

THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

All nations of all ages have accepted the truth that there is a God. Against the awful grandeur, the sublime significance, and the incontrovertible actuality of this truth, or its general acceptance by the human race, the inane carpings of isolated atheists no more militate than do breeze-blown atoms of dust tend to batter down a wall of solid masonry. Individual men may impugn God's wisdom or deny His immutability. They may gainsay His justice or repudiate His providential love for man; but each and every sane human being arrived at reason's age undoubtedly knows that a supreme Being of some description must, and therefore does, actually exist. "The fool said in his heart there is no God."¹

Catholics know by both Revelation and reason that there is a God. An infallible Church tells them of a pure, just and omnipotent Spirit who made the world, and who at the time of their death will reward or punish them according to their manner of acting during life. But even without the aid of Revelation man could certainly acquaint himself with the fact of God's existence. Our reason tells us that there is a Supreme Being. Else who put the modest moon in space? Whence came all the twinkling stars, and the blazing sun? Whence the earth, and the note it plays in the marvelous music of the cosmic spheres? How began earthly life, in its varied forms of vegetative growth and animal activity, if He who is Life itself and is without beginning, change or possible end, did not by His infinite power, cause finite life to be? "The heavens show forth the glory of God, and the firmament declareth the work of His hands."² "For the invisible things of Him, from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made: His eternal power also and Divinity: so that they are inexcusable."³

Thus we have it on the authority of the Holy Ghost that unaided reason can attain to a knowledge of God's existence; and that for those who deny His existence there is no excuse, since the evidence to the contrary is so abundant. Accordingly, our purpose here is not to offer any new proofs for the existence

¹ Ps. lii.

² Ps. xviii.

³ Rom. i, 20.

of God. None are needed. Nor is it to make His reality appear more probable for as we have seen the conclusion that there is a God forces itself upon every reason. Neither is our purpose the raising of doubts in our readers' minds regarding a point on which for Catholics there can be no doubt, since according to a pronouncement of the Holy See we must believe, under pain of incurring eternal damnation, that God actually exists.

On the contrary, our intention is merely to consider the validity of the Ontological Argument, first formulated by the great Saint Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109), and later used under slightly different forms by the famous Des Cartes (1596-1650) and also by Leibnitz (1646-1716), by which these three philosophers sought to demonstrate God's actual existence from the mere fact that we have an idea or concept of God in our minds. "Whether or not the idea of God proves God" is a question which has invited through centuries the attention of many of the brightest intellects the world has known, some of these enthusiastically favoring the so-called "idea proof," and others with equal fervor aligning themselves against it. Consequently, on whatever side one takes his stand he may be assured of illustrious companionship. Briefly to discuss this question is our humble aim. We are to consider whether the so-called Ontological proof does or does not involve, as has been said, a "convenient ignoring" of the unbridged (and what would be, in the impossible case of a non-existing Infinite, an unbridgeable) chasm which necessarily separates the actual from the merely imagined. And while we do not pose as pronouncers of the last word on the subject, we hold, and in the following paragraphs shall endeavor to state our reasons for believing, that St. Anselm's Ontological Argument in all its forms does actually involve such "ignoring" and is for that reason invalid, without weight. Inasmuch as the arguments of Saint Anselm, Des Cartes and Leibnitz are substantially the same (each purporting to prove God's actuality from the idea or notion of God in the human mind), it might be thought that an examination of any one of them would be sufficient. But since their difference in form is considerable we shall treat them separately—St. Anselm's first, then Des Cartes' and, lastly, that of Leibnitz.

Before addressing ourselves to this task, however, it might be well to explain that there are in the human mind ideas of two classes of things: First, we have ideas of things which exist in

the mind and which also have or have had actual existence, i. e., existence outside the mind. Secondly, we have ideas of things which exist in the mind and which also could, but do not, exist outside the mind. Things represented by ideas of this second class are usually called possible things. That is, they have not actual existence at present, but they might at some future time have actual existence, the latter coming from some external cause having the power to bestow it. An example of a possible thing would be a lake coincident in dimensions and identical in location with the present Lake Michigan, but consisting of liquid silver instead of water. Such a lake could exist instead of Lake Michigan if God so desired. It is therefore a possible thing, and as such is said to have logical existence. While an example of an object represented by an idea of the first class is anything that exists outside the mind, as a trolley car, for instance. A trolley car not only exists in the mind, but it also has real being outside the mind. It is therefore said to have actual existence.

Now we come to St. Anselm's Ontological Argument for the actual existence of God. He begins by laying down a proposition; and to this proposition we would ask the reader to attend closely, as the weakness of the Saint's syllogism will thereby become more readily observable. He says in his fundamental statement that a being which exists both in the mind and outside the mind is greater than one which exists only in the mind. In other words: a being that has both logical and actual existence is greater than a being having logical existence only. He means, for example, that a willow whistle in the hands of a child is greater than a silver Lake Michigan, since the latter is a mere figment of the imagination, while the former has actual existence. Thus far we are in accord with St. Anselm, for we concede that his proposition is correct. His so-called proof, syllogistically stated, is the following: We have an idea of God as a Being than which nothing greater can be thought. But that than which nothing greater can be thought must exist outside the mind; for if it existed only in the mind it could then be conceived as existing outside the mind—which would be greater. Hence, since we conceive God as a Being than which nothing greater can be thought, and since such a Being must exist outside the mind, therefore God actually exists. This is the renowned Saint Anselm's celebrated Ontological Argument for the existence of God.

Among others Duns Scotus, the Subtile Doctor, a Franciscan, accepted the Ontological Argument. But the Angelic Doctor, Saint Thomas Aquinas, a Dominican, was one of many who rejected it on the ground that it involved an unwarranted transition from the ideal order to the actual order, from the world of thought to the world of actual things. That the argument has this defect may be observed at once, it seems to us, if we examine it closely. St. Anselm's syllogism is equivalent to: Our idea of God is of a Being than which nothing greater can be thought. But this Being actually exists. Therefore, God actually exists. He does not, nor can he, prove his minor premise. And hence his conclusion is not logically nor legitimately drawn.

In his epichirema, given some lines back, where St. Anselm attempts to prove his minor premise, which is, "But that than which nothing greater can be thought must exist outside the mind," by using the clause, "For if it existed only in the mind it could then be conceived as existing outside the mind—which would be greater"—at that point in his reasoning an error is palpably present. The validity of the argument depends on proving that the Being than which nothing greater can be thought actually exists outside the mind. All will admit that such a Being exists in the mind; but the difficulty is to prove that it exists outside the mind. The Being which is so great that nothing greater can be thought may exist in the mind only. We conceive such a Being as actually existing; but what is there to prove that this actuality is not a matter of the conception and nothing more? We can think of any conceivable object as actually existing outside the mind which does not so exist. Therefore, the greatest conceivable object, as St. Anselm calls God, might be thought of as actually existing and yet in reality be a thing of the mind only. From which it would follow, it seems to us, that God's existence cannot be demonstrated from the idea of Him in the human mind.

But let us see whether or not St. Anselm reasons in accordance with the fundamental proposition which he himself laid down at the outset. It will be recalled that the Saint therein says that a Being which has actual existence is greater than one having only logical existence. Yet when he attempts to prove that the Being than which nothing greater can be thought exists actually he is not true to the spirit of his original dictum. Observe that he tries to prove the actual existence of the greatest

conceivable Being by saying, "for if it existed only in the mind it could then be conceived as existing outside the mind—which would be greater." Now by conceiving actual existence for a Being, what do we give it? All that we thereby give it is logical existence. But according to St. Anselm's opening proposition it is the possession of actual existence which makes one thing greater than another having only logical existence; and in his syllogism, in accordance with this criterion, he claims for a certain object superiority over another. But to neither of those objects does he assure anything more than mere logical existence. For he says, "if it existed only in the mind it could be **conceived** as existing outside the mind—which would be greater." Therefore, the Saint's reasoning is not in agreement with his own fundamental proposition.

The mere conceiving of any being as existing outside the mind does not prove that it exists in that manner. Hence, the mere conceiving of a Being than which nothing greater can be thought as actually existing outside the mind does not establish the fact that it has actuality. For, as said above, we can conceive of an object as existing outside the mind which does not so exist. St. Anselm's reasoning does not and cannot prove that the Being he calls God actually exists. He merely assumes that such a Being actually exists. Here, then, is the flaw in his fabric of argumentation—the delinquent link in his chain of plausible reasoning. Here it is that the Saint as a reasoner attempts in one reckless, illegitimate leap to cross the gulf that must eternally yawn between what actually is and what is merely pictured in the mind. What St. Anselm's conclusion should be is: We have an idea of God, who may and may not exist outside the mind.

Does it not become patent that Saint Anselm makes in his argument an inadmissible transition from the ideal to the actual?—that he "conveniently ignores" the wide chasm separating what actually is and what exists (so far as his syllogism goes to prove) merely in thought?—in a word, that his Ontological Argument is without weight?

Only a few words need be said in refutation of the arguments of Leibnitz and DesCartes. The latter argues thus: Whatever is contained in a clear and distinct idea of any object must be affirmed of it. But a clear and distinct idea of an absolutely perfect Being contains the notion of existence. Hence

we may say that there really exists an absolutely perfect Being. We contend that DesCartes' conclusion "there really exists an absolutely perfect Being" cannot be drawn logically from the premises of his argument. It must be remembered, first of all, that we can have an idea of an object which exists only in the mind, just as truly as of objects existing actually. The notion of the existence of an absolutely perfect Being is merely a part of the idea of such a Being, just as the notion of the existence of a silver Lake Michigan is merely a part of the idea of such a lake. Whenever we think of this imaginary lake we conceive it as having actual existence; and yet it remains an imaginary object even though we apply to it the notion of actuality. Likewise even though we apply the notion of actuality to a conceived perfect Being, such a Being may still be an object whose extramental reality cannot be demonstrated by the fact that we conceive it as actual, or in other words by the fact that we apply to it the notion of actuality. And hence by DesCartes' argument the actual existence of God is not proved any more than by St. Anselm's argument. Moreover, it is to be noted that DesCartes' argument contains the same defect as does the Saint's, namely, an inadmissible step from the ideal order to the actual order. DesCartes neglected to consider that we can have an idea representing an object as actually existing which does not actually exist.

Leibnitz tries in the following manner, to prove God's actuality from our idea of Him: "God," he says, "is at least possible; for the concept of Him involves no repugnance. But if possible He must exist; for the concept of Him implies His actual existence.

Leibnitz says, "God is at least possible; for the concept of Him involves no repugnance." Let us consider this first statement in his argument. There are two significations in which the "possible" may be interpreted; the absolute signification and the relative. When we say that anything is absolutely possible, we mean that there is in its essential nature, and therefore in its concept, nothing repugnant to actual existence. It is evidently in this absolute signification that Leibnitz uses the word "possible" in the above sentence. When Leibnitz speaks of God he means what we understand by the term "Infinite Being." Now the essential nature of an Infinite Being involves no repugnance to actual existence, and such a Being is therefore absolutely possible. So

we concede Leibnitz's statement that God is possible, interpreting "possible" in its absolute meaning. But does it follow from the fact that God is absolutely possible that He actually exists? There is an absolute possibility of a silver Lake Michigan, but does it follow from that fact that such a lake actually exists? Certainly not. Hence it does not follow that God actually exists from the fact that He is absolutely possible. And hence we can not say, with Leibniz, "if possible, He must exist."

Nor would it help the argument any were we to interpret the word "possible" in the relative signification. What is the meaning of relative possibility? When we say that something is relatively possible, we mean not only that there is nothing in its essential nature, and therefore in its concept, repugnant to actual existence, but also that if it does not now actually exist it may be brought into actual existence by some cause having the power to give it actual existence. But when we apply the term "relatively possible" to an Infinite Being, we immediately reach an absurd conclusion. Which conclusion is that there must be already in existence some power that is more than infinite, by which the Infinite could be brought from potency into act. Otherwise, how could the Infinite Being which he calls God and whose actuality his argument has not yet proven—how could that Being be given actuality unless there was already in existence some cause that is itself more than infinite? Since, if relatively possible, God is not at present actual, but may become so through the agency of some greater cause, which cause is in its very name a contradiction? It is clear, therefore, that God cannot be relatively possible and also that His absolute possibility does not prove His actual existence.

We hold then that the Ontological Argument does not of itself prove God's existence. And, in conclusion, let us remind the reader that it is with St. Thomas Aquinas, than whom in these latter days profounder philosopher or more enlightened theologian has not arisen—it is with the immortal St. Thomas that we stigmatize as invalid the Ontological Argument for the actuality of God.

—Martin McDermott, O. P.

ALFRED JOYCE KILMER

The name of the Catholic soldier-poet, Alfred Joyce Kilmer, continues to excite admiration not only because of the heroism he displayed in his generous death-sacrifice, but also because of the nobility of his whole character as revealed so delicately in his writings.

Let us briefly review his career. He was born at New Brunswick, N. J., December 6, 1886; was graduated from Rutgers College in 1904; received his A. B. from Columbia in 1906; began teaching the same year as instructor in Latin at Morristown High School, N. J.; some time after he became lexicographer; conducted for nine years the poetry department of the Literary Digest; finally, in 1913, he engaged as special writer for the New York Times Sunday Magazine. This year of 1913 marked the great turning-point in his life, for then it was that he professed, together with his wife, the Catholic faith, having hitherto adhered to the Episcopalian persuasion.

His conversion was thorough. Staunchly Catholic he remained, laboring heartily withal for the spread of God's kingdom through a literary mission of piety and mirth; giving thereby a new impetus to our Catholic journalism. When the United States went into the World War Mr. Kilmer volunteered in the "Sixty-ninth." In his "Apology" he tells us why he laid down his pen, grasped the gun, and with a farewell to wife and family, crossed the seas to fight:

"Is freedom a will-o-the-wisp
To cheat a poet's eye?
Be it phantom or fact, it's a noble cause
In which to sing and to die."

Sweetly did he sing, bravely did he fight, and manfully did he die in the cause of justice and freedom on August 1, 1918, his age being thirty-one years. Joyce Kilmer gladly endured like a true soldier the trying hardships and bitter sufferings of the battlefield, and his spirit of patient resignation is unmistakably evinced by the following "Prayer":

"My shoulders ache beneath my pack,
(Lie easier, Cross upon His back.)
Men shout at me who may not speak

¹ Kilmer, Joyce—Memoirs and Poems, Doran Co., N. Y., p. 132.