

## Anselm, Aquinas, Sartre, and Girard on the Ontological Argument

### Anselm's Formulation

Anselm conceives of God as the Perfect Being, that "being than which nothing greater can be conceived."<sup>1</sup> Anselm says that when the fool says that God does not exist, the fool is thinking of God as the being than which nothing greater can be conceived and is denying that such a being exists. At least the fool has this idea of the Perfect Being in his understanding.<sup>2</sup>

Anselm then argues that if the Perfect Being exists only in the understanding, then the Perfect Being is not the Perfect Being. For a more perfect being can be conceived of, namely, one which exists both in human understanding and in reality. To correctly think the idea of the Perfect Being, the mind must conceive of that Being as existing in reality. For existing in reality is greater than existing only in the understanding. To quote

Anselm:

Therefore, if that, than which nothing greater can be conceived exists in the understanding alone, the very being, than which nothing greater can be conceived, is one, than which a greater can be conceived. But obviously this is impossible.

Hence, there is no doubt that there exists a being, that which nothing greater can be conceived, and it exists both in the understanding and in reality.<sup>3</sup>

The logical structure of Anselm's argument is valid with the following structure:

If P, then Q. Q is not true. Therefore, P is not true: Consequently, if the premises are true, then the conclusion must be true:

Premise 1: If God, the Perfect Being, exists in the understanding alone, then the Perfect Being is not Perfect. (For it is more perfect to exist both in reality and in the understanding.)

Premise 2: It is contradictory to say, it is impossible, that the Perfect Being is not Perfect.

Conclusion: Therefore, the Perfect Being does not exist in the understanding alone. The Perfect Being exists both in the understanding and in reality.

The question we must ask of Anselm's argument is whether the premises are true.

Premise 2 can be accepted as true. It is impossible for the Perfect Being not to be Perfect, as Anselm as defined Perfect Being.

However, we can question premise 1: Is Anselm's definition of the Perfect Being correct?

Aquinas in the following section has an illuminating evaluation of this point.

### The Evaluation by Thomas Aquinas

The basic question that Aquinas raises against the argument of Anselm is whether the human mind has a correct idea of God by merely thinking of ideas. We can assume, Aquinas says, that God has a clear idea of God and that God knows that He exists necessarily. However, we cannot assume that human beings have such a clear idea. Hence, humans cannot prove that God exists from their mere idea of God.

Aquinas sums up his refutation of Anselm as follows: The proposition "God exists" is self-evident to God. For God knows he is the eternally existent Perfect Being. God knows the meaning of the term "God" by direct self-awareness. Hence God knows

that eternal existence belongs to Himself. However, the proposition "God exists" is not self-evident to the human mind. For the human mind does not have an intuition of the essence of God. The human mind can make up a definition of the term "God"; and we can say that if that definition is correct, than God necessarily exists. However, the question is: Do we have a correct definition of the term "God"?<sup>4</sup>

So we can say that the ontological argument is valid: If the premises are true, the conclusion must be true. Furthermore, for God, the all-knowing being, the premises are true since God knows that God has the truthful concept of God. For humans, the logical structure of the argument is valid, but how do we know that the premises are true, how do we know that we have the truthful concept of God?

However, Aquinas makes an ingenious move in his analysis now and indicates that we might have an inborn but confused idea of God. He writes:

To know that God exists in a general and indefinite way is implanted in us by nature, inasmuch as God is man's beatitude. For man naturally desires happiness, and what is naturally desired by a man must be naturally known to him. This, however, is not to know absolutely that God exists; as to know that someone is approaching is not the same as to know that Peter is approaching, even though it is Peter who is approaching; for there are many who imagine that man's perfect good (which is happiness) consists in riches, and others in pleasures, and others something else.<sup>5</sup>

Since God is a human being's ultimate happiness, that good than which nothing greater can be conceived, for Aquinas, we do have a natural but vague knowledge that God exists. People, however, have to search for this ultimate happiness; many only gradually learn that riches and pleasures do not give the eternal, perfect happiness that they are seeking. However, we cannot turn this argument into a conclusive proof. For there are

many people who will deny the basic assumption; they will deny that humans seek an eternal and perfect happiness. The two different attitudes, first, the attitude that it should be eternal and perfect and, second, the attitude that it should be temporal and human, appear to be two existential attitudes chosen freely as different ways of making sense out of people's lives human. The value of Aquinas's evaluation is that it takes the ontological argument about God's being and existence out of what appears to be a mere game of words about how we define God as the perfect being and that it places the argument more importantly in a context of attempting to discern what is the ultimate nature of the human desire for happiness. Sartre will continue this emphasis in his evaluation of the concept of God as the object of human desire. However he will argue, not as Aquinas did, that the desire is possible to fulfill, but that the desire is impossible to fulfill.

### The Evaluation by Sartre

Sartre interprets consciousness as a relative nothingness, that is, as that which is by being not the thing of which it is aware. For example, if I am a gambler today, I am also at the same time one who could refuse to gamble even today. I discover that my self is not any definite thing but rather the freedom to attempt to choose to be anything which I dare to become. In the experience of anguish, the self fearfully apprehends its own freedom, afraid of what I might or might not choose to do when I walk past the gambling tables. Also, in the experience of bad faith or self-deception, the self attempts to lie to itself, denying that it has the freedom to control its own choices. In self-deception, I would be lying to myself when I would say that I am a gambler, that I always will be a gambler, that I am an it, a thing that is determined by the circumstances of my life. In

summary, for Sartre, consciousness is never fully identical with itself or with any object of which it is conscious or with any identity such as that of being a gambler which the self would choose. Sartre calls such conscious being being-for-itself.<sup>6</sup>

In contrast, Sartre calls non-conscious being such as a cloud being-in-itself. He describes being-in-itself as that being which is what it is. For example, a cloud follows necessary laws of physics. Given the present conditions of the world, the whole future of the physical world is determined according to the necessary laws of physics. A physical object such as a cloud simply is what it is; it has no separation from itself; it cannot choose its own future. Its future is built into its present inescapably. Furthermore, the physical object can be defined without negative reference to other objects such as cats or dogs. The cloud is what it is and can be described and defined without negative reference to cats or dogs. Hence, being-in-itself is that which is what it is; no negation enters into its definition.<sup>7</sup>

Consequently we have this contrast between conscious being, being-for-itself, which exists only by negative reference, by not being the object of which it is aware and by being open to choose its own future, and unconscious being, being-in-itself, which exists without negative reference, by being what it is and what it will be according to the necessary laws of physics. As a result of its radical freedom separating consciousness from any object of awareness, consciousness suffers from a radical insecurity and dependency upon the other, the object of its awareness. Being-for-itself is like an empty hole which desires to fill itself up with the solidity and necessity of being-in-itself. Take the example of desiring to consciously own an object such as a bicycle. In one sense,

when I have paid for the bicycle, it is mine; I own it; I have the bill of sale to prove that I do. But in another sense, it is never completely mine, for I need an unlimited time to make the object mine, to use it up. I have to admire it, touch it, ride it, do the wheelies with it. Sooner or later, I realize that I can never make the object completely mine, and the desire to possess it completely might turn into a desire to destroy it. If I cannot have it completely, then nobody can. In consuming the object, I am destroying it, annihilating it, but I am also eating it up as though it were food, identifying with it. The object is mine because I have used it up.<sup>8</sup>

Another example of unfulfillable desire is sexual desire. In one sense, sexual desire can be fulfilled, consummated, satisfied, just as we can say that an individual can claim to satisfy the desire to own an object. However, just as ownership is an endless project, so also is sexual desire. Sexual desire wishes to prolong itself in order to enjoy the fulfillment of desire. But the fulfillment of desire cannot be final for the self since consciousness of the fulfillment separates the self from the fulfillment: the self realizes its distance from the sexual partner and from the sexual ecstasy itself. Consequently, the self is thrown back into the project of renewing sexual desire. No fulfillment of conscious desire can be final because it is in the very nature of consciousness that consciousness is never fully one with its object of awareness.

Sartre's point about any human fulfillment in life as essentially incomplete is not some new discovery. Many religious traditions would agree with Sartre. For example, St. Augustine wrote: "Thou hast formed us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee. . . ."<sup>9</sup> No finite or temporal happiness can suffice for a

consciousness which is aware of a continued life beyond the present happy moment of fulfillment. Only an eternal consciousness would fulfill a consciousness which is aware of more than the present, which is awareness of both a past and a future. Consequently, on the basis of the experiences we have referred to, namely, the impossibility of complete fulfillment through ownership of a bicycle or sexual consummation with one's partner, many people project an eternal happiness in which their essential human desire for an eternal happiness, which can never be taken away, is completely fulfilled by the eternal being, God.

However, Sartre argues that the very concept of God is a contradiction. One traditional definition of God is that God is *ens causa sui*, the necessary, eternal being which is the cause of itself rather than a contingent, temporal being which is caused to be by another. In ordinary language, we could state it in the following way: God is the being who is what god wants to be without any dependency upon another being, without any positive or negative reference to another being. In Sartre's terminology: God is the conscious being who is the necessary and eternal foundation of God's own being as the Necessary, Eternal Being; God is being-for-itself-and-being-in-itself. However, Sartre's analysis of human consciousness has argued that conscious being is always consciousness of an object or of an identity and as such is never identified completely with that object or identity. Consciousness can only define itself as that which is not the object of consciousness. Hence, the concept of God as a conscious being which would be its own foundation, which would be dependent upon itself, is in Sartre's analysis of consciousness a contradiction.

### The Evaluation by Girard

Although I have not found a direct evaluation of the ontological argument in the writings of Rene Girard, he does have a profound analysis of human desire as fundamentally oriented towards the realization of an impossible project, much as Sartre has argued. Girard does not understand desire primarily as a biological function directly relating the elemental needs of the organism to the objects that would satisfy those needs. Rather, our human desires are learned through imitation of others. Through their desires for objects, others are models of how we can desire, and these models serve as mediators. “We must,” Girard affirms, “understand that desire itself is essentially mimetic, directed toward an object desired by the model.”<sup>10</sup>

He distinguishes between two kinds of mediation. In the first kind, internal mediation, the model and the imitator are competitors because their desires are for the same object. For example, a swimming coach and a pupil compete within the same race for first place. In the second kind, external mediation, the model and the imitator have different fields of action and do not compete for the same desired object. For example, in the novel, *Don Quixote*, Sancho, the servant of Don Quixote, does not compete with him to be an exemplary knight, but only to be his faithful servant and to receive the proper reward of actions based on that desire.<sup>11</sup> Girard affirms:

The mimetic approach preserves and enhances Freud’s most acute insights. In *The Ego and the Id* Freud explains that the relation between the ego and the superego “is not exhausted by the precept” ‘You ought to be like this (like your father).’ It also comprises the prohibition: “You *may not be* like this (like your

father)—that is, you may not do all that he does, some things are his prerogative. . .<sup>12</sup>

Although it seems that one's desire is for the object, for example, winning the swimming race, or in Freud's psychology, the son's winning the mother as a sexual object, Girard affirms that mimetic desire is primarily to be like the model, indeed, to become the model. This desire is called metaphysical desire:

Imitative desire is always desire to be Another. There is only one metaphysical desire but the particular desires which instantiate this primordial desire are of infinite variety.<sup>13</sup>

This metaphysical desire to be Another arises from the baby's sense of deficiency and dependency in contrast with the godlike others, the parents who fulfill all the baby's needs and who thereby appear to be infinite and independent beings. So when the baby is learning to model desires upon the parent's desires, the baby is striving to become infinite and independent. For the baby wants what the parents *have* because the baby feels that it makes them what they *are*.<sup>14</sup>

There is an insidious quality in metaphysical desire. It is not that the objects we desire fail to satisfy us because what we really desire is the being of the other. Rather metaphysical desire leads to death of the spirit and to self-destruction. In running away from one's own finitude and dependency, one seeks an illusory fusion with the infinitude and independency of the other.<sup>15</sup> Girard identifies two reasons why "[t]he will to make oneself God is a will to self-destruction which is gradually realized."<sup>16</sup> (*Desire*, p. 287). First, one is abandoning development of one's own real potentialities, neglecting the

overcoming of one's weaknesses by seeking the plenitude of the other. Second, an inevitable frustration builds up from the impossibility of realizing one's desire. Satisfaction with any particular object will never satisfy that desire to be Another. Two options now open for the self who is beginning to realize this impossibility. The first option is to give up in bitterness the quest completely precisely because it is impossible. The second option to increase one's efforts even more so, but the inevitable frustration leads to violence against oneself in masochism. Girard explains:

The master has learned from his many different experiences that an object which can be possessed is valueless. So in the future he will be interested only in objects which are forbidden him by an implacable mediator. The master seeks an insurmountable obstacle and he almost always succeeds in finding one. . . . The *masochist*, for that is whom we have been describing, may be originally a master who has become blasé. Continual success, or rather continual disappointment, makes him desire his own failure; only that failure will indicate an authentic deity, a mediator who is invulnerable to his own undertakings.<sup>17</sup>

Masochism and sadism were terms created by a senior colleague of Freud, Richard von Krafft-Ebbing, who defined them as classic forms of sexual deviation. Freud understood these deviations by his theory of the death instinct. When the death instinct is directed against others, sadism results; when it is directed against the self, masochism results. In contrast, Girard explains these aberrations as resulting, Webb explains, from:

the tendency to seek out increasingly resistant obstacles in order to heighten the appearance of value in both the object and the model-obstacle. . . . The individual who inclines either toward sadism or masochism is simply identifying mimetically with the mediator: either positively—by identifying with him directly in his power to inflict pain—or negatively—by abasing himself before the mediator in order to believe in and worship his godlike power.<sup>18</sup>

Sadism and masochism are not simply sexual tendencies, but rather, when they are extreme habits, special forms of fundamental tendencies within us all. For in the sadistic tendency we can imitate the mediator for our desire, playing the role of the model and persecutor of others, or in the masochistic tendency we can imitate our own role as finite and dependent subjects who desire to be like the mediator.<sup>19</sup> Obviously, there is physical desire present in sadism and in masochism, but the key in Girard's analysis is not the physical desire of cruelty against the other or against the self, but the "mimetic and metaphysical desire. . . a symbolic good through which we hope to attain a purely ideal power and sufficiency."<sup>20</sup>

Girard summarizes the conflict and violence inherent in the metaphysical desire to be the other:

Man cannot respond to that universal human injunction, "Imitate me!" without almost immediately encountering an inexplicable counterorder; "Don't imitate me!" (which really means, "do not appropriate *my* object"). The second command fills man with despair and turns him into the slave of an involuntary tyrant. . . .

Bateson is undoubtedly correct in believing that the effects of the double-bind on the child are particularly devastating. All the grown-up voices around him, beginning with the father and mother . . . exclaim . . ., "Imitate us!" "Imitate me!" "I bear the secret of life, of true being!" The more attentive the child is to these seductive words, and the more earnestly he responds to the suggestions

emanating from all sides, the more devastating will be the eventual conflicts. The child possesses no perspective that will allow him to see things as they are.<sup>21</sup>

This inherent desire in the child to be the other, to possess the secret of life that the other has, has inevitably led in so many cultures to human violence against each other as:

. . .the signifier of ultimate desire, *of divine self-sufficiency*, of that “beautiful totality” whose beauty depends on its being inaccessible and impenetrable. The victim of this violence both adores and detests it. He strives to master it by means of a mimetic counterviolence and measures his own stature in proportion to his failure. If by chance, however, he actually succeeds in asserting mastery over the model, the latter’s prestige vanishes. He must then turn to an even greater violence and seek out an obstacle that promises to be truly insurmountable.<sup>22</sup>

This inherent violence within each society and culture can eventually destroy the whole society unless a sacrificial victim is generated upon whom, if human, or which, if it is a surrogate animal, that is, a scapegoat, in place of the human, the hostilities of the community can be discharged. The repetition in ritual of the original act of violence against the sacrificial victim can protect the society against further outbreaks of mimetic violence against each other.<sup>23</sup> Paradoxically, the human victim, the scapegoat, upon which the community discharges its mimetic violence, Girard affirms, inevitably appears as a being who submits to violence without provoking a reprisal; a supernatural being who sows violence in order to reap peace; a mysterious savior who visits affliction on mankind in order subsequently to restore it to good health.”<sup>24</sup>

Girard finds in Sophocles’ Oedipus tragedies a clear example of violence generating the sacred:

The beneficial Oedipus at Colonus supercedes the earlier, evil Oedipus, but he does not negate him. How could he negate him, since it was the expulsion of a *guilty* Oedipus that prompted the departure of violence? The peaceful outcome of his expulsion confirms the justice of the sentence passed on him, his unanimous conviction for patricide and incest. If Oedipus is indeed the savior of the community, it is because he is a patricide and incestuous son.

Sophocles' two Oedipus tragedies show a pattern of transgression and salvation long familiar to scholars. Such a pattern is to be found in innumerable tales from folklore and mythology; in fairy stories, legends and even in works of literature. A source of violence and disorder during his sojourn among men, the hero appears as a redeemer as soon as he has been eliminated, invariably by violent means.<sup>25</sup>

In summary, then, we have seen in Girard's analysis of human desire that the metaphysical desire to become the other person is impossible to fulfill because the adult does not have true independent existence in the adult self and the ontologically and necessarily insecure child seeks the illusory, divine-like state of the adult's independence and leads inevitably to escalating violence within a community. When this violence is discharged upon a scapegoat victim, whether human or animal, the scapegoat victim restores peace and harmony within the community and is consequently accepted as divine. We can then judge that an ontological argument, for Girard, just as for Sartre, cannot be based upon the metaphysical desire to become the other person as a way of overcoming the child's ontological insecurity. Girard points out the word *sacer* means in Latin both the *accursed* and the *sacred* and that a similar double meaning can be found in many languages such as "the *mana* of the Melanesians, or the *wakan* of the Sioux and the *orenda* of the Iroquois."<sup>26</sup> Human desire both curses and blesses humanity with the desire to be God, and it cannot be the source of a clear and distinct concept of God that necessarily guarantees that this human desire can be fulfilled.

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- <sup>1</sup> Anselm, *Proslogion*, ch. 2 (<http://cla.umn.edu/sites/jhopkins/proslogion.pdf>).
- <sup>2</sup> Anselm, *Proslogion*, ch. 2 (<http://cla.umn.edu/sites/jhopkins/proslogion.pdf>).
- <sup>3</sup> Anselm, *Proslogion*, ch. 2 (<http://cla.umn.edu/sites/jhopkins/proslogion.pdf>).
- <sup>4</sup> Thomas Aquinas, "Whether the existence of God is self-evident?" *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas*, (<http://www.newadvent.org/summa/1002.htm>).
- <sup>5</sup> Thomas Aquinas, "Whether the existence of God is self-evident?" *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas*, (<http://www.newadvent.org/summa/1002.htm>).
- <sup>6</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, translated by Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956) pp. 47-79.
- <sup>7</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, pp. 171-180.
- <sup>8</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, pp. 617-628.
- <sup>9</sup> Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, Book 1 (<http://www.leaderu.com/cyber/books/augconfessions/bk1.html>).
- <sup>10</sup> René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, translated by Patrick Gregory (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977) p. 147. The analysis that follows is closely based on Eugene Webb, *The Self Between: From Freud to the New Social Psychology of France*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1993).
- <sup>11</sup> René Girard, *Desire, Deceit and the Novel: Self and Other in the Literary Structure*, pp. 2-9.
- <sup>12</sup> Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 178 (quotation cited from Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, p. 32). See also Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, pp. 181-182 for Freud on ambivalence of the identification of son with the father.
- <sup>13</sup> Girard, *Desire, Deceit and the Novel: Self and other in the Literary Structure*, p. 83.
- <sup>14</sup> Eugene Webb, *The Self Between: From Freud to the New Social Psychology of France*, pp. 97-98.
- <sup>15</sup> Girard, *Desire, Deceit and the Novel: Self and other in the Literary Structure*, p. 282.
- <sup>16</sup> Girard, *Desire, Deceit and the Novel: Self and other in the Literary Structure*, p. 287.
- <sup>17</sup> Girard, *Desire, Deceit and the Novel: Self and other in the Literary Structure*, p. 107.
- <sup>18</sup> Webb, *The Self Between: From Freud to the New Social Psychology of France*, pp. 107-108.
- <sup>19</sup> René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, translated by Stephen Bann (Books II & III) and Michael Meteer (Book I) (Stanford, Calif. : Stanford University Press, 1987) p. 333.
- <sup>20</sup> Webb, *The Self Between: From Freud to the New Social Psychology of France*, p. 109.
- <sup>21</sup> Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 147. See Gregory Bateson *et al.*, "Toward a Theory of Schizophrenia," in *Steps to an Ecology of the Mind* (New York, 1972) pp 201-227.
- <sup>22</sup> Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 148.
- <sup>23</sup> Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 148.
- <sup>24</sup> Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 86 (my emphasis).
- <sup>25</sup> Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, pp. 86-87.
- <sup>26</sup> Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 257.