

The Ontological Argument and¹⁴⁸ Theological Education

by Dayton Haskin, S.J.

Even as organized religion becomes less fashionable in many corners, and perhaps especially in the university, a centuries-old scholastic debate about the existence of God has been resurrected to be pursued by the Academy with a new vigour. The so-called Ontological Argument, which St Thomas and Kant each in his turn demolished, is alive and well and alleged to have been more energetically debated in the last decade than ever before in its history.¹ That this phoenix has risen from its ashes is not necessarily best accounted for by seeing it as an event in the war between belief and unbelief. For in large measure, today's philosophers have occupied themselves with the new modal arguments of men like Malcolm and Hartshorne because of the fascinating logical problems which they entail. Moreover, in the course of the history of the argument, the sides have not been chosen by a strict division between those of the faith and those outside. St Anselm thought he had come upon a worthy insight when he first proposed the argument. But just as surely St Thomas thought the argument inadmissible—without by any means intending to deny God's existence. There is a lesson here, albeit an embryonic one, for those who are carrying on another current debate—the one about whether theology can or should be done with detachment or commitment.²

To be academically respectable, some would say, theology must be pursued with scholarly objectivity and freedom from ecclesiastical constraints. Its integrity as a discipline hinges on dispassionate examination of the data and the freedom to draw conclusions wholly in accord with the evidence. One's faith-commitment as such should not influence his theology. But others have argued that, on the contrary, a faith-commitment is necessary for fruitful theological investigation and reflection; that it is part of the data, and that the nature of religious faith is such that it can be grasped only from within.³

The problem is nearly as familiar as it is thorny. The Ontological Argument serves as an apt arena, I think, for sorting it out and for pursuing its ramifications. For this argument skirts about in that ill-defined area which practitioners of the philosophy of religion, of logic, and of theology all stake some claim to as being part of their respective provinces, that shifting terrain which an earlier generation

¹See Jonathan Barnes, *The Ontological Argument* (London, 1972), p. viii.

²See E. J. Yarnold, S.J., 'The Theologian in the University', *The Month* (March, 1972), pp. 79-82.

³See Roderick Strange, 'Faith and Theology in the University', *New Blackfriars* (July, 1972), pp. 307-13. Bernard Lonergan's *Method in Theology* (New York & London, 1972) provides an illuminating perspective from which to consider this debate: see esp. pp. 115-24.

conceived of as a sort of buffer zone separating the truths we know by reason from what we know by faith.

The early history of the Ontological Argument

Almost nine centuries have elapsed since St Anselm of Canterbury gave what has come to be known as the Ontological Argument its first definite formulation. First in the *Proslogion*, and later in his reply to the objections of one Gaunilo, Anselm argued from the idea of God to the existence of such a Being. *Aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari possit* ('something than which nothing greater can be conceived'): such was the definition of God with which Anselm began; and in a real sense the whole argument hinges on this definition.¹ For Anselm goes on to argue that this greater than which nothing can be conceived exists necessarily. The argument originally appeared in the form of a prayer, but Father Copleston has translated it into a syllogism:

God is that than which no greater can be thought.

But that than which no greater can be thought must exist, not only mentally, in idea, but also extramentally:

Therefore God exists, not only in idea, mentally, but also extramentally.²

Anselm cleverly points out that if that than which no greater can be conceived existed only in the mind, a greater could be conceived, namely, a being which existed in extramental reality as well. This seems to assume that the *quo maius* formula will lead us to an independent, unconditioned being. Certainly Anselm uses this formula as his formal criterion for identifying its own referent, after rejecting a series of candidates which do not measure up.³

But it has commonly been objected that Anselm errs when he attempts to deduce from his concept an extramental reality which corresponds to it. When the monk Gaunilo posed such an objection, by comparing Anselm's idea of God to the idea of a possibly non-existent Lost Island, Anselm insisted in reply that God (unlike such an Island) necessarily exists and that His non-existence is inconceivable.⁴

But Thomas Aquinas rather than Gaunilo struck the death-blow

¹Actually, Anselm employs three other phrases as well. But they are quite similar and he seems to use them interchangeably and to regard them as synonymous—a not very helpful practice according to the canons of modern logic.

²F. C. Copleston, *A History of Philosophy, II: Mediaeval Philosophy, Augustine to Scotus* (London, 1950), II, 162.

³See Sylvia Fleming Crocker, 'The Ontological Significance of Anselm's *Proslogion*', *The Modern Schoolman* (November 1972), p. 33. This article explores the 'ontological meaning' of the *quo maius* formula, arguing that Anselm's concept of 'greater' has to do with being—the more independent, underived and unconditional a being is, the greater or more real it is.

⁴Norman Malcolm thinks that this addition actually constitutes a different proof although Anselm himself did not distinguish two separate arguments. See 'Anselm's Ontological Arguments', *The Philosophical Review* (January, 1960); rpt. in *The Existence of God*, ed. John Hick (London, 1964), pp. 47-70. Sylvia Crocker's article (pp. 33-56) is premised, however, on the basic unity of Anselm's argument.

to the argument. For after the refutation in the *Summa Theologica* (1a. Q2.1. ad 2), the Ontological Argument lay buried for some four centuries, until Descartes resurrected it in his *Meditations*. Thomas recognized that Anselm was assuming that the being whose existence his *quo maius* formula led him to was to be identified with the Christian God.¹ He argued that it is precisely the actual existence of such a Being as Anselm would define that those who hold that God does not exist deny. Thus Thomas levels Anselm's *a priori* argument by denying that we have *a priori* knowledge of God's nature; he claims that our idea of such a being derives only from its effects, that God's existence can be known only *a posteriori*.

The fundamental disagreement between Thomas and Anselm suggests some thing worthy of note for the detached-versus-committed theology debate. Thomas, although he himself believed in God and expended no little energy elsewhere in devising his Five Ways to prove His existence, was more sensitive to the possible objections of the adversaries than was Anselm. One might assume that because Anselm attempted to prove God's existence that he had non-believers foremost in his mind. This does not necessarily follow. Karl Barth, for instance, has claimed that Anselm was not intending to argue against the atheist. And while Anselm does explicitly mention the Fool of the Psalm who says in his heart, 'There is no God', he nevertheless addresses himself to God in prayer and not to the Fool. By casting his argument in the form of a prayer and using the term 'God' as a name rather than as a descriptive term, Anselm makes of God his primary audience; and the reader, as it were, overhears the prayer of a man who is certainly not prepared to discard his belief if he cannot find rational proof for it. Anselm is most accurately understood, as it is generally recognized, as operating within the Augustinian theological tradition—*credo, ut intelligam*—in an era which made no careful distinction between philosophy and theology. For him, faith provided a measure of *a priori* knowledge of God's nature; and his proof only confirmed that of which he was already convinced.

The case of Thomas is slightly different. He too belonged to the community of believers. But he was acquainted with the Greek and Islamic thought which had been made available in the West in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries; and he was at once the beneficiary and the canonizer of the distinction between philosophy and theology. When, as a philosopher, Thomas uses the term 'God', he uses it not as a personal name but as a general term, a common noun.² Moreover, he knows, as Anselm presumably did not, that a respectable philosopher such as Aristotle could hold that the world itself is eternal; while Anselm assumed it impossible that the world

¹P. F. Harris offers a similar objection to 'neo-scholasticism' in 'Natural Theology and the Historicity of Faith', *New Blackfriars* (January 1973), pp. 12-13.

²See Barnes, pp. 68, 70.

could be thought to be eternal and unconditioned, and assumed further that the *quo maius* formula leads to a *spiritual* Being, without parts or temporal or spatial extension.¹ St Thomas, in short, envisions a wider audience and attempts to operate within a larger and more neutral framework than Anselm did, a framework which would admit a universe of discourse which might, ideally, be shared by theist and atheist alike.

The study of the argument

Studying this early history of the Ontological Argument will not close the discussion of the relative merits of teaching and studying theology from a detached or a committed perspective. Rather it will contribute to our grasp of what is at stake in this debate. Reflection upon various approaches which one might take to this study highlights the fact that the discussion about committed and detached stances entails issues as diverse as the missionary implications of Christian commitment and the epistemological status of the act of faith. In order to explore the advantages of the study of the argument for the current debate about theological method, I shall have occasion then to reflect upon the reasons why the argument is still studied and to enlist the aid of Michael Polanyi's insights into epistemology, which attune us to the crucial role that faith (in the broad sense of the term) plays in every form of human knowledge.

First, a consideration of approaches to the study of the Ontological Argument. I originally came to the study of the *a priori* argument for the existence of God somewhat perforce, as perhaps most people who examine it do, while pursuing a university degree. I mention this to call attention to what we implicitly recognize—that such study is seldom initiated, nor is it usually carried through, with a simple desire to know. Yet faculties often require a certain study; and the various possible rationales for requiring a study will suggest, and to some extent determine, the approaches which may be taken in teaching and studying it.

One rationale for requiring a student to investigate the Ontological Argument finds its justification in the tradition of Christian apologetics. The educated Christian—and even more the clergyman!—should be familiar with The Tradition; and he should be able to present the *vera doctrina* and be equipped to refute the adversaries. The fact that many Christians now regard this approach as old-fashioned tends, however, to vitiate its merits. The student may look upon both the argument and apologetics generally as something of a historical curiosity; as so much residue from a naïve age, more or less useful as it can be contrasted with the current situation. So, what those who set the topic intend to be studied with commitment actually comes to be looked upon with curious detachment. Moreover, the argument itself has not won universal acceptance among

¹See Crocker, pp. 45, 52.

Christians by any means; in fact, it merits especial disfavour in some circles.

This suggests a second rationale for requiring such a study. It finds firm roots in a sort of post-Kantian disjunction of faith and reason. Its classic spokesman is Kierkegaard: 'whoever . . . attempts to demonstrate the existence of God . . . [is] an excellent subject for a comedy of the higher lunacy'. Its confidence in biblical revelation renders philosophical proofs irrelevant.¹ Those who would insist upon the need for commitment if theologizing is to be fruitful find a ready ally here, hoping that in studying the argument the student will discover the futility of philosophical argumentation in matters of faith. If this happens, the alleged disjunction is confirmed; and—it is presumably hoped, though judiciously not required in examinations—the student grows in faith. At its best this avenue leads to deeper faith; at its worst it generates a stubborn, if subtle, anti-intellectualism.

Still another rationale finds more adherents among teachers of philosophy than among theological educators: this sends the student to the debate to grapple with a traditional philosophical problem and to discover for himself the difficulty of clear thinking and writing in the matter. The student sees the sloppiness of much of the previous argumentation and becomes aware of his own hopelessly confused thinking. If he is a good student, he will be moved to learn logic for himself. More probably he will defer not to the authority of religious faith but to that of the trained logician.

One might also study the Ontological Argument from the point of view of the history of philosophy. The great thinkers of the past are studied for their intrinsic worth and interest, and the relevance of the topic to contemporary life is left for the student to discover for himself. While at first blush studying other men's ideas seems to minimize the opportunity for original thinking, it may well prove to be the most exacting and the most fruitful of the various approaches. First, the student must come to terms with the arguments of each of a range of thinkers, with the writings of men who wrote in a variety of circumstances, in different languages, for different audiences. In each instance he must move away from his own peculiar preoccupations to uncover the accurate sense of another's thought. His sense of what is at stake in the argument will be sharpened by comparing and contrasting the different forms it takes and the different ways in which it is refuted. Nor will he remain content for long with studying so many antiquated curiosities. If he gives himself to the task of understanding others' thoughts, he will perforce grow more eager to think through the problem for himself. He will choose one side perhaps only to defect later to the other, and then to return to the first. He will formulate his own

¹See John Baillie, 'The Irrelevance of Proofs from the Biblical Point of View', in *The Existence of God*, pp. 204-10.

position, alternately eager to try it out on an audience of his own envisioning and yet aware of its inadequacies. He will explore too the relationship between faith and reason and discover the unavoidable role that basic assumptions and faith-commitments play in human knowledge.

Epistemological concerns

It is at this point that Michael Polanyi offers something germane. For epistemological concerns, especially in studying the Ontological Argument, are paramount. And the debate over a detached or committed stance in doing theology is at base epistemological, its chief concern presumably being for finding the surer avenue to truth.

In *Personal Knowledge*,¹ this Hungarian philosopher of science repudiates Locke's classic denigration of faith as an inferior form of knowledge and maintains that all knowledge depends upon some sort of prior belief. Polanyi shows that science, the bastion of 'objective knowledge' according to the popular imagination, itself entails tacit assumptions and intellectual passions. No matter how original any thinker may be, he necessarily works within a 'fiduciary framework'. In the West he presupposes a cultural heritage which values truth, reason, objectivity, and 'facts'; and he must use a commonly shared language to formulate and communicate his insights. One who would become a scientist affiliates himself therefore with the scientific community, learns its vocabulary and grammar, accepts its traditions and authority (even if he will later challenge certain features of these) as the inescapable starting point for his work.

So it is with the would-be theologian. He aligns himself with the community of believers, learns their vocabulary and grammar, their traditions and their understanding of the nature and scope of authority. But among Christians there is not only a whole range of traditions, many of which contradict one another, but there are various understandings of authority as well. This serves to alert one who would perform the theologian's task to the variety of starting points and frameworks of belief that are available to him. Moreover, it points up what Polanyi insists is characteristic of *any* kind of knowledge: that one cannot legitimately expect to get behind all his presuppositions, since there are no self-evident truths; or rather, no self-evident criteria, however 'clear and distinct' one's ideas, which can themselves be proved valid without the judgment of the knower being exercised. Nor can appeal be made in such ultimate matters of judgment to some 'outside' or non-human knower. Verification itself, the hallowed principle of modern science and contemporary philosophy, admits of personal, if communally supported, criteria: men must decide what constitutes evidence, when enough evidence has been gathered, and must make human judg-

¹*Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (London, 1958). See also *The Tacit Dimension* (London, 1967).

ments about the soundness of the verification process itself. This is true in doing theology, *mutatis mutandis*, whether one starts with an Augustinian faith-seeking-understanding, a Thomist natural theology which is addressed to men of good will or a Marxist assumption that religion is the opium of the people. Since it is impossible to theologize without making presuppositions, and since one's starting point in any discipline will in some measure predetermine the findings of one's investigations, it is essential that the theologian examine and acknowledge his presuppositions as far as this is reasonably possible. Unless this is done communication among those who foster different approaches to the study of theology will be effectively cut off; and we will find one group or another setting itself up as possessing the normative approach to the exclusion of all others.

Now Polanyi's epistemological tenets have the salutary effect, I think, of reminding us that any approach has its limitations. For instance, the apologetic approach to the study of the Ontological Argument assumes religious faith as its starting point, and it rests squarely within the framework this establishes. This matrix should be adverted to, if only for the sake of diplomacy. Anselm could speak with the Psalm of the atheist as a 'fool' because he was operating within a culture officially given to belief. But it may not always be useful to assume that another matrix cannot afford any access to truth. This is precisely the limitation of a 'committed' approach which flirts with fideism: it claims that one sees by the light of faith and denies that one who sees and evaluates the data differently has the clear vision of the man of faith. This not only undercuts the possibility of an honest difference of opinion, but it hardly seems compatible with a Christian's missionary responsibilities.

Modern logic offers a common ground for the detached and the committed. But its limitations in matters theological are rather severe, as testified to by the conclusion of Jonathan Barnes' recent study of the Ontological Argument: the argument 'fails because it cannot withstand a close scrutiny of the logical role played by the term "God" in its premisses and conclusion'. Moreover, logic affords the 'committed' theologian little chance to play his strength; for his contention is precisely that logic is insufficient for accounting for the Christian faith.¹

But the historical approach I have outlined above promises more fruitful territory for a dialogue. Here, each point of view is to be set forth on its own terms. This presupposes that the student and the teacher find Polanyi's epistemological contentions at least congenial and that epistemological concerns will inform the course of study without paralysing it. The approach further presupposes that both student and teacher are capable of a good deal of mental flexibility; that they can accommodate themselves mentally, if not always temperamentally, to various frameworks of belief. Admittedly, this

¹See Barnes, p. 81.

makes great demands by way of time and energy; but the alternative approaches promise the Christian theologian far less in the way of possibilities for dialogue between church and world.

Not 'either . . . or', but 'both . . . and'

To speak of a 'detached' theology is to run the risk of using a misleading tag, if not a complete misnomer. For no matter what approach one takes to any study, he cannot detach himself altogether from a set of presuppositions. 'Detachment', when used with reference to theological pursuits, indicates the acceptance of one set of presuppositions rather than another. Its method rests in a fiduciary framework that assumes that it is possible—and desirable for the sake of dialogue—for one to disjoin his public *persona*, who makes statements describing religious beliefs (whether his own or others' which he has sympathetically examined), from his private self, who may or may not believe religiously. It does not require of the theologian atheism or agnosticism; but it does ask him to exercise his imagination and to participate in a scholarly community which includes men who are privately atheists or agnostics and to share, as far as possible, a common language and method with them.

To advocate that Christians abandon the realms of natural theology and the philosophy of religion is to invite a new parochialism. To demand that the philosopher of religion take into account the existential and historical context within which Christians understand their faith is, however, to ask him to do his job properly.¹ But this will entail a dialogue between 'committed' and 'detached' theologians. It will necessitate an exploration of whether, and to what extent, faith consists in a supralogical leap which can bridge a noetic gap; and of whether the disjunction which many allege exists between philosophical reasoning about God and existential belief in Him actually precludes the possibility of imaginative and sympathetic understanding of belief and its implications by non-believers, and vice versa.

If the *a priori* argument has, as Hume put it even before Kant levelled his assault, 'seldom been found very convincing, except to people of a metaphysical head',² we might fault Anselm and Descartes, or we might fault the Creator for not peopling the earth with an abundance of metaphysical heads. Both tacks are rather idle. It would be more helpful to admit that the tacit assumptions which obtain pretty generally in the Western world are not amicable to a reasoning which lies wholly within the framework of theistic (or Christian) belief. And this is even more the case today, I submit, than it has generally been since Anselm shaped the argument. The implication for a missionary faith is that such important issues as are

¹See Harris, pp. 12-19.

²*Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, ed. N. Kemp Smith (London, 1947), chap. ix. Although in its immediate context in the dialogue Philo's observation is directed chiefly to the so-called 'cosmological' argument, it likewise embraces the ontological.

pursued in the study of God and religious faith must not be formulated and discussed only parochially, within the community of believers. Theological investigation can be profitably carried out from both a 'detached' stance and a 'committed' one; and the serious student will demand to know how the data is evaluated from each stance. Most especially, the committed Christian, because he is necessarily a missionary, will sense the importance of imaginative and sympathetic understanding of the agnostic's view of religious faith and Christian revelation.

There is no chaining the gospel, said Paul. And the first Christians would enforce this moral. Taking their mission to Gentiles as well as Jews, they translated the gospel message into terms that made it accessible to the Hellenistic world and enriched our understanding of the Christian mysteries. Likewise, Thomas broadened the base of medieval philosophy through his acquaintance with Greek and Islamic thought, and he contributed considerably to Christian theology. Just as we would not want to choose between the Jewish-oriented gospel according to Matthew and the Gentile-oriented redaction of Luke, or to suppress either Anselm or Thomas, so we will do well to allow scope for theological investigation to run its course within both 'detached' circles and 'committed' ones and to foster a maximum of interchange between the two. The risk involved is altogether appropriate for an essentially missionary faith.

The Sentimental Clown: The Idea of the Self in T. S. Eliot

by Stan Smith

One recurring premise in much criticism of T. S. Eliot's poetry is the dissoluteness of his *dramatis personae*. I say 'dissoluteness', because there is usually assumed to be some correlation between the imputed psychological state and a moral dereliction. Thus, Bernard Bergonzi's recent study,¹ speaking of the 'deluded' or 'corrupt' narrator of *Portrait of a Lady*, argues that 'his consciousness is at all times on the verge of dissolution'. His drawing-room conversation is said to be disrupted by the 'grotesque musical sounds going on inside his head. . . . He makes an effort literally to compose himself but his impressions remain as fragmentary and disjunctive as the items in a

¹T. S. Eliot, Bernard Bergonzi, Macmillan (1972). I shall be reviewing this book in a later issue of *New Blackfriars*.