The Ontological Argument

'Nor do I seek to understand so that I can believe, but rather I believe so that I can understand.' (Anselm, Proslogion Chapter 1)

The ontological argument for the existence of God was famously set out by Bishop Anselm in his Proslogion (Chapters 2-4). This argument is a pure-thought argument and does not require the thinker to venture into the realm of sensory experience. It is also an argument that seems to presuppose a faith-stance (this also being Karl Barth's interpretation of it and a view which is accepted by the author of this article). In other word's, Bishop Anselm was a Christian and his ontological argument for the existence of God seems to be a way for him to dwell on the greatness of God and not necessarily intended to convince any unbeliever that God exists.

Ontology is to do with 'being' (or what something is). Anselm's ontological argument concerns existence and whether it is an attribute (characteristic/quality) of God in the same way omnipotence, omniscience and benevolence are believed to be. As such the argument is an a priori argument. It does not rest on proving God's existence from the empirical realm (as arguments such as The Design Argument and The Cosmological Argument do), but on showing that God must exist logically (or that God's non-existence is illogical).

The main idea behind Anselm's argument is that epistemology (what we know) IS ontology (what there is); or, that if it is possible to conceive of \( X \), then \( X \) must surely exist. As such the central premise of the ontological argument is:

'God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived'

In other words, something that exists in reality is better than something which only exists in the mind (or existence is the best possible quality something can have). To illustrate this it is obvious that one can imagine all kinds of fantastic creatures and beings but if they do not exist then they cannot be the greatest of all conceivable beings. For Anselm any being that has the attribute of existence is greater than a being that did not have the attribute of existence. Therefore, that for Anselm, 'God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived' means God must exist. It is not saying that God's attributes must be greater than anything we can imagine of God. This would ultimately lead nowhere as you could conceive of a God greater than mine (i.e. more powerful), and others to postulate greater things than others ad infinitum.

Anselm presented his argument in two stages:

The first statement of the argument is that existence is the greatest possible attribute God can have:

For when a painter thinks ahead to what he will paint, he has that picture in his thought, but he does not yet think it exists, because he has not done it yet. Once he has painted it he has it in his thoughts and thinks that it exists because he has done it...

And certainly that greater than which cannot be understood cannot exist only in thought, for if it exists only in thought it could also be thought of existing in reality as well, which is greater. (Proslogion, Chapter 2)
The second stage of Anselm’s argument is that it is illogical to consider that God might not exist:

For one can think there exists something that cannot be thought of as not existing [or it is inconceivable for it not to exist], and that would be greater than something which cannot be thought of as not existing [i.e. It does not exist!]. ... For if that greater than which cannot be thought can be thought of as not existing, then that greater than which cannot be thought is not that greater than which cannot be thought...

(Proslogion, Chapter 3 [my brackets and emphasis])

In other words, the greatest possible thought one can have about God is not only that God exists, but that God’s non-existence is impossible (or one cannot conceive of any realm of existence (or possible world) where God does not exist). In fact, Anselm is arguing that God has necessary existence. Something which has necessary existence is something that exists in all possible worlds (i.e. It is not contingent). In classical theism God is believed to have necessary existence because God created the world, is eternal and is outside time.

The ontological argument was reformulated by René Descartes in the seventeenth century. It also has a contemporary expression in the work of Alvin Plantinga and Norman Malcolm who both concentrated on the issue of God's necessary existence. Anselm clearly believes that by meditating on the being of God one can be assured of God's existence. Thus he concludes by saying that, 'For no-one who understands what God is can think that he does not exist.' In fact, those who attempt to speak of God, yet deny God's existence, are the fool spoken of in the Bible in Psalm 14:1.

1 'The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.' (Psalm 14:1)

http://www.faithnet.org.uk/A2%20Subjects/Philosophyofreligion/ontologicalargument.htm

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