

# Anselm's monologion

Philosophy



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Anselm's Monologion is at first a detailed expansion of his more famous ontology - the proof of the existence of God - as expressed elsewhere. In this proof God is first equated with the most perfect being, and then it is demonstrated that such a being necessarily exists. The Monologion is concerned more with the nature of the most perfect being, and what else can be predicated about it, in relation to itself, and to created beings.

The same line of argument is followed, where the oneness and the perfection of the Supreme Being are emphasized, but after a point we notice that the effort is diverted into explaining the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, so that God is said to be three persons in one substance, and yet indivisibly one. It needs to be remembered that Anselm does not attempt to 'prove' the doctrine of the Trinity. Therefore the latter part of the Monologion is really persuasive rather than demonstrative. The aim is to convince us of the reasonableness of the doctrine of the Trinity. It will be instructive to recall Anselm's ontology here.

In order to divert any suspicion of sophism, Anselm introduces the argument as taking place in the head of a fool. This fool denies the existence of a Supreme and Perfect Being. But when he tries to imagine something of the kind in his head, he cannot. Whatever great thing he imagines, it is not final, because the mind soars inexorably past it and imagines something even greater. The mind tries to grasp perfection, but cannot do so. Anselm argues that if there were no perfect being, then the mind chases after nothing, which cannot be so. So there must be a thing called Perfection, at least as an idea.

Next he supposes the case where the Perfection is only in the mind and not in reality. If this were the case then it would not be the most perfect thing, because being only in the mind, the mind would then try to imagine something even greater than it. Therefore the Perfect Being has real existence. The Monologion opens with a variation on this ontology, postulating that all things that are good, or great, or virtuous in any way, are so due to the goodness, greatness or virtue of the Supreme Being, which must necessarily exist as the abode or perfection and being whereby everything else derives its qualities and its existence.

It then tries to fix the nature of this Supreme Being, and concludes that whatever qualities it possesses it does so by itself, from itself, and through itself. And at the same time all created beings possess their qualities and their existence by, from and through the Supreme Being. So that a person can be said to be just, which implies a comparison. He is just because he has more justice in him than the next person. But with God there is no comparison, so that He is Justice itself. He is said to exist in all places and in all times, and this sense exists in the truest sense.

In comparison all created being can be said not to exist at all, and at best that they exist in a limited sense. They are mutable, so that whatever existence they have is fleeting - nothing is ever what it was a moment ago. Therefore, the Supreme Being not only brings them into existence, but sustains their existence too. These are things demonstrated in the first part of the Monologion, and all the arguments follow the same pattern as in the ontology, i. e. it employs the oneness and perfection of God.

But then Anselm comes to consider the Expression of the Supreme Being. All created existence is but a manifestation of the Expression. We must next consider whether this Expression is also a creature. But it cannot be so, because all creatures come to existence through the Expression, and the Expression cannot come into being through itself. If it is not a creature then it can only be consubstantial with the Supreme Being. Here it is established that the Expression of the Supreme Being cannot be anything distinct from it.

It must therefore be sufficient in itself, and need not depend of created beings, having existence before creating things came into being, and even after the final dissolution of things. So we need to find a way to describe the Expression to relation to God alone. Anselm describes it as the understanding of God. It can be seen as a means by which God comes to understand Himself. It is plain that God cannot be in the dark about his own nature, says Anselm, and he points out that even the human mind understands itself. The mind is conscious of itself, can remember itself, can reason with itself.

This is but the mind understanding itself. If the mind can understand itself to some extent, there is no doubt that the Supreme Being understands itself, and does so not partially, but wholly. It is indeed the aspect we know as divine wisdom. The next step is to equate the Expression with the Word. In truth, an analogy is here being drawn between "words", which are the units of human language, and the essence of expression. In a word is the image of the thing as we sense it. Therefore, in words are the expressions of all things, and as words all things are represented in the human mind.

There are, no doubt, other carriers of expression, for example, pictures, sculptures, tastes, smells, etc. But the word is the purest and most powerful medium. It is the building block of language, and thus is the bearer of culture and civilization. We have many words, and these exist so that all things may be represented in the mind, and even then it is inadequate to bring the whole diverse splendor of the universe to us. Anselm asks the question whether the divine expression employs many words. But quickly demonstrates that such diversity would detract from the perfection of the divine expression.

If the Expression is one, and the word is made consubstantial to it, then the word is also one, and this is the Word. It is the supreme image of the divine, but it also forms an identity with the divine. From it is derived all other words, and indeed all other images. Since all things are created in the image of the divine, the Word is indeed the source of all Creation. Anselm thus far has arrived at the Biblical assertion, as found in the Gospel of John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1: 1).

Anselm points out a possible difficulty at this point. If it is true that the Word brings all things into existence in the manner of lending to them its own image, then it must be somehow like the things which are created, being in its own image. He considers the three mutually exhaustive cases. Either the likeness is (1) exact, (2) partial, or (3) non-existent. It is obvious that there cannot be an exact likeness, because created things are mutable, and the Word is not. A partial likeness implies that some aspects of the creating being do not derive from the Word, which is also plainly false.

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If there no likeness at all then there is no creation either. Anselm suggests that we come over this difficulty by using the comparison the other way. This means that we should compare created beings to the Word, and not the other way round. All created things must compare to the Word in some degree. And the degree to which they do compare is the degree of their existence. To elaborate on the theme of 'degrees of existence', Anselm asks us to consider the graduated nature of all created things.

The rational human mind is certainly superior to the sensual human body; the sensual animals are certainly superior to the non-sensual plants; the sentient plants are superior to the non-sentient and material substances. Each created being is an effulgence of the Word, and it must necessarily be so, because the Word is the expression of the divine. But there seems to be a gradation that rises to make the image of the divine truer and truer. When we arrive at the rational human mind we have self-reflexive understanding, which is an attribute we apply properly only to the divine mind.

But then, human reason does not comprehend itself finally, and neither can it come to an understanding of what it sees as God and the universe. On the other hand, the Spirit that is God comprehends itself fully, and this through the means of the Word. Therefore we must conclude that the human mind is an effulgence of the Word, but it is not the Word itself. Through a multiplicity of 'words' the human mind can grapple with the infinite expanse that it finds before it, and can come to know of the existence of the Word, thus of God, though it cannot know the Word itself.

We may assert that the rational mind is the greatest among all created things, and therefore bears the greatest likeness with the Word, and consequently possess more reality than anything else in the phenomenal world. Though none can deny that it is a created, and thus limited thing. This much Anselm attempts to prove. Much of the latter part of the Monologion is not proof but suggestion. The starting point of such suggestion is when Anselm insists that the Expression be construed as something distinct from the Supreme Being.

Having already proved that there cannot be any distinction, Anselm seems to be taking liberties now. He wants to be reasonable instead of rational. It is as if he is encountering God as a person instead of a matter of logic. In the sense that we would not mistake the expression of a person with the person himself, so Anselm describes the Word as distinct from the Supreme Being, And further on he will give the description a more personal character by saying that the Word is begotten by the Supreme Being in the way that the son is begotten of the father. He is at pains to point out, though, that it is an "ineffable plurality."

To be sure, ineffable—because although necessity compels that they be two, what two they are cannot at all be expressed" (Anselm 53). In the end it is an article of faith that he is espousing. To think in this way is to gain a glimpse into the deepest mysteries of the divine, and this is what increases devotion and strengthens faith. Once we admit two distinct beings in God, there issues by necessity a third, which is Love, which is that by which the Son is united with Father and the Father with the Son. This is the doctrine of the

Trinity, that which Anselm has been aiming at from the beginning. We draw the following conclusion.

In the Monologion it is Anselm's task to prove the existence of God and to elaborate on the perfection of His nature. The proofs that he provides for the existence and perfection of God are thorough and irrefutable. He elaborates on the Expression of God as the source of all created existence. But even though he establishes that, in a strictly logical sense, we cannot apply predicates to God, he nevertheless goes on espouse the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. He is careful to point out that this latter assertion is not a proof, but is rather the most reasonable predicate that can be applied to God.