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ONTOLOGICAL PROOF AND THE CRITIQUE OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

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Abstract: Focusing mainly on a number of unpublished texts by Collingwood, especially his “Lectures on the Ontological Proof of the Existence of God,” the study examines the English philosopher’s innovative interpretation of the Anselm’s main contribution to the philosophical-theological tradition. Collingwood insightfully shows how the ontological argument can be used in analyzing and discussing the religious experience, not in trying to formulate a logical proof of God’s existence. When abstracted from the individual’s practical religious life, that is, from the experience of prayer, worship, and the like, mind’s awareness of God cannot be understood. Resorting mainly to Anselm, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and Descartes, Collingwood argues that the externality of the Platonic absolute is that of an absolute transcendent whereas the Christian God is not only conceived as the transcendent cause of all things, but also as the immanent spirit in them. By asserting the unity of the mind—regarded as identical with its acts—this interpretation is meant to serve both as a means towards self-knowledge, and as a starting point for a future conceptual unification of religion and philosophy.

Key Words: ontological argument, religious mind, religious experience, faith, common-sense realism, absolute presuppositions, transcendence, immanence

Anselm: an Analyst of Religious Experience

In his unpublished “Lectures on the Ontological Proof of the Existence of God” (hereafter *LOP*) written in 1919, the original Idealist English philosopher Robin George Collingwood (1889-1943) displays the extent to which the problem of *belief* represented a deep and serious concern for him. Already in this early text, he writes that philosophy must renounce the judging of truth-claims regarding the general nature of reality, and aim to uncover the actual beliefs about reality held by men. He remains faithful to this idea throughout his creative life; for example, in his late *An Essay on Metaphysics* which deals, among other subjects, with the relevance of the ontological proof for metaphysics, he stresses that the proof does not have any ontological implications: “[W]hat [Anselm] proves is not that because our idea of God is an idea of *id quo maius cogitari nequit*, therefore God exists, but that because our idea of God is an idea of *id quo maius cogitari nequit*, we stand committed to belief in God’s existence.”¹ Thus, in Collingwood’s opinion, Anselm did not necessarily mean that God exists independently of the believer’s mind, but rather that for the Christian orthodox believer, God is conceived as existing not only as an idea pertaining to his mind, but also independently of it. According to Collingwood, the examination of the ontological proof must help us to clarify the nature of the most fundamental religious beliefs held by men. And that is why, he wrote,

“[the analysis of] the ontological proof is of immediate and overwhelming importance...[and] the neglect of it is the cause of all that is most unsound and unphilosophical—as well as irreligious—in ... modern theories of religion.”²

The first aspect of the Anselmian discussion—whose interpretation represents the nucleus of *LOP*—is the fact that the notion of God includes the notion of *existence*:

“The ontological proof consists in the demonstration that the notion of God as we conceive it includes existence; that is to say that a belief in the real, as opposed to the merely imaginary, existence of God is a necessary and inseparable part of religion.”³

However, the emblematic formula or motto of Anselm’s argument, namely *credo ut intelligam* is not an Anselmian innovation, but is borrowed from Augustine;⁴ indeed, this important idea is brilliantly expressed in Augustine’s *On Free Will*; moreover, its argument proceeds from the same

Biblical verse as Anselm's, who had arguably been decisively influenced by the entire demonstration, including its premise:

"Augustine—...[Y]ou are certain that God exists. Evodius—I firmly believe it, but I do not know it. Aug.—We read in Scripture: "The fool hath said in his heart: there is no God" (Ps. 52:18). If such a fool were to say to you there is no God, and would not believe as you do, but wanted to know whether what you believe is true, would you simply go away and leave him, or would you think it your duty somehow to try to persuade him that what you believe is true, especially if he were really eager to know and not merely to argue obstinately? Ev.—Your last proviso tells me... I ought to reply to him... [For] we want to know and to understand what we believe. Aug.—We cannot deny that believing and knowing are different things, and that in matters of great importance, pertaining to divinity, we must first believe before we seek to know. Otherwise the words of the prophet would be vain, where he says: "Except ye believe ye shall not understand" (Isa. 7:9. LXX)... [N]o one is fit to find God, who does not first believe what he will afterwards learn to know."⁵

For Collingwood, the principal function of Anselm's argument is one of clarification rather than one of justification—and therefore faith and reason cannot be separated; for, according to Collingwood, only during the scrupulous and accurate critique (in the Kantian sense) of the former, which it logically presupposes, reason gains its proper aim and content. Consequently, more categorically than his predecessor Augustine, Anselm does not address the faithless people, but those who already share the religious experiences upon which he focused his analysis. In trying to emphasize this aspect, Collingwood quotes from the written dispute between Anselm and Gaunilo and notices the accurate remark of the latter that in fact the Anselmian argument did not refute the fool⁶ (who says—in his heart—that there is no God;⁷). And, the Oxford don wrote, Anselm's reply was that he does not talk to fools, but to Christians;⁸ moreover, Collingwood re-asserts this interpretation in *Essay on Metaphysics*, proving that he practically holds this conviction until his last creative period.⁹ Given that the characteristic which makes the Christian able to grasp the truth preached by Anselm is his faith, which is primarily expressed in verses, that are uttered during prayers, such as "Except ye believe ye shall not understand" (Isa. 7:9. LXX), Collingwood implicitly remains faithful to his earlier conviction that prayer and faith are coincidental.¹⁰ At the same time, he must have noticed that Anselm himself develops his argument

under the form of a prayer which is, if we are to use Collingwood's own terms, a part of Anselm's own religious experience. And, according to the Oxford don, all that the latter does is "articulat[e]... the noetic side of a religious experience whose essential trustworthiness is unquestioned; ... [for] Anselm is analyzing and discussing the religious experience, not trying to formulate a logical proof which shall take the place of religion in supplying a certainty of God."¹¹

What seems to me significant here is Collingwood's implicit tendency to reject the exclusively intellectualist perspective on religion: at this point he seems to suggest that the orthodox believer in God conceives his faith as solidly grounded, even if he does not know of any logical argument (deductive or inductive), or, as Alvin Plantinga would say, "even if he does not believe there is any such argument, and even if in fact no such argument exists. Like Calvin, Kuyper, Bavinck,... or Barth", Collingwood appears to hold that "belief in God is *properly basic*—that is, such that it is rational to accept it without accepting it on the basis of any other propositions or beliefs at all; and, even though, in fact, the Christian ought not to accept belief in God on the basis of any argument, the believer remains rational [—even if his rationality is limited; for, unlike philosophy, religious consciousness does not dogmatically question its assertions—], entirely within his epistemic rights, in *starting with* belief in God, in accepting it as basic, and in taking it as premise for argument to other conclusions."¹² In conspicuous concord with the Reformed thinkers mentioned above, Collingwood appears to claim, in his analysis of the ontological argument, that a rational noetic structure can include belief in God as basic. His account of the Anselmian analysis of religious experience converges with the assertion of the Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck:

"Scripture does not reason in the abstract. It does not make God the conclusion of a syllogism, leaving it to us whether we think the argument holds or not... Both theologically and religiously it proceeds from God as the starting point... [W]e accept [God's existence] without any constraint or coercion. The so-called proofs are by no means the final grounds of our most certain conviction that God exists. This certainty is established only by faith; that is, by the spontaneous testimony which forces itself upon us from every side".¹³

In his unorthodox analysis of the Anselmian argument, the Oxford don ascribes to the author of *Proslogion* an infirm symbiosis of hard Christian dogmatism and Platonic realism which, in his opinion, are in fact hardly compatible. It is also worth bearing in mind that Collingwood performs this investigation *indirectly*, via his critical account of Thomas Aquinas' critique of Anselm's proof and that his approach suggests his

divergences with Aquinas provided that, according to the latter, to prove or demonstrate that God exists is to exhibit a deductive argument whose conclusion is that God exists, whose premises are drawn from the deliverances of reason, and each of whose steps is by way of an argument whose corresponding conditional is among the deliverances of reason. Aquinas' first three ways of proving the existence of God would be attempts to demonstrate the existence of God just in this sense. Thus, in his own words,

"The existence of God can be proved in five ways. The first and more manifest way is the argument from motion ... [W]hatever is in motion must be put in motion by another ... But this cannot go on to infinity ... Therefore it is necessary to arrive at a first mover, put in motion by no other ...

The second way is from the nature of the efficient cause. In the world of sense we find there is an order of efficient causes. There is no case known (...) in which a thing is found to be the efficient cause of itself; for so it would be prior to itself, which is impossible ...

The third way is taken from possibility and necessity ... We find in nature things ... [that] are found to be generated ... and, consequently, they are possible to be and not to be ... Therefore, if everything is possible not to be, then at one time there could have been nothing in existence ... because that which does not exist only begins to exist by something already existing."¹⁴

I have quoted from Aquinas in order to sustain my assertion that these first three ways of demonstration he employed are the exemplary arguments of this genre whose implications are unacceptable for Collingwood; for, in this context, a demonstration that God does not exist seems to be structurally isomorphic, and thus it would have as conclusion the proposition that there is no such person as God. I think that this results from the fact that to be in the standpoint suggested by Aquinas it suffices to hold that belief in God is rationally permissible—that is, as Karl Barth would say, "*only if it is more likely than not with respect to the deliverances of reason*"—"for a person who has a good reasonable argument for it." But one who holds this belief is in fact in the standpoint of unbelief; for he is ultimately "commit[ted]... to the deliverances of reason rather than to God."¹⁵

Now, it is obvious that, whereas Anselm has conceived his proof as a logical argument, for Collingwood the whole demonstration becomes truly

valuable only when it leaves aside its alleged logicality —viz. in the answer to Gaunilo—and addresses only those who share this basic devotional experience. In fact, as I have already pointed out, the Oxford don has unorthodoxly transformed Anselm into an analyst of religious experience. Evidently, this was much beyond the intention of the latter, who was a Platonic realist, whereas Collingwood's reading of his argument is strongly anti-“realist”; in his opinion, the subject-matter of Anselm's proof is not God's existence in itself, but the nature of the religious mind's experience of God's reality. At this point, he is consistent with an idea expressed in “The Devil”: “Belief in God is not a result or an inferential conclusion drawn from previously determined facts (the finding [based on the information provided by the senses, like in Thomas Aquinas] that the world is ordered...). God's existence is an immediate result of a direct experience of His presence, namely the experience of communion with Him.”¹⁶ As Felser suggestively comments,

“In...[his accounts on the nature of God he] attribut[ed] to Anselm, Collingwood is not saying that God is not fictitious—though at times this is what he appears to be asserting. What he is saying is what he subsequently says in *Speculum Mentis*: that the religious consciousness *does not* and *cannot* recognize God as the product of its own imagination without ceasing to be what it essentially is ... For the religious mind, God is a fact—a religious fact, but a fact nonetheless.”¹⁷

In fact, Collingwood himself constantly indicates that his idea that faith cannot be inferred from reason, but rather that reason draws its substance from faith, is one of his grounding metaphysical *leitmotifs*; for example, in *Faith and Reason*, he writes:

“Faith cannot be the product of reason... you cannot produce faith by arguing. Faith is presupposed in the argument itself. People do not, and never can, come to believe in God, or in anything else as a result of ratiocination. The function of ratiocination is not this, but the development or reasoned statement of what faith finds within itself.”¹⁸

Collingwood's interpretation of the Anselmian argument resembles his interpretation of St. Paul made in “Lectures on the Philosophy of St. Paul” (1918); according to these lectures, all that Paul truly does is to unveil and analyze, indirectly, certain general truths about human nature and the perennial problem of actualizing the potential unity of the mind. The Oxford philosopher praised Anselm especially for his refusal to

discuss God's existence in separation from the experience of his worshipper. And it seems that God of both St. Paul and Anselm is seen by Collingwood as a person of whom communion knowledge is *sui generis* in character. When abstracted from the individual's practical religious life, that is, from the experience of prayer, worship, and the like, mind's awareness of God cannot be understood. A few years later, in *Outlines of the Philosophy of Art*, the importance of the specific form of practice relative to every type of experience is conspicuously maintained: "Practice is the mind [engaged in] bringing about a change in itself and in its world."¹⁹

One of the most important ideas of *LOP* is that the practice of worship and prayer do not only express and presuppose belief, but belief of a certain sort; in my opinion, this is the standpoint subsequently generalized by Collingwood under the form of a universal way of obtaining acquaintance with all indemonstrable basic truths upon which human knowledge and practice rests. Of course, this generalization had not yet been set in motion in *LOP*; at that time, the Oxford don was trying to work out this principle only with application to religion. Unlike religion, philosophy was conceived as not regarding its premises as indemonstrable: in Collingwood's own words, "it does not accept its starting-point as containing unquestionable truth, but begins precisely by questioning and overthrowing it."²⁰ Yet, the relevance of religion for philosophy is already suggesting the possibility of a future conceptual unification of the two, and of a symmetrical, or mutual, dependence and circumscribing; so far, only philosophy is presented as implicitly contained within the essential aspect of religion, namely faith (expressible in worship and prayer). Thus, for Collingwood, the ontological proof expressed in the form of a prayer by Anselm contains the general philosophical problem of the necessity or non-necessity for knowledge to presuppose the existence of an object:

"Does knowledge in general assume or presuppose the existence of an object, or is our ordinary common-sense realism satisfied by the theory that the external object is a mere figment of the imagination? ... [T]he Psalmist's Fool is the person who says that all experience is illusory, that nothing is as we think of it, that truth is unattainable... [This is the standpoint of] universal scepticism [which] must be carefully distinguished from that maintained by the solipsist or subjective idealist, who maintains that nothing exists except my own consciousness ... Anselm is directing his proof ... against the solipsist..., who thinks that everything except my own states of consciousness [represent] ... a mere unprovable hypothesis where he declines... to argue against the sceptic, and

contents himself with calling the sceptic a fool; that is, admitting his position as unassailable”.²¹

The asymmetry I mentioned comes into light when Collingwood translates this philosophical meaning of the Anselmian proof into theological language. Thus, he writes, this translation

“indicates that the ontological proof is no argument against atheism or any purely destructive attack on religion from the outside: *but it is of great value against the tendency to disintegrate religion from within by reducing God to a myth*”.²²

The value of the ontological proof consists in the fact that in asserting the belief in God’s existence as an indispensably constitutive component of the theistic frame of mind it asserts the unity of the religious mind. Thus, as regards the true worshipper, the ontological proof provides him with an explicit description of his communion with an external absolute being, whose unquestionability confers on the account a dogmatic character. But this “mysterious” nucleus of the religious frame of mind represents for Collingwood a gulf between religion and philosophy; for, unlike philosophical premises, religious beliefs do not have truth-value: yet, even if unquestionable, they are not assumed by Collingwood as necessarily false. This seems to me an important change in comparison with “Ruskin’s Philosophy”, according to which the basic assumptions of religion have truth-values accessible to critical scrutiny and need to be validated by it. However, Collingwood will not return to this early standpoint, but will develop the other one, exploring—during the next two decades—its implications; thus, in *Essay on Metaphysics*, he wrote that the distinction between true and false does not apply to ultimate beliefs (or absolute presuppositions).²³ Therefore, in uncovering these hidden beliefs one has to abandon any further attempt at critical evaluation.

As regards the main achievement of the LOP, it consists in the solution offered to the problem of the tension between religion and philosophy: it is philosophy of religion, that represents basically an expression of the religious frame of mind; as regards its philosophical (that is, critical) side, it is reduced to a minimum, technical, analysis. Hence

“[T]he philosophy of religion [exhibited by Anselm] is—or ought to be no mere reflection upon religion from the point of view of logic, but a logic impregnated and informed at every moment by the religious consciousness; that is to say, that no one can exhibit a genius for the philosophy of religion unless he exhibits at the same time a genius for

religion itself. The relation between philosophy of religion and the religion upon which it reflects is *not* the relation between rational subject and externally-apprehended object: it is a relation in which the subject and object are identified, so that philosophy becomes no mere discussion about religion but *the rational expression of religion itself*".²⁴

I interpret this solution as a crucial step towards the future developments made in *Faith and Reason*, "Reason is Faith Cultivating Itself", and, much later, in *An Essay on Metaphysics*. In *LOP* the dogmatism of religion is mitigated through the logical (deductive²⁵) inferentiality of criticism. In its turn, philosophical criticism is limited by religion, for the philosopher of religion will not be concerned with the rational justification of basic religious beliefs, but with "explicating the meaning which those beliefs have for him, as one who minimally presupposes the validity of the general claim of religious experience to provide knowledge."²⁶ Given that religion is conceived as implicitly philosophical in content as well as in form, I think that the establishment of this univocal relation could be viewed as the opening towards a future reciprocity, that is, that philosophy will be conceived as implicitly and partly unconsciously "religious" in its form (as re-enactable, pre-reflective, or propositional, thought) and content.

On the other hand, Collingwood does not lose sight of the practical, or experiential, aspect of religion, whose crucial role in understanding he claims are clarified by the author of *Proslogion*. Now, if we focus these accounts on Collingwood's general concern with the establishment of the unity of the mind—within which mind is identical with its acts—we ought to interpret the new philosophy of religion both as a means towards self-knowledge, and a radical expression of religion. But, unlike other similarly aimed approaches, this form of rationality is also a systematic reflective inquiry. This does not mean that the method suggested by Anselm is not limited, says the Oxford don; its main inconsistency consists in the conflict between Anselm's actual object of reflection, namely his own thought, and the conclusion of his inference, that is, the existence of an absolute being situated beyond his thought. The conclusion is, according to Collingwood, false; it falls, due to Anselm's Platonist commitment, into the fallacy of a realism which the premise had impeccably removed. What Anselm has failed to understand was the fact that the externality of the Platonic absolute is that of an absolute transcendent whereas the Christian God is not only conceived as the transcendent cause of all things, but also as the immanent spirit in them.²⁷ Nonetheless, what the author of *Proslogion* has achieved was the successful employing of the Platonic doctrine "in order to express through it a profound truth concerning the nature of religious experience—the truth that God is not a hypothesis... [and that he] as an

object of *a priori* knowledge is pre-eminently not an imagination of our minds, but a reality.”²⁸

At this point I think a critical discussion of Descartes’ view on the ontological argument can contribute, on the one hand, to a better understanding of Collingwood’s denial—*via* his implicit rejection of the validity of the Cartesian type of argument started from *Dubito*—of the possibility of demonstrating basic beliefs and, on the other hand, to a better understanding of Collingwood’s own view on the ontological argument. My choice of this particular theme was inspired by an assertion he made in defense of Thomas Aquinas’ critique of Anselm’s proof:

“[Anselm]’s faithful statement ... [is] that [b]y God we understand *id quo maius cogitari nequit*. But that which is both *in intellectu* and *in re* is greater than that which is *in intellectu* alone: therefore the very meaning of the term God makes the existence of God self-evident. [To this argument] Aquinas [replies] that God’s existence is not really but only apparently self-evident: ... it only appears to be [so] because we are accustomed to the idea of God from childhood and cannot rid ourselves of it.”²⁹

And, as Joseph Felser suggests, at this point the Anselmian argument will be ultimately re-iterated by Descartes:

“[O]ne can be so indoctrinated that one mistakes an idea for a fact. That “God” means “that than which no greater can be conceived”, i.e., the absolutely perfect being is, according to Descartes, clear and distinct— but only to someone like Descartes. If he had not spent eight years with the Jesuits at *La Flèche*, he would not have mistakenly identified the tenet of a particular theological tradition as a piece of the timeless furniture of the human mind.”³⁰

Dubito ... ergo Deus est

As Collingwood explicitly put it later, Christianity recognizes (and expresses exemplarily by the ontological argument), a form of thought productive of beliefs which, like grounding presuppositional contexts, are immediate and indemonstrable. One of his prominent interpreters, Michael Hinz summarizes these reflections as follows:

“These beliefs are based on no reasons, and yet they are not wholly irrational, for they exhibit *universality* and *necessity*. Having faith, properly

speaking, means to demonstrate in practical life beliefs or principles which one accepts without argument and which characterize one's activity as a whole. But this is no mere acceptance, for the certainty with which these beliefs are regarded is evidenced in one's practice through and through."³¹

One perplexity about the re-enactment of absolute presuppositions is how it can make sense to say that the metaphysician consciously reconstructs an unconscious process; this problem was clearly expressed by Rex Martin.³² But, as Hinz points out, the distinction between conscious and unconscious does not describe two separate and exclusive species of thought. For the metaphysician this involves reconstructing for himself the elements of presupposing implicitly contained in the evidence. As in the case of art, re-enactment is, to a significant extent, non-inferential and so, in a crucial sense, non-historical.

Collingwood's deep conviction was that the set of beliefs recognized by Christianity represents the "mysterious" core of basic principles from which all human knowledge radiate, a basis—situated beyond all reasonable arguments—for all human existence and behavior. In his later discussion of the Cartesian formula *Cogito, ergo sum*, Collingwood himself expresses this point quite clearly:

"[By his] *cogito, ergo sum* ... Descartes ... found a point at which reason and faith coincide. The certainty of my own existence is a matter of faith in the sense that it does not rest on argument but on *direct intuition*; but it is a matter of reason in the sense that it is universal and necessary".³³

As Hinz puts it, "the certainty of one's own existence as a thinking thing is always an implicit conviction in one's thinking. That is to say, the operations of propositional thinking, of which presupposing is a part, are performed without being reflected upon and they constitute the core of thought on which all reflective self-consciousness is based."³⁴ The only way in which the universality and necessity of its presupposing can be proved is through action, i.e. through practical activity (such as the practice of worship and prayer, in case of religion).

In discussing the ontological proof, Descartes starts by grounding all his theory of prime propositions on the concept of necessity (or analyticity, in Kantian terms). Arguably, all this can be expressed in modern terms: By definition, the act and its existence, predicate and subject, the finite and the infinite, are given together (none of them can be conceived as isolated); therefore, when I assert or conceive one of them, I also assert, by this very act, its "pair".

At this point, what is essential for us is to know whether in advancing from the finding of *one* term (e.g. the act) to the finding of the *other* (e.g.

the existence of the act), the consciousness of the necessary connection between them imposes itself, or, on the contrary, this consciousness is useless if the move in question takes place spontaneously, and “naturally”, as Descartes himself puts it. In other words, do “I” have reasons to assert the existence of the act of doubt, for I know that the connection between the act and its *existence* is necessary, or, quite the contrary, I am determined to establish the existence of the act only through the *reality* of this connection? This problem still persists: briefly, it can be formulated as follows: How can necessary (in Cartesian terms) or analytic (in Kantian terms) connections be known? At any event, whatever solution to this problem is offered, Descartes seems to commit, at this point, two errors: firstly, from the existence of thinking he infers that the subject represents the “substance” whose essence consists in “thinking”; secondly, from the fact that the infinite is innermost comprised within the finite, Descartes infers the existence of God. In short, the identification of the subject, or self, with thinking (a), and the identification of the infinite with God (b), are introduced arbitrarily by Descartes, by a process of extrapolation similar to that observed by Collingwood in Anselm.

Now, it is common philosophical knowledge that Descartes has employed at least three types of argument on the existence of God: The “semantic argument” (1); the ontological argument (2); the cosmological argument (3).

According to the “semantic argument”, the concept of God’s perfection is made necessary by the concept of the self’s own imperfection. As Frederick Ferré puts it,

“the “semantic argument”, holds important features in common with both the ontological and the cosmological arguments ... but is not properly identified with either of them. It begins with the premise ... that at least one thing is certainly existent: *I am*. The thinking self, together with its inventory of ideas, searching amid nearly universal doubt for more complete knowledge, is known to exist. The idea of this self is an idea of an imperfect thing ... In being aware of the self’s finitude and imperfection, one has to be aware of an idea of infinitude and perfection ... [A] concept of perfection is entailed in the concept of the self’s own status as an imperfect being ... [T]his logic requires that one must be able to conceive a being having *all* perfections ... that is, God”.³⁵

For Descartes, the essentials of the idea of God that are logically required to be known by every man have a logical priority that makes the temporal process of “learning about God” quite beside the philosophical

point. The main effort of Descartes to render explicit the semantic foundations on which the argument rests is given in *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Part III. According to the great French philosopher, the representational content of one class of ideas could not in principle have been produced by the imperfect self: “these would be the ideas ... representing a being greater than the self, and particularly, representing a completely perfect being. For perfection cannot possibly be supposed to be a negative idea.”³⁶

As regards the cosmological argument, it can be briefly said that it also starts from the premise that the only actual existent we can justly claim to know is the self as a thinking thing. The essential assertion of this proof is that if anything exists, God exists.

And finally, Descartes’ ontological argument is asserting that the concept of God as the utmost perfect being is undeniably a part of a full inventory of the self’s ideas.³⁷ But by the ontological argument, knowledge of God’s actual existence can be established as self-evident by carefully analyzing the idea itself. In Ferré’s words, Descartes believes that if we examine the idea of a perfect being, we find that

“existence is included in it just as manifestly, or even more so, as having its three angles equal to two right angles is included in the idea of a triangle ... so it is discoverable from the meaning of “perfect being” that it must possess actual existence; however, it is a contradiction to deny any perfection to a supremely perfect being and thus it is literally inconceivable that God lacks the perfection of actual existence. God’s existence is not so much inferred as seen clearly and distinctly to be necessary. Therefore God exists”.³⁸

Now, the common aspect which encouraged me to treat these three arguments together was the fact that all Descartes’ proofs of the existence of God had as their starting-point the “demonstrated” result of the *dubito... ergo sum* argument, and I did so only to the extent to which I think they reverberate with this premise.

As regards Collingwood’s view on the matter, its similarity with the above interpretation seems to me significant:

“We must be careful how we relate the infinite to the infinite. To imagine the two as in opposition or even in distinction from one another is to falsify both, to reduce the infinite to a kind of finite: for nothing except one finite can be compared or contrasted with another finite. The infinite is not something over against the finite: it is the

significance of the finite, that in virtue of which the finite exists at all".³⁹

Furthermore, even in *Faith and Reason*, where the Oxford philosopher explicitly refers to Descartes, this position remains basically unchanged:

"The infinite is not another thing which is best grasped by sweeping the finite out of the way; the infinite is nothing but the *unity*, or, as we sometimes say, the "meaning" of the finite things in their diversity and their mutual connections."⁴⁰

Finally, I think the analysis and conclusions proposed above are justified by and convergent with Collingwood's own insightful suggestion, made in *LOP*—regarding the relevance of the ontological argument for the analysis of religious experience, not of God's existence—, which I take as an interpretive translation of Anselm's main tenet into the terms of the Cartesian formula and their implications: To the extent that it addresses to the believer, Anselm's argument is: *prayer exists; therefore, God exists*.⁴¹ Recently, Michael J. O'Neil commented on the key-role played by Collingwood's interpretation of the ontological proof within his attempt to elaborate a conceptual rapprochement between religion and philosophy:

"Anselm's proof is essential to Collingwood's historical science of mind... For [him], it is Anselm's proof that clearly expresses th[e] relationship between faith and reason. The two elements of this analysis that must be understood if one is to understand Collingwood's use of the proof are what he means by "the idea of an object that shall completely satisfy the demands of reason" and the "special case of metaphysical thinking."⁴²

The ontological argument holding that God is a necessary being remains as actual as ever in the theological debates. It was also very important for Collingwood, whose pioneering philosophical work is still waiting for the deserved recognition. A forerunner of the "hermeneutic turn" and of the contextualising perspectives in philosophy, Collingwood defends the ontological proof as a first-rate piece of philosophical reasoning and places it at the centre of his discussion of the nature of philosophical inquiry. His interpretation of the argument inspired his account of the structure of experience as reason articulates it historically, and ultimately shaped his ground-breaking theory of absolute presuppositions.

Notes

¹ Robin George Collingwood, *An Essay on Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940), 210.

² R.G. Collingwood, "Lectures on the Ontological Proof of the Existence of God. Written December 1919 for delivery Hilary Term 1920," Department of Western Manuscripts, Bodleian Library, Oxford, (Dep. Collingwood 2), 1. Hereafter: *LOP*

³ *LOP*, 6.

⁴ From the numerous commentators who have analysed the influence exercised by Augustine upon Anselm, I have chosen Nicholas Wolterstorff: "Anselm's motto was that of Augustine: *credo ut intelligam*. In the opening pages of his *Proslogion* he makes clear what that means for him. [Like in case of Augustine, h]is goal in the book was to come to know, or understand, what already he believed. 'I have written the following treatise,' he says, 'in the person of one who strives to lift his mind to the contemplation of God, and seeks to understand what he believes.' (Preface) 'For I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand.'" N. Wolterstorff, "Can Belief in God Be Rational?" in *Faith and Reason*, ed. A. Plantinga and N. Wolterstorff (Notre Dame & London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 141.

⁵ John H.S. Burleigh, trans., *Augustine: Earlier Writings*, Library of Christian Classics, Vol. VI (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953), 137-8.

⁶ In the Latin text: *insipiens*, that is, the unwise.

⁷ Anselm quotes repeatedly this provocative assertion in *Proslogion*, starting from 227c. Sancti Anselmi, *Proslogion seu Alloquium de Dei Existentia*, trans. A. Baumgarten (Cluj: Biblioteca Apostrof, 1996), 227c ssq.

⁸ *LOP*, 6

⁹ Thus, in this book he wrote: "Whatever may have been in Anselm's mind when he wrote the *Proslogion*, his exchange of correspondence with Gaunilo shows beyond a doubt that on reflection he regarded the fool who 'hath said in his heart, There is no God' as a fool not because he was blind to the actual existence of *un nommé Dieu*, but because he did not know that the presupposition 'God exists' was a presupposition he himself made" (*Essay on Metaphysics*, 189).

¹⁰ R.G. Collingwood, "The Devil," in *Concerning Prayer: Its Nature, its Difficulties and its Value*, ed. Canon B.H. Streeter et al. (London: Macmillan & Co., 1916); reprinted in R.G. Collingwood, *Faith and Reason: Essays in the Philosophy of Religion* by R.G. Collingwood, ed. with an Introduction by L. Rubinoff (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1968), 223.

¹¹ Joseph M. Felser, *R.G. Collingwood's Early Philosophy of Religion and Its Development* (PhD diss., vol. II, University of Chicago, Illinois, 1992), 325; *LOP*, 52.

¹² Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," in *Faith and Reason*, ed. A. Plantinga and N. Wolterstorff, 71-2.

¹³ Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God*, trans. William Hendricksen (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Erdmans, 1951), 78-9.

¹⁴ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Vol. I, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Benziger Brothers, 1947), 25-6.

¹⁵ Cf. Plantinga, 70-71.

¹⁶ Collingwood, "The Devil", 232.

¹⁷ Felser, 333.

¹⁸ Collingwood, "Faith and Reason." A pamphlet in the *Affirmation Series* (London: Ernest Benn, 1928); reprinted in R.G. Collingwood, *Faith and Reason: Essays in the Philosophy of Religion* by R.G. Collingwood, 118.

¹⁹ Idem, *Outlines of a Philosophy of Art* (London: Oxford University Press, 1925), 50.

²⁰ LOP, 9.

²¹ Ibid, 7-8.

²² Ibid, 11, italics added.

²³ Idem, *Essay on Metaphysics*, 32-3.

²⁴ LOP, 44, italics added.

²⁵ It is well-known that in Collingwood's *The Idea of History* the deductive method is repudiated in favour of the inductive inference inspired by Bacon; yet, in my opinion this can be understood as a *complementary aspect* applicable to the domains of reality which are accessible to science whereas with respect to the "matters of great importance, pertaining to divinity," as Augustine would say, (that is, in the domain explored by unconscious thought, as Collingwood would say) deduction remains the only applicable type of inference.

²⁶ Felser, 349.

²⁷ LOP, 24.

²⁸ Ibid., 28, 31.

²⁹ Ibid., 50.

³⁰ Felser, 327.

³¹ Michael Hinz, *Self-Creation and History* (Lanham, New York, London: University Press of America, 1994), 70.

³² Cf. Rex Martin, "Collingwood's Claim that Metaphysics is a Historical Discipline," *The Monist*, 4 (1989): 489-525.

³³ Collingwood, "Faith and Reason," 136-7, italics added.

³⁴ Hinz, 70.

³⁵ Frederick Ferré, *Basic Modern Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967), 133.

³⁶ Cf. René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, in Lowell Bair, trans., *Essential Works of Descartes* (New York: Bantam Books, 1961), 76-78.

³⁷ Descartes firstly exposes his ontological argument in Part Four of the *Discourse on Method*, and then returns to its restatement and more elaborate defense in Meditation V of the *Meditations on First Philosophy*.

³⁸ Ferré, 139.

³⁹ LOP, 77.

⁴⁰ Collingwood, "Faith and Reason," 143, italics added.

⁴¹ Ibid., 38.

⁴² Michael J. O'Neil, "A Peculiar 'Faith': On R.G. Collingwood's Use of Saint Anselm's Argument", *The Saint Anselm Journal*, 3.2 (2006): 32.

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