

3. Anselm's Definition

Anselm in his famous Ontological Argument for the existence of God defines God as follows:

'God is that than which nothing greater can be thought.'

I will seek to use this statement throughout the thesis. I will call it Anselm's Definition. Anselm also has five arguments for the existence of God based around this definition. Rather than concentrate on the arguments for existence of God, I will concentrate on the plausibility of the existence of God and the conceivability of God. This Definition that Anselm uses has a decided mathematical flavour. In terms of the quote from Paul in Romans 1:20, we can obtain an understanding of the nature of God from a study of the creation. This does not imply that we see God but that we understand God by concepts obtained from a study of the way things are. Mathematics and Logic are conceptual disciplines that can be applied successfully to the way things are. Set theory is a major source of the development of concepts that is very applicable to the way we think. Consider Cantor's definition of a set:

By an aggregate (German: Menge) we are to understand any collection into a whole M of definite and separate objects m of our intuition or our thought. (Cantor (1955), p 85).

The German 'Menge' can mean class, manifold, set, collection, aggregate, assemblage, complex or quantity (Macintyre & Witte, p85). This shows the conceptual power and dynamic of Set Theory. Set Theory develops a structured

scheme for the collection of ideas, without referring to the ideas themselves. We have provided for us a conceptual language for the handling of ideas that has, after much discussion, become the basic language of mathematics. Anselm's Definition is a method, even an algorithm, for developing concepts toward the notion of God, although it does not refer to any notion about God. Anselm means us to provide the descriptors of God. What he offers is a method, which we will explore below, that can be interpreted in various ways, all with the intention of developing ideas about God.

Given the ideas in Chapter two about the conceivability of God, Set Theory and other mathematics can be used with Anselm's Definition to come to some understanding of God. It must be emphasized that our understanding is about the knowledge of God. If God is conceivable we can have knowledge about God. The knowledge that we are looking for is knowledge associated with well-established and recognised forms of thought, namely logic and mathematics.

3.1 Preliminary considerations on Anselm's Definition

There are a number of features that we can recognize, in a preliminary way, about Anselm's Definition. It is a definition saying 'God is ...', but there is no description of God in any typical attributive sense. We are not told anything descriptive about God. We are simply told how to find God, conceptually or by thought. The Definition uses the greater than relation ($>$). Seeing that we are dealing with thoughts, this must mean that one thought is, in some sense, greater than another. Because there can be more than

one thought about God, I take the $>$ relation to relate different degrees of the same attribute. So we should talk about greater expressions or degrees of holiness or beauty and not make comparisons between attributes, whereby we would be claiming that holiness is greater than beauty. The $>$ sign can also be treated as an operator, typical of the power set operator, which is an operation to generate all the subsets of a particular set. One interpretation of Anselm's Definition is that it requires us to generate a thought sequence, as a comparison between thoughts using the $>$ relation. An ordinal sequence immediately comes to mind, whereby lower degrees of an attribute are always included in greater degrees or measures of an attribute. This means that the $>$ relation can be also interpreted as an inclusion. Indeed there need be only a two-step sequence to be using the $>$ relation. Some attributes of God may not be given to increments let alone infinite increments. God has life, but are there degrees of life? Presumably, something is either alive or dead. If God has existence, are there degrees of existence? Presumably, one exists or one does not. In one of his arguments Anselm does claim that to exist in reality is greater than to exist in the imagination. Are these two different kinds of existence? Are there various existences? Or are there various types or conditions of existence or ways of being? Are we talking about different states of existence or different levels of existence itself? Is Anselm pushing us into the inconceivable? I have already commented that I do not believe anything exists in the inconceivable. It is not even an (the) empty set, for that is a set. If God is conceivable, as I maintain, then no aspect of God can be

inconceivable. How can this be reconciled with Anselm's Definition? There are two places one can be with respect to a sequence and, in particular, with an infinite sequence. One position is inside the sequence. If the sequence is infinite then no matter what term one is at in the sequence, there is always another term. This is often referred to as potential infinity. The other position is outside the sequence. From this position the sequence can be viewed as completed. This is often referred to as actual infinity. We can adopt both positions with respect to Anselm's Definition. From within the sequence God is beyond any thought in the sequence, therefore inconceivable. From outside the sequence we obtain a limit thought and God is conceivable by means of it.

A final preliminary thought about Anselm's Definition is that Anselm's Definition never actually gives us the thought that defines God. We only have thoughts that approach the thought of God. From within the sequence we never reach the limit. If we were to regard the idea of God as the limit thought, then the limit thought is not a term of the sequence because we only ever approach the limit of an infinite sequence from within the sequence. These kinds of considerations about Anselm's Definition will be considered in greater depth in the sections that follow.