialectical observation has implications for the traditional teaching of the Incarnation in which the Word becomes flesh and in so doing does not contradict the nature of the Creature and creation.

The dialectic of the argument rests upon the claim that we know when something is greater in one state of existence than in another state of existence. It is a simple point of thought, and when applied to God, it enables the mind to conceive in clearer ways the magnitude of God's being, and helps us to contemplate more truly upon God's reality. As Scharlemann says, "To

*think* that than which no greater can be thought is to be in the presence of the structure of being.”<sup>15</sup> This is an exceedingly great claim, but in this type of reasoning, the contemplation upon God as the unsurpassable being aligns with God’s being, not in the sense of a mystical union in which the thinker and God become the same, but in the sense that the impress of God’s reality compels us to think a certain way. This is when contemplation becomes demonstrable reasoning.

In Aristotle’s terms, with the *nous* of knowing God as “that than which nothing greater can be conceived,” we can reason demonstrably to conclusions about God and can better order our thinking and hence living in light of that knowledge.

### **The Relevance of Anselm’s *Proslogion* II and III for Philosophical or Theological Study**

Steven M. Cahn makes the point that none of the well-known “proofs” for God’s existence has any relevance for theism or atheism.<sup>16</sup> He raises three objections: first, one either has an experience with God or not, and a proof cannot provide that. Second, the proof cannot vouchsafe the foundation of religious morality because only God’s will does that, and that assumes one already knows God regardless of the merit of the proofs. Third, the proofs are interesting philosophical examinations (i.e., logical analyses) and should not become religious issues because philosophy and religion are separate concerns.

I do not think that Cahn’s objections are the last word on the relevance of the “proofs,” but I believe that the way I approach Anselm’s argument meets his challenge. As for the first objection about approaching *Proslogion* II and III as an occasion for intellectual contemplation, the argument’s value is not in proving God’s existence but in eliciting serious reflection about an ultimate reality in its own right. The question of whether it settles the issue of God’s existence is a secondary, not primary concern. In fact, Cahn’s objection seems to imply that for a proof to work successfully one has to demonstrate God’s existence independently from thinking about it; otherwise, for Cahn one begs the question. If that is the case, then Cahn asks too much because it is impossible to ascertain the existence of anything without thinking about it. My point is that Anselm’s argument does not try to derive God’s existence from the idea of God; rather, it represents among other things (e.g., the use of dialectic in modal logic) the extent of concentrated contemplation upon the name of God. Such a concentration helps justify the place of the intellect in our approach to life, and it exemplifies an important characteristic of the way we define ourselves as rational humans.

Because I’m not trying to justify morality upon a metaphysical proof for God, Cahn’s second objection is not a pressing concern.

However Cahn’s third objection is a concern. The implication is that the argument may interest some philosophers who like to analyze logically theological arguments, but it has no use for religious people because (from the way Cahn sets out the distinction) religion works with

---

<sup>15</sup> Scharlemann, *The Being of God*, 151.

<sup>16</sup> Steven M. Cahn, “The Irrelevance to Religion of Philosophic Proofs for the Existence of God,” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Apr., 1969): 170-72.

different criteria for valid claims, appealing to what is more subjectively satisfying. It is right to see that there is a difference between the way people do philosophy and do religion, even though it is hard to say absolutely what it is. I suppose the most direct way to indicate their differences is that they emphasize different topics and texts, but many of the same approaches and questions are found in each. Each is concerned with questions of reality, morality, beauty, warranty, etc. Philosophy is not more objective than religious belief because it is supposedly more public and rational. If it were, then the test would be that the public actually assents to and applies what philosophers say, which obviously is not the case. Furthermore, philosophers should admit that presuppositional commitments or hunches about reality underlie their intellectual claims. Although philosophers may rigorously examine their own presuppositions, they are not without them. My point is not to impugn philosophy as a distinct intellectual discipline but to impugn the facile claim that philosophy is more trustworthy than religion because it is more objective.

Religion does not always try to be private and nonrational. Religious people maintain that what they know has public implications and that what they know can be persuasively communicated either through doctrines, life style, or an institution. Thus Cahn's point that a clear boundary separates philosophy from religion and that the "proofs" overstep the boundary is unwarranted.

As an example of the human virtue of intellectual contemplation applied to a reality appreciated for its own characteristics and intrinsic value, religious people also can be interested in Anselm's argument. If we approach the argument, not as an attempt to derive God's existence from the name of God without committing circular reasoning at the same time, but as a serious intellectual effort to recognize and explicate a reality for its own sake, then we can see how the argument has value for both philosophers and theologians. By approaching the argument as an occasion for intellectual contemplation in the highest sense, we do not have to separate philosophy from religion to safeguard what relevance the argument may have, as Cahn has done.

### **Conclusion: The Argument as a Classic**

Merleau-Ponty in the introduction to *Signs* says that we rarely ever, in the history of thought, just pronounce ideas as false and others as true. Rather the history of thought "dismantles or embalms certain doctrines" according to prevailing interests into messages, museum pieces, or classics. The distinctions are not hard and fast but are important to account for why we treat texts the way we do. What presently interests me is his description of a classic. "These do not endure because there is some miraculous adequation or correspondence between them and an invariable 'reality'—such an exact and fleshless truth is neither sufficient nor necessary for the greatness of a doctrine—but because, as obligatory steps for those who want to go further, they retain an expressive power which exceeds their statements and propositions."<sup>17</sup> I think Anselm's *Proslogion* in its entirety, especially chapters II and III (even though I probably have done Anselm an injustice by not including all twenty six), is a classic, because as a great example of rational contemplation upon the reality of God for its own reward, it prepares us,

---

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Albert William Levi, *Philosophy as Social Expression: Plato, Aquinas, Descartes, Moore* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), 314-15.

among many things, “to go further” in the “expressive power” of the “statements and propositions” of contemplative reasoning to recognize and contemplate the invariable realities. It is an example of a thinker engaging the mind at its best, encouraging us to do the same.

Perhaps this appeal accounts for one of the reasons why *Proslogion* II and III has had the wide-spread attention of such diverse thinkers as G. W. F. Hegel, Bertrand Russell, Karl Barth, Charles Hartshorne, and Iris Murdoch. Certainly, for many, the argument is a museum piece. Interestingly, however, it still appeals and will probably continue to do so as an example, not only of modal logic and medieval thinking, but of the particular virtue which we either overtly or implicitly maintain is important to us—that is, the virtue of intellectual contemplation.