No More Nonsense: Proving God With Anselm And Suhrawardi
No More Nonsense: Proving God With Anselm And Suhrawardi

Muhammad Legenhausen

Article
Abstract

This article is a critical review of Ermanno Bencivenga’s book, Logic and Other Nonsense: The Case of Anselm and His God. My purpose is to examine some of the issues raised by Bencivenga and to compare how they appear in the context of medieval Christian and early Islamic intellectual culture. The difference in perspective allows a sort of triangulation that enhances the subtlety of our understanding of the proofs for the existence of God and the theologians who constructed them. Ultimately, however, we are led to reflect as much on contemporary attitudes in philosophy and religion as on their history. For this purpose, I introduce Suhrawardí (1156–1191) as a Muslim counterpart to Anselm (1033–1109) and consider how the points illustrated by Bencivenga with Anslem might be reformulated when attention is also given to Suhrawardí.

The first major issue raised by Bencivenga is why a Christian monk of the eleventh century would want to prove the existence of God. The motivations for the construction of proofs for the existence of God are varied and complex. Bencivenga considers various motives, none of which he finds completely satisfactory. He concludes that Anselm has a number of competing motives that are often in tension with one another. By looking at Suhrawardí, we find clues to further motives not considered by Bencivenga, the most important of which is the aim of supporting philosophy in a religious society where it is looked upon by many with suspicion.

Bencivenga devotes much attention to the political motives Anselm may have had for the proofs. According to Bencivenga, the dominant motive seems to have been a desire to support the authority of the Church by giving the endorsement of reason to its teachings. Another motive considered by Bencivenga is to introduce a potentially subversive element, since reason might assert its own authority in opposition to the Church, although there is little textual evidence that Anselm ever consciously entertained this idea. In Suhrawardí, however, the politically revolutionary potential of philosophy was explicitly recognized, both by Suhrawardí and by his enemies who pressured Saladin to have him executed.

Another topic discussed by Bencivenga in the course of his reflections on Anselm is irony. He sees the confusion of motives as revealing a fundamental disunity of the self. I suggest that irony is more closely...
related to dialectic, and that it reveals an overcoming of the self.

**The Functions Of Demonstration**

The book starts off with a reasonable enough question: Why prove the existence of God? More specifically, why should an eleventh century monk bother with such a chore? The author continues that maybe if you didn’t know whether something existed or not, like neutrinos, you might start looking for a proof. Really? I think the last thing I’d try to do if I wanted to figure out whether some postulated particles existed or not would be to try to construct a proof for them. What sort of doubts about the existence of particles could one have that would be settled by strict deduction? If we take “proof” in a broader sense, to include induction, inference to the best explanation, and the citation of authorities, one could try to prove that there are neutrinos by an appeal to the writings of experts, or else one could study physics and examine the evidence used to support atomic theory. Nevertheless, one would not attempt a logical proof in order to figure out whether they exist. There are things whose existence one might like to prove rigorously, as one might want to see whether a certain set exists in a given axiomatic theory, but not in order to figure out whether they exist or not, except in some rather exceptional cases, such as in mathematics one might try to prove that prime numbers exist greater than some very large number.

What is the point of constructing logical proofs at all? Usually, logicians and other mathematicians construct proofs in order to gauge the strength of the system in which the proof is carried out. They are interested in finding out whether certain well known theorems can be proven in various systems. Often it is asked what must be added to a given system so that one will be able to prove some desired theorem without getting unwanted results in the bargain. How much of standard set theory can be duplicated in systems that do not have the axiom of choice? In a less technical manner, one might want to test the power of human reason. How much can it prove? Can we prove the existence of the self, of other minds, of the world, of God?

Another reason for the construction of proofs is to give clarity to a theory. Consider Hans Reichenbach’s Axiomatization of the Theory of Relativity. The point of the proofs this work contains is not to discover the truth of the theorems proved, but to make use of an axiomatic method to clarify logical features of Einstein’s theories.

These seem much more the sorts of questions that would occupy the likes of Anselm or Suhrawardí. They were both interested in particular systems of proof, the systems of philosophical reasoning available to them. Neither of them would have dreamt of using a proof to find out if God or the angels or anything else existed. Both inherit a tradition of theological speculation in which proofs for the existence of God have led to controversy. Between Augustine and Anselm, some seven hundred years have passed during which the Church has employed philosophical reasoning in order to perform various tasks. Anselm wants to push the envelop, to see just how much mileage he can get out of philosophical reasoning. At the same time he wants to use the method of proof to give precision to the concepts
involved. Anselm’s proof is issued with the excitement of a suppressed glee, as if to say, “Top that!” What is vindicated with the proof is not the existence of God, but the philosophical method of theology. Suhrawardí, on the other hand, has formulated a philosophical system of his own, a rival to the dominant system of Avicenna. He wants to show that his system has the strength to prove God’s existence, and that the proof he can offer is better than what has been offered before. His proof is offered as an alternative to Avicenna’s that boasts of superior precision and economy. Again, what is verified is not the existence of God, but the system of thought in which it is demonstrated.

If Anselm has doubts, they are not about the existence of God, but about the limits of the rational faculties. His doubts, however, are not of the usual pessimistic ilk; he suspects that all the eternal truths are provable, even the Trinitarian nature of God. Here his faith, much more than Augustine’s, seeks intellection with a vengeance.

Today, one might try to offer philosophical reasons for believing in God, the reality of values, numbers, the mind, or other things whose existence has been denied in order to show that it is rational to believe that they do exist. This is how Alvin Plantinga’s version of the ontological argument works. He tries to show that on the basis of plausible premises we can arrive at the conclusion that God exists. He admits that one might question the premises. His proof is not designed to convince the infidel of anything but the rationality of having faith.

Anselm felt no challenge to the legitimacy of his beliefs. There were no atheists claiming that science did away with the need for religion. The crisis of authority during Anselm’s day is known as the Investiture Controversy, and during the days of his successors—until Becket was murdered in Canterbury Cathedral—there continued to be contests for power between the kings and the popes, the royal courts and the Church courts. None of the participants to these disputes would even think of questioning the existence of God. The idea of a challenge to Church authority coming in the form of casting doubts on the existence of God as imagined by Prof. Bencivenga reflects the late twentieth century tendency to be suspicious of a philosophical claims that are used to support the legitimacy of authority, especially religious authority, but this would have been far beyond the horizons of Anselm’s understanding.

**Proof, Politics and Authority**

Both Anselm and Suhrawardí write as teachers and spiritual guides. They address the faithful. The infidel figures in their discussions with faithful students as those who bring reasoned doubts about the faith. The infidels are not all fools. Consider the remark of Boso:

“Suffer me, therefore, to make use of the words of infidels; for it is proper for us when we seek to investigate the reasonableness of our faith to propose the objections of those who are wholly unwilling to submit to the same faith, without the support of reason. For although they appeal to reason because they do not believe, but we, on the other hand, because we do believe; nevertheless, the thing sought is one and the same.”
The infidel is never named as being a pagan, Jew or Muslim. It is a generic infidel whose reasons are brought by the student to be refuted by the master. However, Anselm served Pope Urban II (r. 1088–1099) who called the First Crusade in 1095. Although Anselm does not express much enthusiasm for the crusades, his support for papal authority is absolute. He writes to the Pope in complete submission, *subissis mentis genibus*, menally bending the knees, or bending the knees of the mind. The mind itself submits to the authority of the Church. In administration, Anselm advocated the use of the carrot over the stick wherever possible as better able to produce the proper spirit of submission.

All of this raises the specter that reason may be little more than an alternative to the rod, and a much more effective one. This worries Prof. Bencivenga; but the worry is never fully explicated. Is it a worry that reason is dishonored by using it to serve the Church? Or is it that what is served does not deserve the service? One could argue that reason should not be employed in the service of the Church because of corruption in the hierarchy, irrationality in the dogmas taught, or because one believes that reason should serve some other purposes. As Anselm sees it, the authority of the Church is unquestionable, and if reason cannot find a way to support it, that only shows an incapacity in reason, not any flaw in the Church. For Prof. Bencivenga, on the other hand, it is the authority of reason that is unquestionable, and any service it renders to any other cause can only debase it. He almost takes a pontifical tone as he scolds the theologian for nipping his students’ doubts in the bud and never allowing them to blossom into a challenge to Church authority.

The crusaders captured Edessa in 1098 and in the following year, Jerusalem. Forty–five years later, Zangi of Mosul retook Edessa for the Muslims. This led Pope Eugenius III to issue a formal crusade bull in 1145, and the Second Crusade began. Victory over the crusaders was won by Zangi’s son, Nêr al–Dîn (r. 1146–1174), who also conquered the rest of Syria and destroyed the Fatimid empire in Egypt through his general Saladin. Saladin then revolted and by 1177 controlled Syria as well as Egypt. By 1183, northern Mesopotamia came under his command, and he placed Aleppo under the governance of one of his teen aged sons, Malik al–İahir. During that same year, Suhrawardî came wandering into the city in the most humble of circumstances, and not long after, met the young prince, who became a devoted disciple. Suhrawardî sought to train the prince to become a philosopher king.

This, along with his outspoken defense of esoteric and philosophical ideas, won Suhrawardî the enmity of an influential group of ‘ulama. They requested Malik al–İahir to have him executed; when he refused, they wrote to his father, claiming that if he were allowed to live he would corrupt the faith. In 1187, Saladin had gained victory over Jerusalem, to which Pope Gregory VIII responded by calling the Third Crusade. When the crusaders began to arrive, Saladin needed the support of the ‘ulama in Aleppo, and wrote to his son ordering Suhrawardî’s execution. Malik al–İahir did not act, so his father threatened to relieve him of the governorship. The biographer of Saladin reports of the decision to have Suhrawardî killed as follows:

“[Salah al–Dîn] hated philosophers, heretics, materialists and all the opponents of the Law. For this
reason he commanded his son al-Malik al-ʿĀhir, Prince of Aleppo, to punish a young man called Suhrāvardi who called himself an enemy of the Law and a heretic. His son had the man arrested for what he had heard of him and informed the Sultan, who commanded that he be put to death. So he was killed, and left hanging on the cross for several days."

There are conflicting accounts of Sohrāvardi’s death, which is said to have taken place in 587/1191, when Sohrāvardi was thirty-eight years old. Shahrazârī claims that when Suhrāvardi realized Malik ʿĀhir’s difficulty, he chose to be shut in a room and denied food and drink until he should meet his Lord. Afterwards Malik ʿĀhir is said to have wrought vengeance on the perpetrators, whom he imprisoned and much of whose property he confiscated.

The point of all this history is that philosophical theory and theology can threaten religious authorities, instead of supporting them, even when it proves the existence of God and much else that happens to be favored by those same authorities. Prior to modern times, challenges to religious and political authorities did not take the form of doubts about the existence of God. Suhrāvardi’s philosophizing theology was seen as threatening because it was! The Master of Illumination was out to overturn both the political and religious status quo. Anselm’s philosophizing theology was rewarded with the highest honors the Church can bestow—eventually canonization.

In order to provide further illumination on the connections between philosophy and politics, Prof. Bencivenga introduces the Frankfurt School. Now, the Frankfurt School has followed a very interesting course through its own history of exile and return, a path from Marxism to liberalism. The Frankfurt School begins its analysis, as Prof. Bencivenga informs us, with a critique of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment promised liberation through reason. Instead, the forms of coercion only became more subtle, coercion in which reason and philosophy often remain at the service of the authorities, or, like the members of the Frankfurt School, are forced into exile.

Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979) analyzed the relations of logic and power by focusing on the role of dialectic. His analysis of dialectic was in the tradition of Hegel and Marx, although he departed significantly from both of them and added much from Freud. Marcuse tells us that ever since Plato, dialectic is revolutionary. It challenges what is with an ideal. In contrast, mere deductive logic aims at the elimination of contradictions. Aristotle concentrated on deductive logic and was politically conservative, while Plato emphasized the importance of dialectic and was revolutionary.

Suhrāvardi was also revolutionary, in political method very similar to Plato, but instead of contrasting dialectic with deduction, he contrasts intuitive philosophy with discursive philosophy.

“This book of ours is for the student of both intuitive philosophy and discursive philosophy. There is nothing in it for the discursive philosopher not given to, and not in search of, intuitive philosophy. We only discuss this book and its symbols with the one who has mastered intuitive philosophy or who seeks it. The reader of this book must have reached at least the stage in which the divine light has descended
upon him—not just once, but regularly. No one else will find any profit in it. So, whoever wishes to learn only discursive philosophy, let him follow the method of the Peripatetics, which is fine and sound for discursive philosophy by itself. We have nothing to say to such a person, nor do we discuss Illuminationist principles with him. Indeed, the system of the Illuminationists cannot be constructed without recourse to luminous inspirations, for some of their principles are based upon such lights. Should Illuminationists fall into doubt about these principles, they will overcome it by climbing the ladder of the soul. Just as by beholding sensible things we attain certain knowledge about some of their states and are thereby able to construct valid sciences like astronomy, likewise we observe certain spiritual things and subsequently base divine sciences upon them. He who does not follow this way knows nothing of philosophy and will be a plaything in the hands of doubts.”

Prof. Bencivenga’s position is in favor of dialectic, freedom, and challenging the authorities, but his suggestions in this regard remain vague. In a later book, he takes up issues raised in connection with Anselm, but this time his subject is Hegel. There he rejects the stance of those who defend the establishment, as well as that of those who oppose it by making themselves into “exotic curiosities.” Instead, he proposes the articulation of alternatives to the current state of affairs to sharpen the urgency of a “demand for justification,” but there is little more than this general proposal.

When Prof. Bencivenga describes faith as a means of winning a favorable attitude to the theoretical structure that legitimizes a political hierarchy (60), he claims to be articulating the position of Anselm’s enemy, not stating his own view. The infidel critic of Anselm might say that Anselm sought to legitimize himself or his ideas by providing a logical model that shows how things might really be just as the authorities claim they are, and how objections raised against them could be defused.

Prof. Bencivenga suggests that rationalization has liberating functions to play as well as necessitating ones, because it can serve to undermine authority as well as to support it; but he seems to see liberation as confined to the rejection of authority. The idea that liberation could be found in submission rather than insurrection does not seem to have a place in his thinking, although it seems much more in keeping with the sort of view advocated by Anselm.

What Prof. Bencivenga, following Marcuse, says about reason, could also be said of religion, i.e., that it can be used to support the establishment or to rally revolutionaries. There is a significant theological reading of religious history that sees the message brought by the prophets from Abraham to Muhammad (peace and salutations to him and his progeny and to all of them) as essentially challenging the powers that be. Certainly, theology can be challenging or supportive of both religious and political authorities. Anselm’s theology was supportive of the Pope at the same time it was a challenge to the King of England. Perhaps Anselm could have been more critical of papal authority without playing into the hands of Henry I. Maybe he was a victim of his historical circumstances so that it was really unimaginable for him that there could be moral and religious reason to question the authority of the Pope. At that time, the major form of corruption in the Church (aside from violations of celibacy) was
simony. Urban II was seen as a reformer who sought to protect the religious authority of the Church from worldly corruption that came in the form of a variety of methods by which the secular authorities sought to coerce the Church for venal purposes.

For Prof. Bencivenga, however, obedience to and intellectual support for the Church is seen as stultifying human potential, submitting to authoritarian power structures and repressing libidinal vitality. Perhaps his dismissive attitude toward the authority of revelation should not be faulted any more than Anselm’s supportive attitude toward the authority of the Pope. Given the political legacy of the Church since the French Revolution and it’s legacy of intolerance for creative thinking at least since Bruno’s being consigned to the flames in 1600, it is only natural for Western intellectuals to find it unimaginable that human beings might be able to display their revolutionary potential in devotional expressions, in sermons and exhortations better than through audacious theorizing. On the other hand, perhaps there is an element of self–deception in Anselm’s not being able to conceive there being anything wrong with launching a crusade against an unknown enemy.

**Irony and Dialectic**

Although this book is ostensibly about Anselm of Canterbury and his much debated ontological argument; in a footnote the author tells us, “irony is what the present book is all about.”

After reflecting on the conflicting motives that are at work in Anselm, and that give rise to his attempts to prove the existence of God, Prof. Bencivenga presents us with a model of the self as a perfect spy, as one with no ultimate loyalties. This self becomes a theater for different trends, none of which commands definitive allegiance. There are other views of the self—including religious views—that admit that there might be a theater of different actors competing for attention. But instead of a congeries of actors, religious views typically posit a hierarchy. That means an objective evaluation, and it means taking sides. It means that some of the voices that sound within us are to be given free reign, will others are to be discouraged.

Suhrawardi’s view of the self is one of the most important features of his philosophy. He begins by emphasizing the immediate presence of the self to itself.

“All that we have enumerated pertains to your you–ness, your reality. You have several names: you are called “soul”, as the Supreme Reality in the Noble Qur’an has declared: “O tranquil soul, Return unto your Lord, well pleased (with Him, and) He well pleased with you.” (89: 27–28) It is also called “word”, as He says: “Unto Him ascends the good word, raised with righteous deeds.” (35: 10) Good words and tranquil soul have the same meaning. Until the soul becomes tranquil, it does not “return unto your Lord”; and until the word becomes good, it is impossible that it “unto Him ascends.” It is also called “spirit”, as He says: “And a Spirit from Him”. (4:171) It is also called “reproaching”, as He declares: “No! I swear by the reproaching soul”. (75:2) It is also called “demanding”, as He declares: “Surely the soul bids one to evil.” (12:53)”
Although the self, according to Suhrawardí has all these various aspects, it is not to be identified with any inner voice or any other mental content. Your apprehension of yourself cannot be by a form or by something added to the self. The self is apparent to itself:

“Therefore it must apprehend its essence due to what it itself is in itself…. There is no other property with it of which being evident could be a state. It is simply the evident itself—nothing more. Therefore, it is light in itself, and it is thus pure light. Your apprehension is not something else posterior to your essence, nor is the capacity for apprehension accidental to your essence. If your essence were assumed to be an identity that apprehends its essence, it would itself be prior to its apprehension and therefore be unknown—which is absurd….

Here is another way to express this: You ought not to say, “My ego is a thing whose concomitant is being evident, but that thing is hidden in itself.” Rather, it is nothing but being evident and being light”.

Despite the luminosity of the self, self-understanding requires work. We can be thrown off, for instance, by the “ruse of imagination.” One paragraph is worth quoting at length, just to get an idea of how Suhrawardí thinks of the task of gaining self-understanding.

“Knowledge of the self depends on several things: first, familiarity with the several faculties which are combined in our bodies, five internal and five external…. One should know the composition and division of one’s parts, because they are all his army and his servants. Some of them are like demons, and some are like angels. Some are like beasts, and some are like birds. In some there is benefit, and in some, harm. If he does not recognize their benefits and harms, he will become imprisoned by them. The body, which is like a city, shall be ruined. Second, one should govern these enumerated faculties so that one rules over them and they are ruled. Third is to know one’s self, whence one has come and whither one is going. From time to time one should bring one’s self to one’s own world. He should join that world so that he may increase his life, as the Messenger, Peace be with him, bids: “Keep the connections of the womb so you may prolong your life.” This means that keeping the connections of the womb lengthens one’s life. This report has an exterior and an interior. Its exterior is that he who keeps such connections will have a long life. The womb is suspended from the divine throne, as it is said, “The womb is suspended from the throne.” In another place he said, “The womb is a branch of the Merciful.” So, when one comes to recognize oneself, so that the desire for one’s own world does not allow one to become preoccupied with this world, one will endeavor to join that world so that one keeps the connection of the womb, and when he keeps the connections of the womb, life is increased. Since this rank is to be achieved through righteous deeds, righteous deeds become like a mount which one rides toward the Truth. The self becomes a good word, as is reported in the Qur’an, Honored is He who said: “He raises to Himself the good word and the righteous deed.” (35:10) Fourth is voluntary death, and this is acquired when the external and internal faculties are governed. Whenever one wants, they are arrested and stilled, as, for example, some of the faculties are arrested and stilled during sleep, so in wakefulness, they become submissive and dormant. When this occurs, the body stops its work, and
comes to rest in its own world, as the Messenger, Peace be with him, says in this regard: “My eye sleeps, but my heart, never.” Khwajah Hakim Sana’i, may Allah have Mercy on him, says:

_O Friend! Die before your death, if you desire life,
For Idris, with such a death, reached paradise before us._

I have also composed two couplets in this regard:

_If before your natural death you die,
Rejoice for you’ve won eternal paradise;
But if you’ve not given this task your best try,
Lament, for you’ve become your own sacrifice._

By contrast, Prof. Bencivenga presents us with a view of the soul as shifting patterns of meaning and identity with no ultimate coherence, no telos, no logos, just vague patterns of actions stitched together into something between chaos and coincidence. Prof. Bencivenga quotes the spy novelist, le Carré: “In the beginning was the deed. Not the motive, least of all the word.” (83)

Regardless of what one thinks of Prof. Bencivenga’s views of the self and intention, it probably is true enough that Anselm had mixed motives. Anyone who takes on the role of the infidel long enough is in danger of infidelity. Actually, however, this role is played by the student rather than the teacher. One of Anselm’s dialogue partners is the importunate student, Boso. The dynamics of Anselm’s discourse becomes clearer by examining the role of Boso: the student (1) questions to remove his own doubts, and (2) questions in order to learn how to answer if such questions should be posed to him. One is reminded of the advocatus diaboli (devil’s advocate) in the canonization process. The official title of the devil’s advocate is

Promotor Fidei (Promoter of the Faith). He promotes and protects the faith by raising whatever objections might keep a candidate for sainthood from advancing to this end. Anselm must anticipate and guard against Boso’s questions put forth on behalf of the infidel, just as Guanilo sought to play the part of defense for the fool. Everyone who considers more than one side of an argument will find themselves with mixed motives. But that does not make us into double agents. It does not mean that there can be no underlying cohesion, ordering and division of labor among the voices. It certainly does not entail hypocrisy.

Irony is what this book is all about, its author tells us. Irony is a revealing and concealing. It is a rhetorical method by which hints are given at the same time that there is an explicit denial. It is never entirely clear whether the one who uses irony is fully aware of the implications of what he is saying. The classic example of irony is the Socratic profession of ignorance. At the same time that he professes ignorance, he hints that he knows that the knowledge of which others boast is a sham. The Socratic use of irony occurs in the course of his dialectic, the careful use of question and answer that leads to deeper understanding.
Irony, is no mere jumble of voices; it is not mere punning or postmodern cleverness. Irony requires one to make a point by saying one thing and in another sense denying it, so that the listener with sufficient understanding can grasp the subtlety of the sense in which the point is true, and the aspect in which it is not. What is needed for an appreciation of irony is an intuitive sense of the aspects. Irony does not provide a mere contradiction. It is dialectical, or, as Suhrawardí would say, illuminative.

The invitation given by Suhrawardí (so common in the mystical tradition of Islam) to die before one dies is ironic. You are to die, but not to die. You are to deny the self, but remain yourself. The dialectic, as in the Platonic tradition, is oriented toward light. It is not a mere holding together of alternative narratives, but requires climbing the ladder of the soul while recognizing what is higher and what is lower.

Irony is also political. It is an affront to the authorities who make false claims to knowledge. It contrasts mere argumentation, mere rhetoric, with the dialectic that brings the wisdom needed to establish justice. Likewise, Suhrawardí’s invitation to intuitive philosophy is one that challenges the authorities who lack illuminative wisdom. Suhrawardí’s political vision is consummately Platonic. When Plato seeks to distinguish dialectic from mere rhetoric, he puts his point in the form of a proportion:

“Sophistic is to legislation what beautification is to gymnastics, and rhetoric to justice what cookery is to medicine.”

In each case, there is a contrast between what offers mere appearances and what really provides the object sought. Here, however, rhetoric is contrasted with justice instead of dialectic. Justice, however, is what rhetoric attempts to give the appearance of, while it is really only achieved through dialectic, just as beautification gives the appearance of the strength that is really achieved through gymnastics. Justice here has two aspects. There is the justice of treating one’s object of enquiry fairly, doing justice to the topic, and there is also justice in the political sense. The two are not unrelated, for the just ruler is one who is able to do justice to the practical issues that arise in governance; and in training to become philosopher kings, five years of the study of dialectic follows ten years of the study of mathematics.

Prof. Bencivenga notices that if God were as inconceivable as Anselm sometimes admits, there would be no point trying to prove His existence. Indeed, Aquinas faulted Anselm’s ontological argument on precisely these grounds. In order to understand Anselm’s proof better, and why Anselm did not consider it invalidated by divine ineffability, we should consider what Anselm meant by inconceivability. As we saw above, in his Monologion, Anselm tells us that God is inconceivable and He isn’t. It’s a matter of precision. Irony functions to provide hints of something more—something that often resists formulation. God is not precisely conceivable; but He is imprecisely conceivable. Imprecise conceivability is enough of a foothold to launch the ontological argument. So, we might draw a lesson from this, that if one uses one’s God given reason, an imprecise conception ought to be enough to lead one to certain conclusions, and if it doesn’t, then it would seem that one is a fool, or playing the fool.

Similarly, Suhrawardí explains how the incompleteness of knowledge of God does not prevent one from knowing God:
“It has been related that all the prophets, saints and angels, upon whom be Peace, finished their litanies with these two or three words: “Glory to You! We did not know You as You should be known; Glory to You! We did not worship You as You should be worshipped.” It is said that there is an angel whose glorification is like this: “Glory to You, whose creatures have no way of knowing You.” The purport of these words is this, that no one can know Him as He is. However, everyone can obtain some knowledge to the extent of his capability and spiritual rank, and to the extent he has traveled the spiritual path he can attain some rank in Presence....

Whoever comes to know himself to the extent of his capability will have a share in the knowledge of the Supreme Reality. The more he mortifies himself, and the nearer he come to perfection, so too, his knowledge will increase. This is exemplified by the way the sun shines into each house proportionately with its aperture”.

If even an imprecise knowledge is still knowledge, and one really ought to draw the implications that are within reach from such knowledge, is Anselm playing the fool when he fails to consider the implications that might follow from an imprecise notion that there is something wrong with mobilizing Christendom against the Muslims about whom precious little is known between Rome and Canterbury? Could such considerations amount to anything more than paper doubts for Anselm? The judgment is to be left to God alone, and it may be improper for us even to speculate about what is in the heart of another. Nevertheless, the act of failing to oppose war may be damnable even if the actor is not.

Prof. Bencivenga has given us reason to suspect that when we argue in support of principles that we cannot imagine could be otherwise, this indicates that there are other factors at work. With regard to Anselm, the motivating factors are at once intellectual satisfaction, support of the Church, and subversion. None of these is the entire story, but each plays a part. It seems, however, that the story is truer of the author than of Anselm, except that the institutions for which the author has worked are not those of the Church but of secular universities. With regard to Anselm, I have suggested another set of motivations: his teleological religious metaphysics, his educational aims, and his support of philosophical theology. I do not mean to dismiss entirely the political concerns discussed by Prof. Bencivenga, although I do not see these as being as central as he does.

Whatever the motives we find in the work of Anselm, what is most important for Prof. Bencivenga’s argument is that there is a multiplicity of occasionally conflicting factors at work. This multiplicity of factors is especially relevant when we consider the controlling beliefs of one’s ideology. One’s identity is not to be understood through a transparent introspection of one’s own real motives, because the self is only understood by listening to the several voices within that evidence themselves in the patterns of our actions. This makes Prof. Bencivenga skeptical about attributions of hypocrisy and self-deception, for such attributions assume a privileged core of the self which one may betray in word or deed.

Against the inner theater of the absurd sketched by Prof. Bencivenga, we may contrast the view of the self-expounded by Suhrawardi. The competing voices within are formed by the various sorts of light and
darkness that are mixed within us, but these actors form a hierarchy, at the head of which is the pure light of simple awareness. Like Prof. Bencivenga, we can grant that often none of the inner voices of the conflicting aspects of our personalities can establish any claim to speaking for the true self or inner identity.

Self-deception remains possible for one who accepts Prof. Bencivenga’s idea of the self, even if not in the form of a transparent true self pretending to be something it is not. First, the very failure to recognize the variety of psychological factors at work within one which Prof. Bencivenga decries is a form of self-deception. Secondly, one’s actions may pattern themselves in such a way as to suggest motivating factors outwardly denied by the dominant inner voice. For example, we may tell ourselves that we are not racists while our actions refute our words. Suhrawardí would no doubt urge that self-deception is to be removed by undertaking the spiritual quest, submitting oneself to the sort of discipline with regard to which Anselm counseled moderation. Perhaps, however, more is needed. Fasts and prayers are not by themselves sufficient to bring to light the manner in which one’s actions may contribute to enmity or oppression, although we may hope that through spiritual exercise one will find sufficient motivation to examine oneself in consideration of such issues. What is really needed, however, is the illumination given by divine grace:

“No one who seeks His court will perish; neither will He disappoint the hopes of him who stands before His door.”

The Proof

After all these ruminations over its motivation, a few words, at least, should be given to an examination of the proof. There has been much controversy over how Anselm’s ontological argument should be interpreted. Some have argued that when he restates his proof in response to Guanilo, he is actually giving a different proof. There have also been a number of different formulations of Anselm’s arguments that employ the tools of modern logic.

Here, instead of focusing on Anselm’s argument, I would like to consider Bencivenga’s interpretation of the argument. Bencivenga’s version is very similar to Plantinga’s. While Anselm asks whether that than which a greater cannot be conceived has objective existence or merely mental existence, Plantinga and Bencivenga ask whether such a being exists merely in some possible world or exists in the actual or real world. Formally, it doesn’t really make much difference, for we could just limit the set of possible worlds to two: the actual world and the mental world. Anselm had no notion of the possible worlds of contemporary modal logic.

The key to Plantinga’s ontological argument is that once you admit the possibility of a maximally great being, that is, the existence of a maximally great being in some possible world, this implies its existence in all the other worlds, too.
Strictly speaking, this implication does not hold in every system of modal logic. It requires a system, such as S5, in which possible necessity implies necessity. This point is overlooked by both Plantinga and Bencivenga. A system of modal logic other than S5 would seem more appropriate for dealing with constructions of the imagination that we want to allow to be conceivably necessary, but not actually necessary.

Instead of questioning the suitability of S5 for the formulation of his version of the ontological argument, Plantinga admits that the argument he gives would not be accepted by a persistent atheist who could argue that a maximally great being is not even possible, that is, he admits that one of the argument’s crucial premises might be considered dubious.

As Bencivenga analyzes the argument, it depends on assumptions that will be rejected by transcendental realists and transcendental idealists; and he sees no alternative to these two positions, and hence, the argument is to be rejected. Of course, the Kantian terminology does not fit well with the way Anselm saw the problem, but the anachronism serves to underscore the fact that what Bencivenga seems to be presenting here is not so much an analysis of Anselm’s argument, but a statement of his own reasons for doubt.

One of the premises employed in Bencivenga’s reconstruction of the argument is the following (with his numbering):

(11) If $Y$ thinks of $Z$, then $Z$ is an object $Y$ thinks of.

From this, Bencivenga informs us, it would not take much convincing to accept this:

(12) If $Y$ thinks of $Z$, then $Z$ is an object existing in a world $Y$ thinks of.

Once we accept (12) we can move on to something like Plantinga’s version of the ontological argument. So, Bencivenga stops at (11). He claims that a transcendental realist should not accept (11), because we can think of all sorts of absurdities that are not objects that exist in any possible world at all. A transcendental idealist, however, can accept (11), but for him $Z$ will be nothing more than an intentional object, an object embedded in some experience and reference to which occurs in opaque contexts.

Bencivenga presents his version of Anselm’s argument as a reductio, where the assumption to be proven absurd is: that than which a greater cannot be thought does not exist in the real world, and the contradiction to be derived is by using (12) to establish that in some possible world $w$, that than which a greater cannot be thought (designated as $X$) does exist, while at the same time proving that in $w$ something greater than $X$ can be thought, namely, something that exists in all worlds. Now, Bencivenga tells us that there is no real contradiction here if we are only dealing with intentional objects because such objects cannot be detached from the experiences of thinking about them in such a way as to derive logical contradictions about them. Hence, Anselm’s reductio fails. We should have to think of the objects of thought realistically for it to succeed, but we already saw that (11) requires us to take a transcendental
Bencivenga’s sympathies seem to lie with the transcendental idealist. Anselm, on the other hand, cannot be properly understood by means of this sort of classification, but it seems fairly clear that he is thinking realistically enough about \( X \) to allow the derivation of a contradiction from the supposition that \( X \) does not exist.

Anselm would not accept (11). This is clear from his response to Guanilo. Just because we can think of a greatest possible island does not make it an object of which we think. It is a mere play of words. So, if Anselm doesn’t adhere to a principle like (11) or (12), how is he to establish that there is an imaginable world in which \( X \) exists? This is precisely the point at which Plantinga gives up and makes the following admission:

“Hence our verdict on these reformulated versions of St. Anselm’s argument must be as follows. They cannot, perhaps, be said to prove or establish their conclusion. But since it is rational to accept their central premises, they do show that it is rational to accept that conclusion. And perhaps that is all that can be expected of any such argument.”

Of course, Anselm wanted more than a proof that it is rational to accept the conclusion that God exists. He did not want to equivocate between the transcendental idealist and transcendental realist conceptions of objects of thought, and he did not want to rest his case on the mere plausibility that a maximally great being possibly exists. As for the issue of how we know that what is in the understanding is more than mere words when we contemplate that than which no greater can be conceived, Anselm appeals to the faith of Guanilo as a Catholic.

“But I say: if a being than which a greater is inconceivable is not understood or conceived, and is not in the understanding or in concept, certainly either God is not a being than which a greater is inconceivable, or else he is not understood or conceived, and is not in the understanding or in concept. But I call on your faith and conscience to attest that this is most false. Hence, that than which a greater cannot be conceived is truly understood and conceived, and is in the understanding and in concept.”

The modern critic will object that Anselm is guilty of circular reasoning, because he assumes the existence of the God whose existence he is trying to prove. But Anselm is not really trying to convince the fool that God is. Anselm begins his defense with the quip that although the *Proslogion* was directed against the fool, Guanilo is no fool, but a Catholic speaking on behalf of the fool, and so, he considers it sufficient to answer the Catholic. Anselm is out to show that anyone who thinks that God does not exist is a fool, because he cannot really understand what he is saying and mean it. If he really does understand what he is saying, the phrase that than which a greater cannot be imagined succeeds in referring to God, and being what He is, He cannot be a mere intentional object.

Of course, this means that the proof doesn’t work unless one already has faith. But Anselm says as much at the end of the first chapter of the *Proslogion*:
For I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand. For this also I believe,—that unless I believed, I should not understand.

Likewise, Suhrawardí proves the existence of God by inviting us to reflect on being itself. These reflections lead to various proofs that being in itself is necessary. Often Suhrawardí refers to pure being as a pure light. Like Anselm’s proof, Suhrawardí’s proofs will not convince the stubborn atheist. The atheist will deny that there is any such thing as pure being. Suhrawardí, like Anselm, appeals to the faith of his reader. However, while Anselm appeals to the Catholicism of Guanilo, Suhrawardí appeals to a specifically philosophical faith, a rational insight that being itself must have reality if anything is to be real. This is not faith as opposed to intellection, but an exalted notion of intellection as including divine intuitions into the nature of reality.26

Suhrawardí seeks to prove the existence of Necessary Existence in order to show how philosophical reflection can enable us to prove Necessary Existence on the basis of rational insight about pure being. The proof is offered not to find out whether God exists, but to show how the intellect can arrive at a philosophical understanding of existence. So, we return to the original question of Bencivenga’s book: Why prove the existence of God if you already claim to know it? Anselm’s own answer is that he is seeking understanding.

He is seeking a specific type of understanding, a philosophical understanding. His description of the divine essence, which admittedly cannot be known in itself, takes the via negativa. Anselm is careful to describe the divine essence not as maximal greatness, but as that than which a greater cannot be conceived. Philosophical reflection on this entirely negative description of divinity—assuming on the basis of faith that it does refer to something with at least mental existence and is not a mere jumble of words—reveals that it exists, by means of a reductio ad absurdum argument. In other words, Anselm has proved that a negative characterization of divinity is sufficient to derive existence, and necessary existence, at that, given the assumption provided by faith that the description refers to a possible object. That is no small feat, even if it disappoints those who mistakenly sought a way to use the force of logic to coerce the atheist to admit the existence of God.

1. Ermanno Bencivenga, Logic and Other Nonsense: The Case of Anselm and His God (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993). All page references to this will be put in parentheses in the text.
9. For example, see Walter Wink, Powers That Be (New York: Doubleday, 1999), Richard A. Horsly, Jesus and Empire (Augsburg Fortress, 2002). The theme of the revolutionary character of the message brought by the prophets is also a recurrent theme in the works of Imam Khomeini and Shahid Mutahhari.
11. Fn. 1, p. 91.
15. The expression, translated literally here, is used for keeping on good terms and visiting one’s relatives.
16. The Arabic words for womb (rahim) and mercy (rahmah) are derived from the same root.
18. Idris is Enoch of the Old Testament (Gen. 5:24, Hebrews 11:5). He is said to have initiated the art of writing, and other sciences. His name derives from the same root as the word for lesson. It is said that Izrael, the Angel of Death, visited Idris in human form. Idris requested a taste of death, so Izrael took his soul out of his body and then returned it. Then Idris asked to see hell and heaven. When he saw heaven he asked to stay, and God commanded Izrael that since he had already tasted death, he might be allowed to remain in heaven.
20. Actually, it is anachronistic to speak of the devil’s advocate in connection with Anselm, since it was only established as an official part of the processes of determining sainthood in 1587!
25. Anselm's Apologetic, Ch. I, 152.


Topic Tags:

Philosophy [6]