

This transcript accompanies the *Cambridge in your Classroom* video on 'Can we prove God's existence?'

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# Can we prove God's existence?

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One argument to prove God's existence is known as the 'ontological argument' — an argument which, by reason alone — proves that, the very idea of God as a perfect being means that God must exist, that his non-existence would be contradictory.

These kinds of a priori arguments rely on logical deduction, rather than something one has observed or experienced: you might be familiar with Kant's examples:

"All bachelors are unmarried men.  
Squares have four equal sides. All  
objects occupy space."

I am Catherine Pickstock and I teach Philosophy of Religion at the University of Cambridge. And I am interested in how we can know the unknowable, and often look to earlier ways in which thinkers have explored this question.

In front of me is an amazing manuscript, called the Proslogion, written nearly 1,000 years ago by an Italian Benedictine monk called Anselm.

Anselm went on to become Archbishop of Canterbury in 1093, and this manuscript is now kept in the University Library in Cambridge.

It is an exploration of how we can know God, written in the form of a prayer, in Latin. Even in translation, it can sound quite complicated to our modern ears, but listen carefully to some of his words here translated from Chapters 2 and 3.

"If that, than which nothing greater can be conceived, exists in the understanding alone, the very being, than which nothing greater can be conceived, is one, than which a greater cannot be conceived. But obviously this is impossible. Hence, there

is no doubt that there exists a being, than which nothing greater can be conceived, and it exists both in the understanding and in reality”.

In this passage, it looks as though Anselm is trying to prove the existence of God using the concept of ‘a being than which no greater can be conceived’, where the idea of the ‘greatest’ refers to God’s complete perfection: all knowing, all-powerful, ranging over all the earth and all the heavens.

Anselm’s premises and conclusion go something like this:

Premise 1: God is the greatest conceivable being.

Premise 2: It is greater to exist in reality than to exist only in the mind.

Conclusion: Therefore, as the greatest conceivable being, God must exist in reality.

This argument has had a very rocky history. Thomas Aquinas (shortly after Anselm) argued that Anselm’s premises were sceptical —they proceed from an initial doubt as to God’s existence, and such a starting point is problematic for a Christian monk whose daily life was immersed in the repeated liturgies of the hours, from dawn until darkness each day. Doubting God’s existence simply should never have entered his mind.

Later thinkers, from Hegel to Kant, and onwards, were worried that the argument was flawed in other ways: that it committed the heinous philosophical

crime of a category mistake: that there is nothing inherent in the idea of a thing that could conjure its existence, as if thinking about a light switch could itself switch a light on; the idea that existence is not a predicate. It was even suggested by some later thinkers that to propose that God’s existence could be thought, opened his existence just as easily to being unthought: the unthinking of God, could lead to the death of God.

So, is it fair to say that Anselm put forward a flawed argument, and that this is all that we can say about his Proslogion? Is this Anselm’s place in the history of Western thought?

So much has been written on those two early chapters of Anselm’s discourse. But what about the rest of what he wrote in the Proslogion? I would like to suggest that Anselm is not trying to prove God’s existence by reason alone, and that the rest of his text pulls in a very different direction, almost seeming to suggest an undermining of an a priori or by-reason-alone approach.

The first sign that all is not as it should be, occurs in the Preface, right at the beginning of the Proslogion, when Anselm describes himself looking around for an argumentum – an argument or discussion – but then after much despondency and effort, suddenly an idea he said “forced itself” upon him.

“At times what I was in quest of seemed to me to be apprehensible; at times it completely eluded the acute gaze of my mind.

At last, despairing, I wanted to desist, as though from pursuit of a thing which was not possible to be found. But just when I wanted completely to exclude from myself this thinking—lest by occupying my mind in vain, it would keep [me] from other [projects] in which I could make headway—just then it began more and more to force itself insistently upon me, unwilling and resisting [as I was].”

What this ‘forcing’ of an idea suggests is that Anselm did not reach his conclusion through careful, rational thinking, but rather as a result of a kind of wrestling match within himself, an emotional and turbulent quest, where ideas attacked him seemingly from without.

Indeed – he doesn’t even mention the idea of God, but rather addresses God as a conversation partner: ‘What art thou, then, Lord God, than whom nothing greater can be conceived?’.

As one reads on, one soon finds oneself tangled up in the author’s quite overwhelming mood swings,—one minute, he is despondent and feeling hopeless, and far away from God: “How wretched man’s lot is when he has lost that for which he was made! Oh how hard and cruel was that Fall...

He lost the blessedness for which he was made, and he found the misery- for which he was not made” (Ps77).

But the next minute, when he feels he has found his way to God’s inaccessible light, he erupts into delight:

“O compassion, for what abundant sweetness and what sweet abundance do you well forth to us .. O boundless goodness of God, how passionately should sinners love you..” (ch 9).

We also soon notice something else. Rather than apparently seeking to prove God’s existence by an idea alone, he says, about halfway through the text, that God is actually beyond what can be thought: “Therefore Lord, not only are you that than which a greater cannot be thought, but you are also something greater than can be thought”.

So how are we to approach God, if this involves so much turbulence and struggle, and if God is even beyond our own thinking? I think the answer lies in Anselm’s repeated use of the metaphor of light.

Throughout the discourse, he talks about our yearning to approach God’s inaccessible light, about our rushing towards the path of light, our being contained by what we nonetheless cannot reach. This metaphor is crucial.

As you watch this video, maybe in a lit classroom, or in your own home, with light flooding in from windows or shining from a lamp, consider yourself, surrounded by light: you know that light is all around you, that it comes right up to your very edges; and yet you cannot point to its hidden source or find the point where it begins, or where its edges end.

This saturation by light can be seen as the key to understanding Anselm’s Proslogion. At the opening, he says to

God: “if You are everywhere, why then, since You are present, do I not see You? But surely You dwell in ‘light inaccessible’, limitless and eternal.

But where is this inaccessible light ... God is both seen and not seen by those seeking inaccessible light? ...Who shall lead me and take me into it that I may see You in it?”

It seems that Anselm is not trying to prove God’s existence, but rather has identified the problem as one of human perception, when, after the Fall, after Adam and Eve tasted the apple in the Garden of Eden, our understanding of God fell into uncertainty and vagueness:

“Why is it that God is all around me, but yet I cannot see God?”.

Later in the text, it seems as though Anselm has reached a kind of height of enlightened understanding, after all his struggle and questing, when suddenly he describes God, not as inaccessible light, but as a kind of tumbling down to the world in the form of material and physical pleasures—if food is delicious, how much more delicious would divine food be?

If perfume is fragrant, how much more lovely would divine fragrance be?

And so on, cataloguing all the physical senses and their divine counterparts, in a tone of delight. He goes on to say that these divine pleasures find their place in the Church, which is our human joy, which nonetheless contains us, by a kind of paradox of within and without, echoing the way in which God is all around me,

and yet I cannot perceive what is all around me.

So to begin with, it looked as though our problem with proving God’s existence was that our experience of God fell short of our knowledge of God, but now we see that the problem is really the other way around: We only know God at all because our experience of God is mysteriously more than our rational knowledge of him. So what have our speculations in our lighted room shown us?

First, that Anselm is not arguing from an idea to the existence of God, as if there were an idea of a light switch which could operate a light. Rather, we have seen that for Anselm, God, like light, is so present to us that we do not know how to look for him. The problem is not whether God exists, but rather, how we are to see something which is too close to us, too excessively apparent?

But if this is Anselm’s concern, has he been wrongly placed in the history of Western philosophy? Well, I would answer no. He takes us to the very heart of the problem concerning foundations. When it comes to God, the fundamental conditions of knowledge are too close to be known directly by us. So we have to make certain assumptions, make inspired guesses, sometimes hurl ourselves into the inaccessible light.

In other words, at the heart of speculative reason, faith is at work. For Anselm, it was not that only Christian faith seeks understanding, but rather, could it be that all understanding is faith seeking understanding? What do you think?