

## POST SCRIPT

### *A Dialogue about the Ontological Argument*

#### *Some critical questions about truth and the ontological argument* (Josef Seifert)

I would like to propose some questions about the second big topic of Pierantoni's important book, the ontological proof of the existence of God.

Pierantoni writes in his summary:

In order to understand the ontological argument, without considering it as a mere dialectical artifice,<sup>541</sup> we must make explicit at least one fundamental assumption which Anselm implicitly accepts.<sup>542</sup>

It is, in our opinion, basically this: thought is rooted, by its very essence, in REAL BEING.

When "something greater than which nothing can be thought" is thought, it must be always understood as something real. This is so, because of the very essence of thinking, which essentially implies, in the last analysis, an ultimate connection to real being. It is true, of course, that we can also think of merely possible, or negative, or imaginary entities through the processes of abstraction and composition, but this happens as a "second intention" (*secunda intentio*, in

(541) Or a "magic trick" ("Taschenspielertrick"), as it has also been called (cf. Josef Seifert, *Gott als Gottesbeweis*..., cit., p. 54).

(542) An ample treatise on the presuppositions that implicitly underlie the ontological argument can be seen in Josef Seifert, *Gott als Gottesbeweis*, cit., Erster Teil, pp. 155-254. Also on this subject, it can be useful to read the long preface that Seifert added to the second edition of his book ("Der Kern des ontologischen Gottesbeweis", pp. 48-151).

Scholastic terminology): that is, having experienced a real entity and, therefore, having been able to think of one, we can consider the relation of such an entity to the intellect (human or divine): such a relation is what we call an idea or concept. (...) In sum: the very possibility of thinking, even when we think of purely abstract, negative, or imaginary beings, is rooted in the reference to real being. Indeed, we could not think of abstract being as "abstract", if not by contrast with particular, concrete being; we could not think of negative concepts, without thinking of the positive essence we are negating; finally, we could not think of purely imaginary beings as imaginary, if we did not contrast imagination with reality:<sup>543</sup> so, we can see that the notion of "reality" or "being" (*ratio entis*), from where our thought starts, is always present. So, it must be true, and therefore, it must ultimately correspond to Reality Itself (Being Itself).<sup>544</sup>

Here, the reader might raise a question: is it possible to prove the real existence of God from "thought being rooted, by its very essence, in REAL BEING"? OR BECAUSE, if "something greater than which nothing can be thought" is thought, it must be always understood as something real..., because of the very essence of thinking, which essentially implies, in the last analysis, an ultimate connection to real being"? Do we not often think that something does not exist, which actually does exist (like the atheist who thinks that God does not exist)? Is such a thought that is not ultimately rooted in real being, not what occurs in any error? Does merely thinking of "that greater than which nothing could be thought" as existing make the object of our thought really exist? Does not the ontological argument require therefore more? Namely that this "definition" of God as *id quo maius nihil cogitari possit* is more than a definition? And that in this case our thought, that more often than not is in error and thinks false things are true, is more than a mere thought? And that it grasps a true and necessary Divine Essence, the most intelligible one and the only one that explains itself and the world? But does not our intellect discover in this case that this *id quo maius nihil cogitari possit* is far from being a mere object of our

<sup>543</sup> As to "contradictory concepts", we have already shown that they are not really concepts, properly speaking, because they imply an impossible composition between concepts that are incompatible: so, properly speaking they *do not exist*.

<sup>544</sup> See above, pp. 175-176.

thought? It shows itself to be the most intelligible and the truest of all natures and as something entirely transcendent to the human mind, and as the only nature and essence that includes its real and necessary existence. Only if this step is possible, it seems, can the proof work as a rational demonstration of the existence of God.

Pierantoni himself explains this and states in another passage what indeed is the true and certain foundation of the truth and validity of the ontological argument:<sup>545</sup>

Of course, Anselm says, it is not a question of merely thinking of the words (*voce*s), of such concepts, but of things themselves:

“Id ipsum quod res est intelligitur”<sup>546</sup>

Who really understands “what God is”, cannot think that “God is not”; because God “is in such a way, that even in thought it cannot not be”.<sup>547</sup>

In general, we can say that all refutations of this argument, both the ancient one the monk Gaunilo raised against Anselm’s proof, “as well as later ones up to the present rest on the misunderstanding about predicating being of God in the same way as other beings, that is, in a relative or contingent way or, using Scholastic terminology, in a way that does not keep in mind the absolute unity of essence and existence in God.<sup>548</sup>

And again, when Pierantoni quotes St. Bonaventure’s third way of knowing God’s existence, he makes the same point:

<sup>545</sup> See above, pp. 176-177.

(546) *Proslogion* iv, p. 103, 19.

(547) *Proslogion* iv, p. 104, 24: “Quod qui bene intelligit, utique intelligit id ipsum sic esse, ut nec cogitatione queat non esse. Qui ergo intelligit sic esse Deum, nequit eum non esse cogitare”. Cf. BONAVENTURE: “Tanta est veritas divini esse, ut non possit cum assensu cogitari non esse, nisi propter defectum ex parte intelligentis, qui ignorat quid sit Deus.” (*Sententiarum Liber I*, d. viii, p. I, art. 1, q. ii).

(548) The truth of this statement could be proved by reviewing the exposition by IAN LOGAN, Reading Anselm’s *Proslogion*. The History of Anselm’s Argument and its Significance Today, Ashgate 2009, pp.129-196.

The third is based on its character of a truth “in itself most certain and most evident”.<sup>549</sup>

Bonaventure continues:

“The more a truth is first and universal, the more it is known; but this truth, by which it is stated that the First Being exists, is the first of all truths both at the level of reality (*secundum rem*), and at the level of knowing (*secundum rationem intelligendi*): therefore, it is necessary that it itself be most certain and evident. But the truth of axioms or “common conceptions” of the soul are so evident, because of their priority, that it cannot be thought that they are not: therefore, no intellect can think that the First Truth does not exist, or doubt it.”<sup>550</sup>

And Pierantoni continues: “Here, clearly, Bonaventure states something that neither Augustine nor Anselm said, that is, that the affirmation of the existence of the First Truth is at the same level as the first principles of the intellect and, in this way, it shares the same character of immediate evidence with them: as it is expressed, this truth would be the first both *secundum rem* and *secundum rationem intelligendi*.”<sup>551</sup>

Now, Pierantoni, with Aquinas and other great thinkers, rejects the analogy between the knowledge of God’s existence with the evidence of the first principles. However, he grants Bonaventure a “certain sense” in which he is right. I believe if we read carefully the important book of Pierantoni and all its quotes, we will arrive at understanding that “certain sense” in which Bonaventure is right and

(549) BONAVENTURA, *Quaestiones disputatae de Mysterio Trinitatis*, Q. I, Art. 1, incipit, ed. Ad Claras Aquas (Quaracchi) Tomus V, 1891, p. 45

(550) BONAVENTURA, *Quaestiones disputatae*...cit., number 27, p. 48: “Quanto veritas est prior et universalior, tanto notior (cf. Aristoteles, *Analitica I*, 2); sed haec veritas, qua dicitur primum Ens esse, est prima omnium veritatum, et secundum rem et secundum rationem intelligendi; ergo necesse est ipsam esse certissimam et evidentissimam. Sed veritates dignitatum seu communium animi conceptionum adeo sunt evidentes, propter suam prioritatem, quod non possunt cogitari non esse: ergo nullus intellectus potest ipsam Primam Veritatem cogitare non esse, seu de ipsa dubitare.”

<sup>551</sup> See above, p. 180.

drop the judgment that he rendered the Anselmian proof in a misleading form against which St. Thomas had an easy play to refute the argument.

Rather, we will recognize that Bonaventure reaches the deepest and culminating point to which all dialectical arguments of Anselm lead up to: something like an intuitive grasp of the truest and most intelligible essence, that of God, which is ultimately the best proof of God: God Himself as proof of Himself. Here Spinoza may help us along with the deep and true remark that links the ontological argument with the proof of the existence of God from truth: *Verum est index sui ipsius et falsi*.

And is perhaps this the deepest point at which we have to agree with Pierantoni that the proof of God's existence from truth and the ontological argument somehow coincide?

***A short answer by the author of this book***  
**(Claudio Pierantoni)**

First of all, I wish to thank Professor Seifert for his kindness and generosity in writing his *Preface*, both moving and interesting, to this modest book. I am profoundly grateful and honored for the attention he has given to it and for his kind appreciation. Also, I am glad that he added these important questions as a *Post Script*, starting this dialogue about truth and the ontological argument.

Responding to his invitation, I will attempt to give a few short answers to his deep questions, that capture some of the most important topics I tried to confront in my book. I hope that this will be only the beginning of a more thorough discussion about them.

The most important one, I believe, which underlies the long debate on the ontological proof is certainly the question of *thought*: 'what is the essence of human thought?'

It is a question, of course, necessarily related to the topic of this book about the essence or the "definition" of truth. Human thought is

an act that is necessarily connected to truth. Truth, as I attempted to show, is "being as object of the intellect". From this it can be concluded that thought has *being* as its necessary object.

How can we know this? Simply, I argue that when we think, we always think of *something*. It is impossible to think, and not think of something. To *think of nothing*, would simply be equivalent to *not thinking*.<sup>552</sup> Now, *something* is something that *is*. 'Thing' is a synonym of 'entity' (*ens*): anything that *is*.

Now, as Aristotle famously stated, "being is of many kinds" and it is true, as Prof. Seifert argues, that not all "being" is *real* being. In this sense, we can think of *imaginary* beings ("the centaur"), *abstract* entities ("the number 3"), *negative* state of affairs ("someone's absence"); we may have false opinions and so on. In fact, in this book this kind of entities have been long discussed, especially commenting on Augustine's *Soliloquies* and Anselm's *De veritate*.

So, when I affirm that our thought is "*always, in the last analysis, ultimately related to real being*", I don't certainly mean to deny the existence of abstract, negative or imaginary entities, nor of errors. Much to the contrary, my point is to affirm that they *do* exist, and precisely *on this* I found my reasoning. They exist, indeed, in their own *mode of existence* – "notional", or "conceptual" being –, which is not to be confused with real being as I have long insisted. But, precisely defining their existence as *distinct* from real being<sup>553</sup> allows us to distinguish between these entities, that do exist as objects of our mind, from real entities that may not exist. For example, when I say, '*Dinosaurs do not exist nowadays*', I mean that today no living dinosaurs are to be found in the real world. Still, my affirmation testifies that the following entities do exist: (a) the concept of *dinosaur*; (b) the concept of *existence*; (c) the concept of *negation*. Note that, once I affirm them, I realize that the existence of these concepts is *necessary* (of course, in

<sup>552</sup> It must be noted that to think the *concept* of "nothing" is not the same as to "think nothing". In fact, to think the concept of nothing – as we do for example in the doctrine of Creation from nothing – we must first think "something", then negate or "remove" it with our thought, as Anselm shows in *De casu diaboli* x-xi. (See above, pp. 132-134). This can be done without contradiction, as long as the being we are dealing with is not the Necessary Being.

<sup>553</sup> See in particular *Appendix A*.

their own mode of being). Once I think the concept of a dinosaur, I cannot deny its existence as a concept. For, as soon as I attempt to do so, I contradict myself, because, in order to deny the existence of this concept, I must first think it and thus also affirm it. To exist, a concept does not ask anything more than *to be thought*. And I cannot affirm that one and the same concept is thought and is not thought, without contradicting myself. Still, the concept of a contingent entity, of which we have a limited knowledge, has always a margin of error. Hypothetically, it is not impossible that someone in the future will prove that dinosaurs never existed, and that their very concept is contradictory. So, although the first statement (“there are no dinosaurs today”) would still be true, the concept of dinosaur would be non-existent. Now, this absolutely cannot happen with the concept of “existence”, for the concept of existence is *simple* and cannot be decomposed into parts that could possibly conflict with one another. In other words, the concept of existence –together with all other true concepts– *must exist* (in the ‘intelligible world’). But, as St. Augustine argues at the end of the first book of his *Soliloquies*, if true concepts exist, they must exist *somewhere*. In other words, as I argued commenting on that text, they must have a ‘place of metaphysical residence’, and it must be both *real* and *eternal*: real, to justify their origin and thus their existence; eternal, since they are immutable.

Summarizing:

- (1) Truth exists and is immortal (everlasting);
- (2) Although it is a purely conceptual reality, it must have a ‘place of metaphysical residence’, so to speak, that is *real* and that constitutes the substantial support without which it could not *exist*.
- (3) Therefore, there exists an EVERLASTING REALITY.<sup>554</sup>

As I have argued, this demonstration really *completes* the following demonstration of the “existence” of Truth, which Augustine gives at the beginning of the second book of *Soliloquies*. The second demonstration (Book II, i-ii) in fact proves that truth is eternal, because it is contradictory to deny truth (“it would be true that there is no truth”); but the first (Book I, xv) adds to this the necessary step from

<sup>554</sup> See above, p. 69.

*conceptually existing* truth to *really existing* truth. Thus, this text gives us all the elements for a complete demonstration of God’s existence, although not in a strictly logical order.<sup>555</sup>

In his *Preface* to this book, Prof. Seifert agrees with St. Augustine (and me) that in the necessity of the existence of truth lies a proof for the existence of God. So, –I argue– he also implicitly agrees that the logical necessity of the existence of truth has its roots in Reality: in other words, that when we think of truth as *necessary*, the logical conclusion of this statement is that this necessity must be rooted in Real Necessary Being. Otherwise, how could the *conceptual* existence of truth lead to the affirmation of the *real* existence of God?

And this is just what I mean when I say that “our thought has an ultimate connection to real being”.

Prof. Seifert is right, indeed, that our thought of God cannot be “a mere thought”, understood in the sense that we can also think falsely.

But I argue that no thought, properly speaking, can ever be “a mere thought”, in the sense of being totally subjective and completely cut off from objective truth. Augustine demonstrated in the *Soliloquies* that the very existence of “the false” in our thought is founded upon truth: “the false” is parasitic on “the true”, and can only be defined presupposing truth. A *false Hector* presupposes a *true actor* and *false silver* presupposes *true lead*.

Summarizing:

- (a) no matter how much we err, we are always stating something that ultimately is based on truth;
- (b) no matter what we state, we are always claiming that “it is true”;
- (c) The notion of truth is always presupposed by us;
- (d) The notion of truth is simple and cannot admit of any error.
- (e) Its existence is necessary on a conceptual level.
- (f) This *conceptual* necessity must ultimately be justified through a connection to a *real* necessity of being, which, only, can be the sufficient reason for its nature and existence.

<sup>555</sup> Maybe because of this, it has been generally overlooked or underestimated by historians of philosophy.

I think Prof. Seifert can agree with me on all these points; and they are to be understood as summarized in my sentence: "in the last analysis, our thought always has an *ultimate* connection to real being".

This statement is *not* to be understood as if we should always necessarily and directly think of real being. On the contrary, note that the expressions "in the last analysis" and "ultimate", which I use here, also imply that our connection to real being is *not direct*. I have insisted throughout my work not only on the true existence of concepts, but on the necessary role they accomplish in our knowledge. Concepts are "that through which we understand things" ("*illud quo cognoscimus*"). The mediation of concepts is necessary for the definition of human knowledge. In fact, without the mediation of universal concepts, we could not explain *universality*, that is the main characteristic of our knowledge. Each one of us is a particular and finite being, who starts by knowing the particular and finite beings of this universe. Neither our own essence, nor the essence of the beings we experience, being both particular and finite, could provide a sufficient reason for the universality and objective necessity of our knowledge: that is why some other essence must be postulated to account for it. And this is the essence of universal concepts which ultimately depend on the first notion, the *notion of being*. So, we know particular finite beings, through the mediation of universal concepts and in the last analysis, through the mediation of the *universal concept of being*.

When we consider this universal concept of being in relation to our intellect, we give it the name of *truth*, in the human sense of *conceptual truth*. We have here the occasion to recall that the "definition of truth" is not a definition in the ordinary sense:

In the usual meaning, a definition *defines*, i.e. marks the proper conceptual *limits* of a given entity (real or virtual) thus *differentiating* it from all others. But the universal concept of "being", and hence of "truth", does not contain a generic or specific difference from anything: on the contrary, it virtually embraces *all* entities.<sup>556</sup>

<sup>556</sup> See above, p. 271.

Still, as Aquinas explains in the *Quaestio I De veritate*, "being" and "truth" are not synonyms, because, as he says, the word *truth* expresses the *relation* of being to the intellect.

A careful reflection on this can also provide an answer to another important question raised by Prof. Seifert in his *Preface*. He argues at one point:

how can a definition (particularly since the author insists that we have no immediate knowledge of God because this would equate philosophical knowledge of God with the beatific vision, as Aquinas claims) be a sufficient starting point of an indirect proof that necessarily needs premises and conclusions?<sup>557</sup>

And shortly afterwards:

The reader could object: A definition, however certain and necessary, does not prove that that which is thus defined in its essence, actually exists.<sup>558</sup>

So, I answer saying that the definition of truth is a definition in a very peculiar sense – a definition "*sui generis*" (in the words St. Augustine uses speaking of the light of the intellect: *lux sui generis*). In this definition, what is "*defined*" is not something really different from what "*defines*". In normal definitions of actually existent beings, the definition itself is different from the entity that we define. So, Seifert correctly argues that "a definition, however certain and necessary, does not prove that that which is thus defined in its essence, actually exists". The mere definition of my dog, although, as a definition, may be certain and necessary, does not prove that my dog exists.

But, in the case of truth, whose concept embraces *all being* and allows of *no limitation*, the definition expresses the relation of *all being* to the intellect, without leaving out any kind of being. It expresses, quite simply, that *being* is in relation to the *intellect*. What is indicated by the universal notion of being is, then, *all conceivable being*, thus including all *modes* of being, both virtual and real. The notion of being is the conceptual horizon that must include *all of reality*.

<sup>557</sup> See above, p. 14.

<sup>558</sup> See above, pp. 17-19.

Summarizing:

- 1) The notion of being is the basis of all our thought.
- 2) The notion of being exists.
- 3) The notion of being includes reality.
- 4) At least some kind of *reality* must exist as such, i.e., *really*, otherwise the existence of its notion would not have a sufficient reason.

Concluding:

- 5) Absolute Reality must exist, as a sufficient reason both for finite reality and for the notion of being: so, the conceptual horizon that we know as the universal notion of being must be a shadow, or a reflection,<sup>559</sup> of the Real Ontological Horizon that is Being Itself and the Cause of all other being.

It should be noted that, although the *notion of being* is the basis of our thought, we are not immediately aware of its *existence*: we generally use it to know things and we apply it to things. Only through a reflection on ourselves and our own knowledge, do we become aware of its *existence* in another mode of being and, through a second step, of its *necessary* existence. Thus, we do not have a direct, “intuitive” grasp of the *existence* of the notion of being (= of truth), because we need a reflection to grasp it; still less we have an intuitive grasp of its *necessary* existence, because we need a demonstration for that, as Augustine showed.

In other words, although the *concept* of truth is self-evident, the *existence* of truth is not self-evident, as Bonaventure claims, and Prof. Seifert seems to do along the same line. Thus, neither do we have, as Seifert claims, “something like an intuitive grasp of the truest and most intelligible essence, that of God, which is ultimately the best proof of God: God Himself as proof of Himself”.

<sup>559</sup> An obscure mirror, or “*a mirror and an enigma*” as expressed by *EPIST. I AD CORINTH. xiii,12a*: “*videmus nunc per speculum et in aenigmate*” (we take the expression as a hendiadys).

In fact, if we had an intuitive grasp of His essence, we would not need a *proof* of His existence, because in the Supreme Being, as Seifert himself states, essence and existence coincide.

However, I readily agree with Prof. Seifert that, in a true sense, “God Himself is Proof of Himself” (which is the title of his famous book, “*Gott als Gottesbeweis*”) – not in the sense that we have a direct, intuitive grasp of his Essence, but in the sense that, having first formed a concept of his Essence through reflection and reasoning, we can then find *in that concept* the demonstration of the *existence* of the Being that is thus defined. But it is always a *demonstration*, not an intuitive grasp of God’s existence.

I hope to have thus answered, to a certain extent, at least some of Prof. Seifert’s stimulating questions. Many others of course remain open, and that will be the occasion for this fruitful dialogue to continue.