After Anselm: St Bonaventure and the Remaking of the Ontological Argument
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This article explores the reception of Anselm's ontological argument within the thought of Thomas Aquinas' Franciscan colleague, Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, and his attempt to reconcile it with versions of the cosmological argument.

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Introduction

When it comes to medieval arguments for God's existence, two figures are nearly always cited in the available literature: St Anselm of Canterbury (1033/4-1109) and St Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274). Typically, Anselm and Aquinas are portrayed as offering two very different – and mutually exclusive – approaches towards how God's existence can be 'proved' by human reason. On the one hand, Anselm, in his *Proslogion* (1077-1078), articulates his famous (and much misunderstood) ontological argument. At the risk of oversimplification, this posits that God's existence is an *a priori* truth. It is, in other words, something which becomes self-evident (*per se notum*) to the mind by reflecting upon the definition of who and what God is – i.e, that God is 'something than which nothing greater can be thought' (Anselm, 1998, p. 89). On the other hand, Aquinas, influenced by his indebtedness to Aristotle (384-322 BCE), specifically the Greek philosopher's theories of motion and causality and his belief that the soul is a *tabula rasa* upon which nothing is written prior the act of sense experience, favoured a purely *a posteriori* approach towards proving God's existence. This is

seen most clearly in the so-called cosmological argument which Aquinas articulates in his famous *Summa theologiae* (1265-1273) and the slightly earlier *Summa contra gentiles* (1259-1265). For Aquinas, God's existence is neither immediately obvious to the mind nor can it be 'proved' by reflecting on the definition of God himself (see Aquinas, 1975, p. 81). Instead, it is something which can only be established by studying the causal chain of being – i.e, the relationship between cause and effect – which underpins the natural order (see Aquinas, 2006 pp. 13-17).

While there is certainly merit in categorising Anslem's and Aquinas' arguments as representing two different faces of the medieval tradition of seeking to 'prove' God's existence, it is important to note that their arguments do not exhaust the medieval philosophical genius in this field, nor do they define its parameters. Two points are key to understanding how and why this is so.

- First, for most medieval thinkers – including those who were direct contemporaries of Aquinas himself – the ontological and cosmological arguments were not mutually exclusive. Instead, they were seen as natural bedfellows, with thinkers often placing them next to one another in their writings.
- Second, many medieval thinkers were quite happy to rework Anselm's ontological argument and to give it a new twist. It is not uncommon, for example, to find medieval authors who seek to prove that God's existence is a truth *per se notum* by augmenting or reworking Anselm's famous definition of God as 'something than which nothing greater can be thought*'*.

An example of a medieval thinker who illustrates both these points in a particularly clear manner is the Franciscan theologian, St Bonaventure of Bagnoregio (1217-1274).

Bonaventure's approach towards proving God's existence

Although much less well-known than Aquinas, Bonaventure studied and taught in the Theology Faculty at the University of Paris at the same time as his more famous colleague. It is in his *Disputed questions on the mystery of the Trinity* (c. 1256, hereafter *DQMT*) that Bonaventure's most detailed attempt to prove God's existence is to be found. In sharp contrast to Aquinas, Bonaventure's starting premise is that God's existence is an 'indubitable truth' (Bonaventure, 1978, p. 107) – that is to say, it is a truth which is so self-evident that no intelligent person can ever deny it. What is striking about Bonaventure's discussion of God's existence in the *DQMT* is the sheer number of arguments which he advances. He outlines nearly thirty arguments to show that God exists. At the outset, however, Bonaventure tells us that each of these arguments falls into one of three categories.

- First, there are those 'proofs' which proceed according to the universal nature of truth itself. These arguments posit that 'every truth that is impressed in all minds is an indubitable truth' (Bonaventure, 1978, p. 107) and that God's existence is such a truth.
- Second, there are those types of argument that seek to prove God's existence by means of studying the natural world and the chain of causality underpinning it. At the risk of oversimplification, these arguments are versions of the classical cosmological argument.
- Third, there are those arguments which

follow the logic that 'every truth which, in itself, is most certain and evident is an indubitable truth' (Bonaventure, 1978, p. 107). It is under this category, so Bonaventure notes, that Anselm's ontological argument – and the various colourations of it which have been advanced – fall.

Before we consider how Bonaventure employs Anselm's ontological argument and how he places it alongside variations of the cosmological 'proof', there are two points which ought to be noted here.

• The first is the obvious question of why, if Bonaventure believes that God's existence is an 'indubitable truth', he invests such a large amount of space to articulating such a complex collage of arguments to show that God exists. After all, if God's existence is a truth *per se notum*, then why bother formulating arguments to show that God exists? Key here is understanding what purpose 'proofs' for God's existence play within Bonaventure's thinking. For Bonaventure the numerous arguments which he outlines in the *DQMT* are not 'proofs' in the way that we today understand the term 'proof' – i.e., they are not designed to persuade us to accept as true something which previously we denied or remained ambivalent on. Rather, for Bonaventure, his 'proofs' are designed as 'exercises of the intellect' designed to show how rational demonstrations can be provided to support what the mind already knows to be true. 'Arguments of this sort', as Bonaventure puts it, 'are exercises of the intellect rather than proofs that provide evidence and make the truth manifest as proven' (Bonaventure, 1978, p. 120).
• Second, Bonaventure's approach towards his 'proofs' is different from that

of Aquinas. As Étienne Gilson notes, where, in the *Summa theologiae* and *Summa contra gentiles*, Aquinas is concerned to articulate a series of arguments which share a common basis and thus possess a clearly worked out inner philosophical unity, Bonaventure, by contrast, shows a certain 'unconcern' (Gilson, 1938, p. 124) for such unity. For Bonaventure, when it comes to his 'proofs' for God's existence 'the choice of a starting point … appears to be a matter of indifference' (Gilson, 1938, p. 124). To put it another way: in noted contrast to Aquinas, Bonaventure is not concerned whether his arguments fit together in terms of their philosophical foundations and internal logic: i.e., whether they proceed according to an *a priori* basis or an *a posteriori* one. Instead, for him, the 'unity' of his long list of 'proofs' derives from the fact that they all point towards the same conclusion: that God exists.

Remaking the ontological argument

When one reads Bonaventure's comments in *DQMT*, q. 1, art. 1, his engagement with Anselm's argument is easy to spot. Bonaventure repeatedly affirms that God is 'something than which nothing greater can be conceived' and that a careful consideration of this definition leads the mind to accept that it is logically impossible for God not to exist. He writes:

> But for the intellect which fully understands the meaning of the word God – thinking God to be that than which no greater can be conceived – not only is there no doubt that God exists, but the non-existence of God cannot even be thought. (Bonaventure, 1978, p. 117)

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In turn, Bonaventure even defends Anselm's famous response to Gaunilo's argument concerning a perfect island. Like Anselm, Bonaventure notes that Gaunilo's objection falls short, because an island is a finite and mutable reality, and thus cannot exist *per se*; whereas God, by his very nature, is infinite and immutable and can thus be said to exist *per se* without fear of contradiction. Bonaventure writes: 'But when I speak of an island than which none better can be conceived, there is a repugnance between the subject and its implication' (Bonaventure, 1978, p. 119). This is so 'because an island is a limited being, while the implication is proper to the most perfect being [*namely God*]' (Bonaventure, 1978, p. 119).

On the surface, then, it would seem that Bonaventure offers a faithful rearticulation of Anselm's argument. When we dig a little deeper, however, we discover that Bonaventure adapts Anselm's argument in several important ways. One such way is his attempt to frame Anselm's argument using the language of the 'best'.

The 'best', Bonaventure notes, is by its very nature *the* 'best': 'the best is the best' (*optimum est optimum*) (Bonaventure, 1978, 113). Moreover, the 'best' must have *all* the perfections associated with being the 'best'. Existence, so Bonaventure argues, is clearly a perfection, for to exist is clearly better than not to exist. As such, if the 'best' is indeed the 'best', then it must – by its very nature and indeed by its very definition – exist. For if it did not exist, then it would not be the 'best'. However, if the 'best' is indeed the 'best', then only God is capable of being the 'best'. This is so because only God is truly the 'best' since, by his very definition, he is the most perfect being. As such, given God is the 'best', God must exist. Indeed, because to be the 'best' is part of the very definition of God himself, we can say, so Bonaventure judges, that if God is truly who he is – i.e., if God is God – then God must by necessity exist: 'If God is God, then God exists' (*Si Deus est Deus, Deus est*) (Bonaventure, 1978, p. 113).

While Bonaventure's logic here is hard to follow at times and comes close to something akin to a philosophical tongue twister, one can nonetheless detect the Anselmian framework and spirit which underpins his thinking. Bonaventure nests Anselm's argument within another argument which has a similar underlying set of philosophical steps and thematic assumptions: if 'a' is 'a', then 'a' by its very definition must exist, for if 'a' does not exist then it is not 'a', which is clearly impossible.

Synthesising the ontological argument with a cosmological approach

We noted earlier that Bonaventure does not just reappropriate and rework Anselm's ontological argument, but also places it alongside a plethora of arguments for God's existence resembling the cosmological 'proof' favoured by Aquinas.

What form do these arguments take? Broadly construed, they seek to show that the created, finite and contingent nature of temporal beings demands that there must be a 'first principle' (Bonaventure, 1978, p. 110) whose existence is derived from nothing but itself. Thus, Bonaventure, in a manner not too dissimilar to Aquinas' 'second way', argues that God's existence can be established by the fact that if one 'being' – i.e., creature – is caused (Bonaventure uses the term 'exists') by another, since nothing in this world can 'bring itself from non-being to being' there must, by necessity, be at least one 'being' which does not 'exist' – or as Bonaventure puts

it is not 'educed' – from another being, and thus stands apart from the created order of being. After all, were this not the case, then there would be an infinite regress of created beings dependent upon one another for their existence, which is not only illogical but impossible (Bonaventure, 1978, p. 110). The 'uncreated being' from which all created being stems, so Bonaventure judges, must be God, since God alone is 'uncreated being' (Bonaventure, 1978, p. 110).

In turn, Bonaventure goes on to argue that God's existence is proved by the dependency of posterior beings upon prior ones. 'If there is a posterior being', he writes, 'then there is a prior being' (Bonaventure, 1978, p. 110). This is so 'because there is nothing posterior except it be from something prior' (Bonaventure, 1978, p. 110). However, when we take stock of the fact that *all* created beings are posterior beings – for all created beings, so Bonaventure notes, regardless of how perfect they may be, derive their existence from something other than, and thus prior to, themselves – we see that the posterior nature of created being itself demands that there must be a 'first principle' that is prior to the totality of created being itself. Moreover, this 'first principle' cannot be posterior to any other being, for were this the case then it would not be the true 'first principle', but rather just another posterior being and, by consequence, a created being. The 'first principle' is thus *the* prior being antecedent to all posterior beings. Bonaventure writes: 'Therefore, if it is necessary to say that among creatures there is both posterior and prior, it is necessary that the sum total of creatures implies and cries out that it is necessary that there is a first principle' (Bonaventure, 1978, p. 110).

Likewise, Bonaventure argues that

God's existence can be demonstrated by the relationship between 'possible' – i.e., contingent – and 'necessary' being. 'If there is possible being', he argues, then 'there is a necessary being' (Bonaventure, 1978, p. 110). This is so because possible being implies 'indifference' (Bonaventure, 1978, p. 110) to existence. After all, a possible being can, by its very definition, either exist or not exist. Moreover, if it does exist, its existence is dependent on that of another being, which itself, so Bonaventure notes, is almost certainly another possible being. For example, I – as a possible being – only exist because of my parents. My parents, however, were also possible beings – for they did not have to exist – and they, in turn, existed only because of their parents, who likewise were possible beings, and so forth. According to Bonaventure, this chain of possible beings cannot regress *ad infinitum.* This is so because an infinite chain of possible beings is a logical impossibility, for a chain of possible beings, no matter how great it is, is insufficient to explain its existence without a foundational necessary terminus. Therefore, there must be a 'necessary being in which there is no possibility of non-existence' and this, Bonaventure argues, is 'none other than God' (Bonaventure, 1978, p. 110).

A final twist in the story – who invented the ontological argument?
So, Bonaventure endorsed Anslem's ontological argument, but also sought to rework it and place it alongside *a posteriori* proofs based on the finite and mutable nature of creation. Is that it? No. At this point a spanner can (potentially) be thrown into the works. Traditionally, scholars have argued that while Bonaventure may have refashioned Anselm's proof and placed it within a

novel context, he was nonetheless a faithful disciple of the Norman Archbishop of Canterbury's argument. Recent revisionist scholarship, however, has sought to challenge this position. According to some – most notably, Lydia Schumacher – the way in which we understand the relationship between Anselm's ontological argument and Bonaventure's defence and appropriation of it is all wrong. Put simply, Schumacher argues that we have misinterpreted Anselm's argument itself (see Schumacher, 2019, pp. 103-118). The ontological argument, as we currently understand it, Schumacher argues, was *not* invented by Anselm. Instead, it originated with Bonaventure and, more specifically, his Franciscan teachers (see Schumacher, 2019, p. 116).

According to Schumacher, the idea that God's existence is an *a priori* truth, which is confirmed simply by reflecting on the definition of who and what God is, is not in fact what Anselm posits in the *Proslogion.* Instead, what Anselm offers in his text is an argument which is not too dissimilar in spirit – if not in content – to the *a posteriori* approach Aquinas himself favours (Schumacher, 2011, p. 97). On this reading, therefore, what Aquinas is rejecting in his *Summa theologiae* and *Summa contra gentiles* when he attacks the idea that God's existence is *per se notum* is not Anselm's argument *per se*, but rather what he saw as the novel distortions of it presented by Bonaventure and his Franciscan teachers (See Schumacher, 2011, p. 97). Schumacher's argument is a new and highly controversial one. Only time and further research will tell if her reading of the relationship between Anselm, Aquinas and Bonaventure on how God's existence can be proved is correct.

Glossary

a priori: knowledge, judgements or propositional statements whose truth is not dependent on sense experience. Instead, their truth is known 'before' any act of sense experience or engagement with the material world, either because the truthfulness of the judgement or statement is contained within the judgement or statement itself, or because it is logically necessary because of the statement or truth. An example of an *a priori* truth is 1+1=2. I can know this truth simply by reflecting upon the statement itself and without having recourse to sense experience.

a posteriori: knowledge, judgements or propositional statements whose truth is dependent upon sense experience and is thus posterior to it. Thus, *a posteriori* truths are those truths which are discovered only by engaging with the world and observing it. For example, I do not know that fire is hot unless I experience its heat for myself or if someone else tells me that fire is hot.

I cannot know that fire is hot simply by reflecting on the word 'fire' itself.

cosmological argument: the argument for God's existence which argues that God's existence is proved by the chain of causality underpinning created being and its incapacity to explain itself without a first principle. For Thomas Aquinas, following Aristotle, this chain of causality is primarily expressed in terms of motion: all creatures are in motion, but the sum of creatures cannot explain why it is in motion. Therefore, there must be an eternal unmoved mover.

Franciscan: the religious order founded by St Francis of Assisi. Its male members were known as friars who took vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. The Franciscan spiritual vision places a great emphasis on the importance of recognising how God's beauty, wisdom and love are reflected in the natural world. This, in part, is why Bonaventure is so keen on showing how creatures affirm the existence of God.

ontological argument: the argument for God's existence usually associated with Anselm of Canterbury. Traditionally construed, the argument maintains that God's existence can be demonstrated by reflecting on the definition of God as 'something than which nothing greater can be thought'.

per se: by, in or of itself/themselves; intrinsically.

per se notum: literally 'known through itself'. A truth whose truthfulness is immediately obvious to the mind simply by reflecting on the nature of the statement made. For example, provided one grasps the nature of the concepts of 'whole' and 'part', then the statement 'the whole is greater than its parts' is a truth *per se notum*, because the very definitions of 'whole' and 'part' guarantee the truthfulness of the statement.

tabula rasa: literally, 'a blank slate'. According to Aristotle, the soul possesses no *a priori* knowledge of either God or the world. Instead, the soul is a blank slate upon which truths are written and retained through the process of sensory experience.

References and further reading

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