

## **Shooting round corners: Newman and Anselm**

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It is beyond the scope of this short paper<sup>1</sup> to compare the views of Newman and Anselm on faith and reason. Lengthy debate continues to surround our understanding of both. My purpose is to understand a comment of Newman's concerning the interpretation of Anselm, and in so doing to address the possibility of agreement between the apparently disparate views we would expect Newman and Anselm to have concerning the particular question: is it possible to 'convert' by rational argument? To this end, I will (1) look at what little Newman had to say about Anselm, in the context of his views concerning the use of logic in matters of faith, (2) address the issue of the relation of Thomas and Anselm, as raised by Newman, (3) consider the role of the Fool (Psalm 14) and the notion of 'natural words' in shaping how Anselm thought about God, and (4) identify a degree of congruence between Anselm, Thomas and Newman.

What did Newman know of, think of, Anselm? There is little reference to Anselm's intellectual work in Newman's writings. Yet, Anselm has an important place in the development of Christian theology and understanding. Newman refers, in the *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, to the fact that Anselm is interpreted by Thomas, going on to say, "in no case do we begin with doubting that a comment disagrees with its text, when there is a *prima facie* congruity between them".<sup>2</sup> We might infer from this statement that Newman is happy to take his reading of Anselm from Thomas. However, in a letter addressed to Pope Leo XIII, in response to his encyclical on the philosophy of Thomas, Newman writes:

“All good Catholics must feel it a first necessity that the intellectual exercises, without which the Church cannot fulfil her supernatural mission duly, should be founded on broad as well as true principles, that the mental creation of her theologians, and of her controversialists and pastors should be grafted on the Catholic tradition of philosophy, and should not start from a novel and simply original tradition, but should be substantially one with the teaching of St. Athanasius, St. Augustine, St. Anselm, and St. Thomas, *as those great doctors in turn are one with each other.*”<sup>3</sup>

It is difficult to see in what sense Newman thought Anselm and Thomas were one with each other. In both Summas, Thomas appears to take Anselm to task for the argument put forward in the *Proslogion*. The grounds on which Thomas does so are admittedly strange. He cites proponents of the Anselmian argument amongst those who argue that God's existence is 'self-evident' or more accurately '*per se notum*'.<sup>4</sup> But in the *Proslogion* it is evident that Anselm views his argument as one which is intended to demonstrate that God exists. It takes all 26 chapters of the *Proslogion* to achieve this demonstration. For how does one prove that that exists which is greater than can be conceived (and is therefore not self-evident)?<sup>5</sup> And if it is not greater than can be conceived (and is open to the possibility of being self-evident), it cannot be God. It may be that Newman simply took Thomas's assessment of Anselm's 'failure' on trust. However, this does not sit comfortably with the categorisation of Anselm as a great doctor alongside Athanasius, Augustine and Thomas. Did Newman, then, share Thomas's view?

In his short manuscript, entitled the 'Proof of Theism',<sup>6</sup> Newman, in a note dated August 31 1864, lists six arguments for the existence of God. Second in the list is the argument from conscience. Fifth is the following: "St. Anselm's argument. (qu. that our thinking implies the fact.)".<sup>7</sup>

What can this brief, elliptical note tell us? Is it a list of proofs that Newman considers may be valid? It does after all contain the argument from conscience. Or is it a list of arguments he is simply interested in? We are not in a position to say with any certainty.<sup>8</sup>

But we saw above that Newman can be interpreted as suggesting that Thomas provides the 'congruous' interpretation of Anselm. Does Newman, then, categorise the argument in the same way as Thomas? Does his use of the word, 'implies', equate to Thomas's '*per se notum*'. One might take it this way, but one is certainly not obliged to do so. In fact, a clue as to the significance of Newman's usage is to be found in the argument put forward by Boekraad and Tristram, in their Newmanian exposition of the argument from conscience:<sup>9</sup>

"The best argument for God's existence is in this way part and parcel of our very existence. In the deepest recesses of our own reality we find the elements which go to make up the argument, once they are brought out and realised. The argument for God's existence par excellence is thus nothing else than: 'a realisation of what we are'."

It is my contention that what Newman means here by 'implies' is 'bringing out and realising what we do when we think'. If this view is

correct, then we have the beginnings of a rapprochement between Newman, Thomas and Anselm. And we may be able to take seriously Newman's notion that they are one with each other.

But surely Newman argues that the kind of thing Anselm is doing in the *Proslogion* and Thomas in the five ways is to 'shoot round corners'. In his response to Sir Robert Peel in 1841, which he considered worthy of reiteration in the *Grammar of Assent*, Newman wrote:<sup>10</sup>

“Logic makes but a sorry rhetoric with the multitude; first shoot round corners, and you may not despair of converting by a syllogism.”

Most tellingly he states:<sup>11</sup> “A conclusion is but an opinion; it is not a thing which is, but which we are ‘quite sure about’; and it has often been observed, that we never say we are sure and certain without implying that we doubt. To say that a thing *must* be, is to admit that it *may not be*.”

The point here is that revelation and faith are the starting point for religious belief and action. Religion “has ever been synonymous with revelation. It never has been a deduction from what we know; it has ever been an assertion of what we are to believe”.<sup>12</sup> Both Anselm and Thomas share this view. For Thomas we can only know by reason that God is (*Deum esse*) and not the being of God (*Dei esse*).<sup>13</sup> And Thomas's objection to the Anselmian argument is in part due to what he perceives as its claim to have accessed the being of God.

However, Anselm's apparent starting point and the original title of the *Proslogion* is ‘*fides quaerens intellectum*’. Anselm claims to proceed from no other starting point. Is there, in spite of this claim, a false move, a deduction from what we know to the being of God? Is Anselm seeking to convert by a syllogism? Or is his position closer to that of “defending the reasonableness of assuming that Christianity is true”<sup>14</sup> (which would be justifiable according to Newman)?

Anselm did not set out to convert unbelievers with his argument. He wrote the *Proslogion* for a monastic audience of believers. It is open to the unbeliever to grasp the force of the argument or not. His view is that the unbeliever cannot refute it, but that is quite a different point. The unbeliever is, according to Anselm, quoting the Psalmist, a fool. The fool is by definition ‘*stultus et insipiens*’<sup>15</sup> and unlikely to grasp the force of Anselm's argument. This is not a simple polemical or rhetorical insult. To understand Anselm's position, the role of fool has to be understood.

It has been argued that the fool is a straw man set up by Anselm

for the furtherance of his argument.<sup>16</sup> I think the role of the fool is more problematic for Anselm. The Psalmist's characterisation of the unbeliever as a fool lies at the heart of Anselm's conviction that it was possible to discover a rational argument that allowed one to say, 'There is a God'.

In his monastic life - in the *lectio divina* and the Divine Office - Anselm was faced frequently with the words of Psalm 14, "The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God'." Given his views on the authoritative nature of scripture and his propensity to find a literal meaning for scriptural texts,<sup>17</sup> we are permitted to ask whether Anselm did not find an impetus in this text to his rational enquiries concerning God. Scripture says that it is the fool, who denies God. As we have seen, the defining characteristic of the fool is not sinfulness or wilfulness, but lack of wisdom. He is '*insipiens*'. In what sense does he lack wisdom? For Anselm, God's existence is not self-evident, as is clear from *Proslogion* chapter 1, where Anselm asks God to: "Teach me to seek you, and show yourself to the seeker, because I am unable to seek you if you do not teach, nor to discover, if you do not show yourself". So it cannot be the case that he is a fool because he denies the self-evidence of God's existence. For Anselm the question had to be: what is Scripture's basis for its authoritative denomination of the atheist as a fool? To grasp Anselm's approach to this question, we need some understanding of his 'epistemology'.

For Anselm there is a 'memory' of God, which he expresses in language close to that of Augustine.<sup>18</sup> Like Augustine, Anselm takes seriously the notion of the divine image in humankind. This strengthens his case for an argument which 'uncovers' the 'intimate connection' between the God of faith and the nature of the human mind.<sup>19</sup> Unfortunately for those who would read Anselm as a straightforward follower and imbibitor of Augustinian teaching, the place where one might expect to see this Augustinianism expressed, the *Monologion*, is precisely the place where Anselm develops his own understanding of how human intellectual activity works. He introduces the term, '*naturalia verba*', to describe concepts.<sup>20</sup> These are the words and concepts we use when we think rightly. Thus, Anselm's discovery of the formula, '*id quo nihil maius cogitari potest*', documented in the *Proslogion*, is the key to discovery of the 'natural word' of God. Anselm's argument is then an articulation of the 'fact' that when I use the word God rightly, I use it in a way that involves my acceptance of the existence of the referent of the 'natural word' of God. His argument, then, turns on what I do when I think or speak this 'natural word'.

Why then does Psalm 14 refer to the fool who says in his heart there is no God? Why is it foolish to say this? Clearly it is not foolish to do so if there is no rational reason not to. Anselm does answer this question in the *Proslogion*: the fool is a fool because he misuses the word or concept of God when he *says*, ‘There is no God’. He is not a fool because he does not see that God’s existence is self-evident. He is a fool because he *says* what he cannot mean, and goes on *saying* it. For Thomas, too, the role of the fool in Psalm 14 demonstrates that God’s existence is not self-evident (*per se notum*).<sup>21</sup> This gives strength to the view which I would want to put forward, that Thomas is in fact arguing against contemporary proponents of Anselm’s argument, rather than against Anselm himself.

For Anselm, implied in the use of the word, God, when understood in his sense, is the acknowledgement that there is a God. Put another way, when I use the word, God, correctly I recognise that I have to say God exists (Thomas’s ‘*Deum esse*’). When I use the word, God, correctly I do not do so in a way that claims to have grasped God’s being (Thomas’s ‘*Dei esse*’). In fact as Anselm shows in the fifteenth chapter of the *Proslogion*, his proof of God’s existence can only work if God is understood as greater than can be conceived. “For then”, as Thomas says<sup>22</sup> in words so reminiscent of Anselm, “only do we know God truly, when we believe Him to be above everything that it is possible for man to think about Him.”

The importance of the fool for Anselm’s argument is that it is the fool’s *action* which is foolish. It is, as Newman indicates, the *thinking* and not the idea of God, as Anselm is commonly supposed to argue, that implies the fact.<sup>23</sup> The conclusions to a syllogism which stated either ‘There is a God’ or ‘There is no God’ are of the same logical status. For Anselm, as for Newman, they would be simply dependent on the premisses from which one began.<sup>24</sup>

I have sought to show how we might understand what Newman meant in his account of the relationship between Thomas and Anselm. From this understanding we are better positioned to see the identity of purpose they have in seeking to demonstrate or prove that God is. We may even be able to grasp the basis of a possible rapprochement between Anselm and Thomas. Consequently, I hope, we are more able to make sense of Newman’s view that there is a Catholic philosophical tradition which is substantially and genuinely one, yet can accommodate the diverse and apparently contradictory positions of Anselm and Thomas. This tradition is one which recognises the rights and limits of reason in matters of the faith, and does not attempt to ‘shoot round comers’.

1 The thesis of this paper derives its impetus from a letter written by Newman to Pope Leo XIII, which may never have been sent, and a manuscript addition to Newman's unpublished work, the 'Proof of Theism'. Such sources should be treated cautiously, of course, but it seems to me legitimate to argue that they may provide us with privileged access to Newman's thought in its 'raw state'.

2 J.H. Newman, *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, 2nd edition, 1846, p.149.

3 See W.Ward, *The Life of John Henry Cardinal Newman*, Vol II, 1912, pp.501 f. My emphasis.

4 *Summa contra Gentiles* I, 10; *Summa Theologiae* Ia, 2, I.

5 See *Proslogion* 15.

6 A.J. Boekraad and H. Tristram, *The Argument from Conscience to the Existence of God according to J.H. Newman*, with the text of an unpublished essay by Newman entitled 'Proof of Theism', Louvain 1961, pp103-125.

7 *Ibid*, p.104.

8 In their notes the editors seek an explanation of the presence of Anselm's argument in Newman's list, "perhaps he was not aware of the fundamental difficulty raised against this argument as totally remaining in the logical order or as implying an illegitimate transit from that order to reality" (*ibid*, p.133). Or perhaps they have not correctly understood Anselm. In any case they are concerned to distance Newman from the suggestion that he accepted the Anselmian argument.

9 *Ibid*, p.57. See also the comment on p.68: "We have to attribute the greatest power of argumentative force in any argument to the elements of our intellectual and moral nature, which cannot be expressed in words, but are nevertheless always implicitly, i.e. not reflexively present in all argumentation."

10 J.H. Newman, *An Essay in aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 5th edition, 1881, p.94.

11 *Ibid*, p.93.

12 *Ibid* p.96.

13 *ST* Ia, 3, 4 ad 2: "The verb 'to be' is used in two ways: (1) to signify the act of existing and (2) to signify the mental uniting of predicate to subject which constitutes a proposition. Now we cannot know the existence of God (*Dei esse*) in the first sense any more than we can clearly know his essence. But in the second sense we can, for when we say 'God is' (*Deum esse*), we frame a proposition about God which we clearly know to be true".

14 *Grammar of Assent*, p.95.

15 *Proslogion*, 3.

16 See, for example, Richard Law, 'The *Proslogion* and St. Anselm's Audience' in G.C. Berthold (ed.), *Faith Seeking Understanding*, Manchester (New Hampshire) 1991, p.224.

17 See on this point, G.R. Evans, *The Language and Logic of the Bible: The Earlier Middle Ages*, Cambridge 1984, pp. 17-26.

18 See *Monologion*, 48.

19 Something Newman himself was alive to, see 'Proof of Theism', p.7, in Boekraad and Tristram, p.109.

20 *Monologion*, 10: "where they cannot be, no other word is useful for manifesting the object". They are "the proper and principal words" for objects. See also, G.R. Evans, *Anselm and Talking about God*, Oxford 1978, *passim*, esp. p.75: *naturalia verba* are "crucial to Anselm's own thinking about the language in which we can talk of God".

21 *ST Ia*, 2, 1 *sed contra*.

22 *ScG*, 1, 5.

23 This point has been made previously by Leslie Armour, who went on to draw out a suggestive case for the proximity of Anselm's argument and Newman's argument from conscience in the 'Proof of Theism'. See L. Armour, 'Newman, Anselm and the Proof of the Existence of God' in *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 19 (1986) 87-93, p.87.

24 See *Grammar of Assent*, p.284: "As to Logic, its chain of conclusions hangs loose at both ends; both the point from which the proof should start and the points at which it should arrive, are beyond its reach; it comes short both of first principles and of concrete issues."