Integrating the History of Philosophy and Apologetics: Understanding Anselm’s *Proslogion* Argument as Contemplative Ascent

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Abstract

Oftentimes, apologetics courses and textbooks approach the history of the subject in ahistorical ways. In this article, I seek to integrate apologetics with the history of philosophy by selectively engaging Edgar’s and Oliphint’s critique of Saint Anselm’s Proslogion argument in their apologetics sourcebook, *Christian Apologetics Past and Present*. My suggestion is that when Anselm is read historically, that is, against the backdrop of his medieval inheritance, not only does his “ontological argument” make more cultural sense but his practice of philosophy as “contemplative ascent” may also even satisfy Edgar’s criteria for presuppositionalism.

In the apologetics sourcebook, *Christian Apologetics Past and Present*, Edgar and Oliphint muse whether Anselm’s philosophy as exhibited in the *Proslogion* measures up to the standards of presuppositional apologetics. They write: “It may be that Anselm assumes that reason alone has to ascertain the character of God, but that is only because the truth of the matter is consistent with what we have in biblical revelation. Does this mean that Anselm presupposed the Christian revelation in his argumentation? It seems difficult to affirm that he did.” The authors indicate what they expect good Christian philosophy to look like (i.e., from the standpoint of a presuppositionalist apologetic). Throughout the sourcebook, they retroject their expectations onto the history of Christian philosophy and recommend those thinkers who in their view operate according to presuppositionalist strictures.

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Elsewhere Edgar explains that the proper way for a Christian apologist to argue for God’s existence is to begin with the creator: “First, [the Bible] insists on beginning with a Creator whose being is utterly different from the being of creation. Second, it argues that because of this he can be known by his creatures. While, of course, we can never know God exhaustively, yet we may know him truly, in his essence.” In this article, I try to show that Anselm’s philosophical approach (1) always begins with God, and (2) because of this beginning, stipulates that he can be known to exist, even by those who speculate there is no God. I suggest that as an analogical, Christian-neoplatonic exercise, Anselm’s ontological argument successfully navigates the presuppositional Scylla and Charybdis that Edgar and Oliphint impose on his philosophy in the name of their apologetic method.

Anyone who has read Anselm will agree there is something about his argument that seems to make it ingenious on one reading and fallacious on another. Joel Friedman once formulated a “mystic’s ontological argument,” contending for its logical validity. Although not formally equivalent to Anselm’s argument, from a programmatic standpoint I judge it to be the most proximate analysis on offer. For the line of inquiry Anselm proposes can be fruitfully understood as an analogical contemplation of a longstanding neoplatonic problem. What Anselm sets out to do in the Proslogion is reason his way to a metaphysical conclusion that the Christian neoplatonic tradition already recognized as lying beyond the reaches of reason.

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3 See, for example, Edgar, “Proving God’s Existence”; Edgar and Oliphint, Christian Apologetics. Note that my approach in this article should be distinguished from (1) arguing Anselm’s argument is sound and (2) suggesting that it is fruitful to engage the history of philosophy by endorsing/rejecting historically significant Christian thinkers based on whether they qualify as presuppositionalists.
6 Friedman’s argument reads: God is defined as the maximally incomprehensible being. Necessarily, something is incomprehensible. Hence, necessarily, there is a maximally incomprehensible being. Therefore, God necessarily exists.
It is no coincidence that the argument in the *Proslogion* concludes that God exists in reality in a way that is methodologically faithful to the neoplatonic schema of return. Barry David, for example, has identified an underlying platonic pattern that necessitates the metaphysical positing of the Good. The necessity arises on account of its “principle of hierarchy, disclosed in the ascent, which shows that if there is a lower there must not only be a higher but also a highest from which everything else is derived.” The connection to be made is that the Anselmian argument of the *Proslogion* is not merely one in a long line of philosophical attempts to prove the existence of God, but also, and more importantly, it is a profound, anagogical gesture that aims to predispose readers toward a deeper appreciation of Christian-neoplatonic metaphysics, namely the reversal of procession back to the One.

Anselm’s argument reads as follows:

Now we believe that You are something than which nothing greater can be thought. Or can it be that a thing of such a nature does not exist, since “the Fool has said in his heart, there is no God” [Ps 13:1; 52:1]? But surely, when this same Fool hears what I am speaking about, namely, “something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought,” he understands what he hears, and what he understands is in his mind, even if he does not understand that it actually exists…. Even the Fool, then, is forced to agree that something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought exists in the mind, since he understands this when he hears it, and whatever is understood is in the mind. And surely that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought cannot exist in the mind alone. For if it exists solely in the mind, it can be thought to exist in reality also, which is greater. If then that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought exists in the mind alone, this same that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought is that-than-which-a-greater-can-be-thought. But this is obviously impossible. Therefore there is absolutely no doubt that something-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought exists both in the mind and in reality. 

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Toivo Holopainen notes there are two contemporary perspectives on Anselm that are somewhat at odds with each other:

The conventional outlook says that Anselm meant his argument for God's existence as a philosophically valid demonstration and he aimed at making the content of faith understandable to the universal human reason. On the other hand, the Proslogion is a devotional exercise in which the person who speaks endeavours to elevate his/her mind to the contemplation of God in prayer.¹⁰

To bring to the fore the presuppositional aspects of Anselm's approach—that is, how Anselm presupposes God in his argument—the present article will emphasize the latter perspective.¹¹

A major cultural influence on Anselm, to wit, on all Christian medieval philosophy, was neoplatonism. Whether gleaned from Augustine or from any number of other thinkers, neoplatonism provided for Anselm an overarching ontological framework for the performing of arguments as analogical exercises.¹² To the extent that this construal gets things more right than wrong, one can expect that Anselm presupposes the metaphysical grammar associated with the neoplatonic return. Indeed, part of the initial allure of Anselm's argument a priori would have stemmed precisely from its functional pedagogy. The argument fully participates in the broader medieval contemplative tradition that utilized a Christian-neoplatonic understanding of the soul’s ascent to the One.¹³

Broadly speaking, neoplatonism involves a drawing of principal ideas from the writings of Plato and granting them a systematic coherence that only tacitly ap-
pears in his work. Minimally, a neoplatonist would presume a theory of Forms and give metaphysical priority to the Good. An example of the former is found in the following exchange between Socrates and Euthyphro (Euthyphr. 5d–6d):

Socr. Tell me then, what do you say holiness is, and what unholliness?
Euthr. Well then, I say that holiness is doing what I am doing now, prosecuting the wrongdoer …
Socr. At present try to tell me clearly what I asked you just now. For my friend, you did not give me sufficient information before, when I asked what holiness was, but you told me that this was holy which you are now doing, prosecuting your father for murder.
Euthr. Well, what I said was true, Socrates.
Socr. Perhaps. But, Euthyphro, you say that many other things are holy, do you not?
Euthr. Why, so there are.
Socr. Now call to mind that this is not what I asked you, to tell me one or two of the many holy acts, but to tell the essential aspect, by which all holy acts are holy; for you said that all unholy acts were unholy and all holy ones holy by one aspect. Or don’t you remember?
Euthr. I remember.
Socr. Tell me then what this aspect is, that I may keep my eye fixed upon it and employ it as a model and, if anything you or anyone else does agrees with it, may say that the act is holy, and if not, that it is unholy.

In the end, however, poor Euthyphro is unable to answer Socrates satisfactorily. In spite of every effort on the part of Socrates to help Euthyphro improve his definitions, Socrates can always remark (Euthyphr. 11a–b): “And, Euthyphro, it seems that when you were asked what holiness is you were unwilling to make plain its essence, but you mentioned something that has happened to this holiness, namely, that it is loved by the gods. But you did not tell as yet what it really is.”

For Plato, there is a type of essence that not only helps identify and categorize those traits that multiple particulars hold in common but also functions as a causal explanation for why multiple particulars have common traits in the first place. Plotinus develops this same idea when he mentions how it is never enough to speak of categorizations only. There will always remain the greater matter of seeking out causal explanations: “Suppose we concede that numbers are quantities: we are merely allowing them the name of quantity; the principle which gives
them this name remains obscure.” Plato’s own solution involves “participation,” yet he always seems to shy away from providing his readers with specific details. Socrates provides an illustration in *Phaed.* 101b–c when he explains that when adding one and one, two may be the sum, but two is not *caused* by the addition of one and one or even by the division of one into two:

Well, then, if one is added to one or if one is divided, you would avoid saying that the addition or the division is the cause of two. You would exclaim loudly that you know no other way by which anything can come into existence than by participating in the proper essence of each thing in which it participates, and therefore you accept no other cause of the existence of two than participation in duality, and things which are to be two must participate in duality, and whatever is to be one must participate in unity, and you would pay no attention to the divisions and additions and other such subtleties, leaving those for wiser men to explain.

In a similar fashion, Socrates observes in *Resp.* 507b–c that

We predicate “to be” of many beautiful things and many good things, saying of them severally that they *are*, and so define them in our speech… We speak of a self-beautiful and of a good that is only and merely good, and so, in the case of all the things that we then posited as many, we turn about and posit each as a single idea or aspect, assuming it to be a unity and call it that which each really is … the one class of things we say can be seen but not thought, while the ideas can be thought but not seen.

A generic platonistic interest in metaphysical accounts of the Forms is also characteristic of neoplatonism.

Another distinguishing feature of neoplatonism, carried over from platonism, is the special place it reserves for the Good. In platonism, metaphysical priority is given to the Good as its first principle. Socrates, for example, claims in *Resp.* 509b that “the objects of knowledge not only receive from the presence of the good their being known, but their very existence and essence is derived to them from it, though the good itself is not essence but still transcends essence in dignity and surpassing power.” Platonism conceives of philosophy as a concerted rational effort to understand the Forms rightly. Among the many Forms, the Good is of particular interest. Neoplatonism develops this further and attempts to provide a

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robust metaphysical model that duly accounts for the Forms, chief among them the Good.

When one reads Anselm, one can detect the same neoplatonic emphases—even if they are presented with an Augustinian twist. In Anselm’s writings, the Forms do not merely exist in the splendor of metaphysical transcendence; they are rather found in the mind of God, eternally available to him for the pleasure of creative activity. Anselm explains in the Monologion (Monologion 9): “For a maker makes something rationally if, and only if, there is already something there in his reasoning—as a sort of exemplar. (Or perhaps terms like “form,” “likeness” or “rule” are more appropriate.)” Given the paucity of platonic texts available to Anselm, his use of platonic notions were not likely gleaned from Plato directly but rather from Augustine whom Anselm claims to have read.

Anselm’s Christian heritage would have maintained that God created something out of nothing. When refracted through the prism of Anselm’s Augustinian neoplatonism, however, Anselm explains (Monologion 9): “before being made from nothing, [the things created] were not nothing as far as the reason of the maker is concerned.” More to the point is how Anselm does not hesitate to identify the Good with God (Monologion 80): “the supreme essence alone is that through which anything good is good, without which nothing is good and out of, through and in which all things exist.” Anselm’s theological heritage traces back to platonism through the writings of Augustine. It should come as no surprise that the subtext for Anselm’s ontological argument is neoplatonism’s emanation schema. Even if filtered through Augustine, the contours of the neoplatonic hierarchy of being, a hierarchy that begins and ends with a necessary first principle, was adapted by Anselm for the analogical purpose of contemplation. I can only briefly indicate here the likely historical progression.

15 Compare David, “Anselm’s Argument,” pp. 100–101, where he distinguishes Augustine’s conception of Forms from those of Plato and Plotinus.
16 Gasper lists only a copy of the Timaeus as being available to Lafranc, Anselm’s teacher. See G. E. M. Gasper, Anselm of Canterbury and His Theological Inheritance (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2004), p. 209. It is debatable whether Augustine himself read Plato (the Timaeus is held out as a possibility). It could be that much of what Augustine knew from Plato he gleaned from (in addition to Plotinus) Porphyry. See Eugene Te Selle, “Porphyry and Augustine,” Augustinian Studies 5 (1974): pp. 113–47.
20 Compare Crouse: “In the Proslogion, however, there appears the strongest evidence of both Anselm’s Augustinianism and his independent development of that tradition.” See Robert Crouse,
For example, in *Conf.* 7.4 Augustine explains: “I had already established that the incorruptible is better than the corruptible, and so I confessed that whatever you are, you are incorruptible. Nor could there have been or be any soul capable of conceiving that which is better than you, who are the supreme and highest good. Since it is most true and certain that the incorruptible is superior to the corruptible, as I had already concluded, had it been the case that you are not incorruptible I could in thought have attained something better than my God.” This underdeveloped line of Augustinian reasoning finds its way into Anselm’s meditations. Indeed, the metaphysical groundwork had already been laid by Plotinus with whom Augustine was undoubtedly familiar. In *Conf.* 2.1, Augustine muses: “You gathered me together from the state of disintegration in which I had been fruitlessly divided. I turned from unity in you to be lost in multiplicity.” And again in *Conf.* 11.29.39:

Your right hand upheld me in my Lord, the Son of man who is mediator between you the One and us the many, who live in a multiplicity of distractions by many things ... and leaving behind the old days I might be gathered to follow the One.... You are my eternal Father, but I am scattered in times whose order I do not understand. The storms of incoherent events tear to pieces my thoughts, the inmost entrails of my soul, until that day when, purified and molten by the fire of your love, I flow together to merge into you.

A telltale neoplatonic pattern emerges of a metaphysical hierarchy that both begins and ends with the One. Within the hierarchy, humans are presumed to already be mindful participants. The ontological particulars can be sorted out variously, but for the most part, neoplatonic accounts of the first principle conceptually oriented themselves around one of Plotinus’ most pregnant remarks (*Enn.* 5.10): “There

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22 Henry remarks that attempts to pinpoint the exact influences on Augustine “has yielded only uncertain, vague, and questionable results: for want of direction, scholarship has been haphazard.” He identifies “a very small number of books of Plotinus” with the “works of the Platonists” that Augustine makes reference to in the *Confessions*. Kenney thinks both Plotinus and Porphyry likely, but in the end: “Uncertainty regarding Augustine’s Platonic syllabus is only a minor concern.” See Paul Henry, *The Path to Transcendence: From Philosophy to Mysticism in Saint Augustine* (Eugene, Ore.: Pickwick, 1981), p. 14; and John Peter Kenney, *The Mysticism of Saint Augustine: Rereading the Confessions* (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 15.
exists a Principle which transcends Being; this is The One, whose nature we have sought to establish in so far as such matters lend themselves to proof.”

Plotinus is famous for his enigmatic claim that the One transcends Being, and as with most metaphysical enigmas, interpretations abound. On the one hand is Hart who writes: “Being is manifestation and to the degree that anything is wholly beyond thought—to the degree, that is, that anything is not ‘rational’—to that degree it does not exist.” 23 On the other hand is Gerson who interprets Plotinus as meaning that since the One is absolutely simple, its essence must be coterminous with its existence. In Gerson’s view, Plotinus wishes to communicate, using the conceptual tools available to him, that the manner in which the One can be said to exist precludes composition. If this interpretation is correct, Gerson observes, it would be impossible to conceive of the One apart from its existence. Put another way, it would be impossible to “conceive” of the One at all. 24 How to speak of the One is a notorious problematic. 25 Yet Gerson observes: “The entitative attribute of the One most frequently mentioned by Plotinus is its goodness.” 26 Surely neoplatonic moorings such as these would have been enough to set Anselm to his task of contemplating a way to illustrate God’s necessary existence given the reality of the Christian–neoplatonic hierarchy. Indeed, Anselm’s ontological argument points to how God’s existence must somehow already be known if the meditative ascent is to suggest itself as a subtext. 27

Neoplatonism furnishes Anselm with a hierarchy of being that is always already ontologically committed to procession and return to the One. Proclus, a later proponent of neoplatonism, provides a variation of the idea in his Elements of Theology. 28 In that work, Proclus delineates a long line of propositions deduced

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25 Hart remarks that “in every meaningful sense [the One] is not (though, obviously, it is not not).” See Hart, “The Hidden and the Manifest,” p. 201.
26 Gerson, Plotinus, p. 18.
27 Compare Thomas Hibbs, “Iris Murdoch, Spiritual Exercises, and Anselm’s Proslogion and Prayers,” The Saint Anselm Journal 3 (2005): p. 70: “On Anselm’s view, the deepening of understanding involves spiritual exercises; indeed, these are constitutive of the religious life to which Anselm had vowed his life.” However, there are both optimistic and pessimistic aspects to these exercises: “From Anselm’s point of view, the most important lesson of his discovery was the extent of human frailty, and it encouraged a great pessimism about the efficacy of human effort.” See R. W. Southern, Scholastic Humanism and the Unification of Europe, Volume 1: Foundations (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1997), p. 27. Compare Caleb Thomas, “Wittgenstein, Augustine and the Fantasy of Ascent,” Philosophical Investigations 25 (2002): pp. 153–171. Interestingly enough, Stephen Menn seems to understand Descartes as operating within analogous Augustinian parameters. See Menn, Descartes and Augustine (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
28 Whether Proclus actually had an impact on the thought of Anselm is disputed and need not be decided here. All that is required for the purposes of illustration is that Proclus be identified with later traditions of neoplatonism that eventually merge with later “Augustinianisms” via pivotal figures including Boethius, Eriugena, and Dionysius (who may or may not have influenced Anselm).
one from another and provides a short proof for each. His first thirteen propositions are delineated as follows:

1. Every manifold in some way participates unity.
2. All that participates unity is both one and not-one.
3. All that becomes one does so by participation of unity.
4. Every thing which is united is different from The One itself.
5. All multitude is posterior to The One.
6. Every multitude consists either of things united, or of unities.
7. Every thing productive of another is better than the nature of that which is produced.
8. That which is primarily good, and which is no other than The Good itself, is superior to all things which in any way whatever participate of good.
9. Every thing which is self-sufficient, either according to essence or energy, is better than that which is not self-sufficient, and depends on another cause for its perfection.
10. Every thing which is self-sufficient is inferior to that which is simply good.
11. All beings proceed from One First Cause.
12. The Principle and First Cause of all beings is The Good Itself.
13. Every good has the power of uniting its participants, and every union is good; and The Good is the same as The One.29

With the general tenor of these propositions many Augustinian–neoplatonists


could have easily agreed—although they would have sought to express them incorporating explicitly Christian parlance. Augustine himself writes, for example:

We can understand that there is something so resembling the sole Unity and principle of all unity that it coincides with it and is identical with it. This is Truth, the Word that was in the beginning, the divine Word that was with God…. This is itself the complete likeness of Unity, and is therefore Truth…. Since things are true in so far as they have being, and have being in so far as they resemble the source of all unity, that is the form of all things that have being, which is the supreme likeness of the principle.30

On the face of it, neoplatonism insists upon an extreme metaphysical aloofness for the One. The One transcends Being, as it were. In fact, Plotinus feels compelled to go so far as to resist all God-talk regarding the unqualified transcendence of the One. His fear is that God-talk will inevitably compromise the simplicity of the One. In Enn. 6.9.7, he cautions:

Think of The One as Mind or as God, you think too meanly; use all the resources of understanding to conceive this Unity and, again, it is more authentically one than God, even though you reach for God’s unity beyond the unity the most perfect you can conceive. This is utterly a self-existent, with no concomitant whatever. This self-sufficing is the essence of its unity. Something there must be supremely adequate, autonomous, all-transcending, most utterly without need.

At the same time, one should not venture too far in the opposite direction in their reading of Plotinus, for Plotinus was not so inordinate as to absolutely refuse any identification of the One with the Good. To wit, he sums up this very section of the tractate: “This Principle is not, therefore, to be identified with the good of which it is the source; it is good in the unique mode of being The Good above all that is good.” Thus neoplatonism takes seriously the idea that there is a hierarchy of beings and makes a conscious effort to formulate the hierarchy in constant reference to the One. According to neoplatonists, “an inventory of existing things would be worthless without an account of the hierarchies and dependence relations the entities form and a view of what, ultimately, is fundamental in reality.”31

This hierarchy is integral to the very way neoplatonists do philosophy. All things are said to flow into the One and it is the movement back to the One that dictates the form of Anselm’s argument.

Traces of this can even be found in Augustine. For example, in On Free Choice of the Will, Augustine draws explicit attention to the existence of a hierarchy of beings and he does so in order to argue for God’s existence. Augustine initiates the anagogy with the following prompt: “If reason [since it changes] … sees something eternal and unchangeable, then it should confess that it is inferior and that the eternal and unchangeable thing is God.” Evodius responds: “If we find that to which nothing is superior, I will certainly confess that it is God.” After some discussion, Augustine convinces Evodius that Truth is greater than reason. Augustine goes on to claim that if Truth is greater than reason, either Truth is God or something greater than Truth is God. Either way, God is shown to exist.

In the backdrop of Augustine’s dialogue with Evodius is a meandering account of the neoplatonic hierarchy of beings. Augustine’s discussion with Evodius offers glimpses into Augustine’s understanding of the contemplative ascent up through its highest echelons. Augustine’s argument for the existence of God taps into the meditative notion of ascent in a way that is faithful to its practice. For Augustine attempts to proceed beyond the limits of reason via a nondiscursive groping, as it were, up to the first principle, which by definition cannot be known. To accomplish this, Augustine asks, what is it that one might plausibly consider as superior to reason? In a very clever way, Augustine is framing his inquiry from the onset as a meditative ascent with a specific goal in mind: he intends to use reason to ascend beyond the limits of reason. This is the task Anselm has also set for himself in the Proslogion during the course of his philosophical exercise of exploring what he might say that he knows about the unknowable God.

The neoplatonic ascent of the soul may have been originally inspired by Plato’s Symposium. However, more relevant to our discussion is Enn. 6.3.3 where Plotinus explains how ascension to the One proceeds:

We are in search of unity; we are to come to know the principle of all, the Good and First; therefore we may not stand away from the realm of Firsts and lie prostrate among the lasts: we must strike for those Firsts, rising from things of sense which are the lasts. Cleared of all evil in our intention towards The Good, we must ascend to the Principle within ourselves; from

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32 Incidentally, Remes recognizes the problems of the one and the many and of constancy and change as the two main problems occupying neoplatonists. See Remes, Neoplatonism, pp. 35–42.
many, we must become one; only so do we attain to knowledge of that which is Principle and Unity. We shape ourselves into Intellectual-Principle; we make over our soul in trust to Intellectual-Principle and set it firmly in That; thus what That sees the soul will waken to see; it is through the Intellectual-Principle that we have this vision of The Unity; it must be our care to bring over nothing whatever from sense, to allow nothing even of soul to enter into Intellectual-Principle: with Intellect pure, and with the summit of Intellect, we are to see the All-Pure.

Note the remarkable resemblance here to Proslogion 1. Anselm encourages his readers to engage in ascent. For the human soul is already caught up in the same metaphysical procession and return as everything else in the hierarchy. The human soul longs to “return” to the One from which it has already proceeded. Of course, Anselm would have foregone neoplatonic descriptions in favor of Christian contemplative locutions (Proslogion 1): “Come now, insignificant man, fly for a moment from your affairs, escape for a little while from the tumult of your thoughts. Put aside now your weighty cares and leave your wearisome toils. Abandon yourself for a little to God and rest for a little in Him. Enter into the inner chamber of your soul, shut out everything save God and what can be of help in your quest for Him and having locked the door seek Him out.” What Anselm enjoins upon his readers is no mundane meditative task. In a way, a form of presuppositionalism is unmistakable as he urges readers to “shut out everything save God.”

In Conf. 8.3.8, Augustine once remarked that the multiplicity of being is so vast, God is “so high among the highest,” that “we [therefore] have difficulty in returning to you.” Yet this is precisely where Anselm wishes to begin his deliberations, not end them. The very definition that Anselm offers of God, as Scott Matthews helpfully points out, “derives not from a definition of God, but from the scheme of participation and hierarchy that designates God as that which all other beings cannot be but which they all presuppose.” So when Benedikt Paul Göcke suggests that various amounts of spiritual training are necessary to obtain the minimal preunderstanding requisite for knowledge of God, it would certainly apply to Anselm’s argument. In this case, Christian-neoplatonic contemplative exercises would constitute “spirituality as rhetorical precondition.”

Although classified as a priori, Anselm’s argument ultimately both draws upon and draws attention to “a particular experience of reality.” Anselm is not interested

in culminating an argument with the conclusion that God exists. Much rather, he very much expects to make full use of a metaphysical schematic that is, at least according to Christian–neoplatonic philosophy, everywhere already underway. Anselm wishes that readers might be mature enough in their meditative practices to join the procession (in terms of taking up his argument) at the farthest reach reason can afford, that is, at the highest point of its ascent so that they may begin their philosophical contemplation of God already at the pinnacle of hierarchy. In this way, subsequent engagements will have a chance to bear more discursive, philosophical fruit than that borne by prior contemplative ascents. For Anselm (Monologion 1) had already tried to convince readers from the start “that of all the things that exist, there is one that is the best, greatest and supreme.” Yet the way that argument proceeded did not allow Anselm to proclaim God’s existence until the very end of the treatise. Indeed, not until the last chapter of the Monologion is the supreme essence that “rules and regulates all things” identified as God. The result falls short of what Anselm initially hoped to accomplish. Hence he musters a second attempt and the result is the argument of the Proslogion. Anselm explains that the Monologion was a “meditation on the meaning of faith from the point of view of one seeking, through silent reasoning within himself, things he knows not.” Yet the Proslogion does a better job of this—at least in Anselm’s estimation—situating readers at a proximity much closer to the One than that afforded by the prior ascent.

What Anselm ends up doing is transmitting third-hand, as it were, a neoplatonic, anagogical exercise by which the soul of the participant meditatively precipitates its own ascent to the One. Not only this, but he does so by means of a mature contemplative argument that is philosophically faithful to the soul’s most basic metaphysical desire, its longing for return to the One. In other words, given the conceptual tools available to him, what some have termed Anselm’s proof a priori, is formulated in a way that qualifies as a Christian–neoplatonic exercise of contemplative ascent. McMahon calls the Proslogion “a Christian–Platonist ascent” that allows Anselm (and his readers) to rework previous insights in light of further meditations. In the end, Anselm presupposes God (indeed an entire metaphysical framework) when he capitalizes on what spiritual access the soul was already believed to have on account of the Christian–neoplatonic schema of procession and return. Via anagogy, God has graciously allowed Anselm a glimpse of the ontological hierarchy from a vantage that is so close in metaphysical proximity to the first

37 For a Boethian outline of the “single argument,” see Holopainen, “Anselm’s Argumentum,” pp. 10–21.
principle that the soul cannot help but acknowledge it. This is what the argument accomplishes: a way for the soul to discursively acknowledge the One even if the conception of the One cannot boast any discernible features (other than that than this One nothing greater can be thought). In fact, the height of meditative understanding achieved by Anselm’s contemplative ascent is so great that any attempt at denial turns out to be an affirmation, and that out of necessity. Anselm has every reason to rejoice for, at least in his mind, what God has disclosed to him during the course of his meditations is what Hartman calls, “an axiom of God that proves itself,” and what Holopainen terms, “an argument that proves itself.” And so in Anselm’s argument: (1) God is presupposed through meditation and (2) because of this he can be known to exist. I submit that Anselm’s argument rises to the challenge (in its own medieval way) that Edgar and Oliphint have posed for it.

The only thing required on the part of Anselm’s readers is that they agree with his meditative disposition toward the reception of knowledge of God precisely as that than which nothing greater can be conceived. With that, his argument both begins and ends, commensurate with procession and return. If his readers grant him this beginning, it matters not what one desires in terms of belief or disbelief, the God that Anselm calls readers to worship exists necessarily in reality. Although reason plays an important role, the argument aims to reach beyond reason, developing in a Christian way a rather Plotinian claim: God’s necessary existence has been proven hereby, at least insofar as the matter lends itself to proof.

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42 Again, this article does not address the merits of the argument itself. Writers often complain that even if one grants Anselm his starting point, it would only reveal some feature of the world (Benedikt Paul Göcke, for example). This is not the place to venture Anselm’s defence.