

Anselm and Hagin: Ontological argument and prosperity cult

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Abstract

The teaching of the 'prosperity cult' that a Christian has a right to wealth is very much a product of the modern age. Similarly the ontological argument for the existence of God belongs very much to its own era. There is no developmental link between the two, but nevertheless they are connected logically. Both argue from a conception of God as infinite - a conception which assures on the one hand the existence of God, and on the other the receipt of blessings prayed for by a Christian. Although such results may well follow from that assumption, these must require qualification, especially in the light of a dynamic rather than a static world. Both ontological argument and prosperity teaching hold questionable assumptions on the nature of perfection and of comparability. A Christian conception of God must however mean that material blessing cannot be a right in this world as is claimed by 'prosperity teaching', simply on the grounds of conception and prayer.

1. INTRODUCTION

The teachings of such as Kenneth Hagin, characterized by the term *prosperity cult* are very much a product of their times. I have elsewhere (Williams, 1985) described the features of the modern world that provided fertile ground for what I believe to be a heresy so attractive to the milieu of modern man, at least in the West. Our society is so acquisitive in its general ethos that theology cannot remain unaffected by it. (For a good description of this, and how it has affected theology, see Frank, 1986.) The justification of the increasing prosperity of men, and particularly the teaching that a Christian has a god-given right and a god-given means to such ever increasing wealth could only have arisen in such a society as ours. (For fuller explanations of the prosperity cult, see Williams, 1985 or Sarles, 1986.) It could never have taken root either in a different time, nor could it take root in a society which does not know such wealth as ours.

Many attempts have been made to refute this teaching. These may be either from a Biblical perspective, pointing out the deficiencies of its fundamentalist approach to the Scriptures, which takes all texts as applicable to later readers without reference to the original situation or to the rest of the Bible, both of which may well modify their understanding (cf Williams, 1985:21, of Mark, 11:24). Other criticisms are made from

experience, pointing out the dangers that result from an acceptance of its practices. I want here to consider the prosperity teaching from a different perspective, seeking to show the deficiencies in the assumptions of the approach. Here help comes from an unexpected source, the traditional *ontological argument* for the existence of God.

This argument is deeply embedded in the philosophical world view that dominated the Middle Ages. Today it is hardly more than a curiosity due to the collapse of its presuppositions, although it still stimulates a considerable amount of intellectual activity particularly among logicians (cf Barnes, 1972, Plantinga, 1968), because it is unique among the classical arguments for God in that it alone is an argument *a priori*, simply from the nature of God and not from the world. Nevertheless with the emergence of the modern world in the Enlightenment and particularly with the devastating attack on the ontological argument by the apostle of the Enlightenment, Kant, it has ceased to have any real value. The modern world is different from that of the Middle Ages, and in it the ontological argument does not find a place.

It is clear that it is impossible to discover any intellectual link between the ontological argument and prosperity teaching. They belong to different eras and different world views. Historically the ontological argument precedes any hint of prosperity teaching, but there is no developing line of thought from the argument. On the other hand, the arguments of prosperity teaching can be traced back to different sources. I see it as an amalgam of two streams (Williams, 1987). On the one hand there is 'positive thought' embodied most clearly in the teaching of Norman Vincent Peale, which has its own antecedents in the Victorious Life movement and perhaps Christian Science, but is a direct result of the American ethos. It really only emerged with the modern world and as a result of that world, particularly in America. On the other hand a far more ancient root, the giving of God's power to men, goes back to the time of the apostles and even beyond them to the prophets and judges of the Old Testament. Nevertheless it is only again with the modern world that Pentecostalism, and more recently the Charismatic movement, have broken in on the world. Neither of these has any contact whatsoever with medieval philosophy; in fact, among these movements there is rather a despising of any form of intellectualism. Interestingly Sarles (1986:350) sees the anti-intellectualism of much evangelicalism as a root of the prosperity cult.

However, although there is no connection whatsoever between the two, there is a similarity of logic that comes to light. Thus the well-understood arguments which pertain to the ontological argument are also applicable to the modern innovation of prosperity teaching, and will clarify its assumptions and failings.

2. DEFINING THE CONCEPTS

2.1 Conception

It is well known that the ontological argument was formulated in two main ways. The most famous is associated with the name of Anselm of Canterbury. He started with the premise, obviously true to him, and to anyone of that era, that God must be perfect. In other words he had a *conception* of what God is like. From this he argued that what exists must be more perfect than what does not exist, and therefore, from the very *conception* of God, He must necessarily exist. The formulation of Descartes was slightly different. Again starting from the conception of God as perfect, he argued rather that a perfect being must have everything, and existence is then one thing that can be possessed. Again, God must necessarily exist. The attack of Kant here is more devastating to Descartes' form of the argument, but is also applicable to Anselm. Existence, he said, is not a predicate. A being is not more perfect by existing or by not existing. What is however of importance here is to note that from the very conception of God, the argument is that He exists. Crudely, God is willed into existence by our conception of Him, although Anselm is careful to note that God is greater than could be conceived of. The conception of God is really what is conceived of.

As far as we are concerned, conception is prior to existence. Something will not exist for us, that is, its existence is irrelevant for us, unless we have some idea of what it is. We modify our behaviour not because of the existence of things, but because of our conception of them. Of course, events do happen to us of which we are previously unaware, but unless they kill us, our subsequent behaviour is affected by our conception of them. Likewise when it comes to possession, we do not desire to have an object without a prior conception of what that object is. This point is of course made by Anselm himself in his assertion that before creation or manufacture, an object exists in the mind of its maker.

Crucial to the ontological argument is the conception that God is omnipotent, total, having everything as a function of his perfection. Prosperity teaching shares this view of God. He is able to provide all that his supplicants ask, and so, it is believed, if the request is made in the right way, God will answer it. In the latter case, the dominant idea is that of the kingship and authority of God. Therefore because we are his children, God is both able and willing to respond to our requests. Prayer made in the right way is necessarily answered.

Conception is therefore a vital matter in prosperity teaching, but in this case goes further. The traditional approach to sickness and poverty, apart from attacking them in a 'practical' way, is to pray about them, bringing the needs to God. Not so, argues

the new approach. That 'negative confession' centres the mind upon the problem and in itself is then a cause of the problem. Rather, emphasis must be placed upon the solution to the problems. Thus the major technique of prosperity teaching is what is known as 'positive confession' where visualization of the desired solution, not the problem, is used to bring about the result. For example, a leading prosperity teacher writes, "The Word will work for *you* when it becomes a reality in *your* heart" (original emphasis) (Copeland, 1978:59), and Hagin (1972:14) himself advises, "see yourself as having received". In this it is similar to the visualization concept of such as Peale (1953:61), or in modern sales psychology. (Other techniques are inter alia the ideas of seed faith (Mark 10:30) by which it is believed that God will repay any gift one hundred fold, and "agreeing" (Matt 18:19).) Now it is indubitable that a positive attitude does produce results, particularly in the latter case, but it is also indubitable that the simple application of positive confession has caused great problems. The obvious case is in sickness, where the application of positive confession, the visualization of perfect health has the counterpart of necessarily claiming healing, and so discontinuing any other form of treatment, often with tragic results. Positive confession has as its corollary the idea that any doubt, that is, negative confession, is also effective in stopping the desired result. The usual text cited here is James 1:6-8: "But let him ask in faith, with no doubting ... a double-minded man ... will [not] receive anything from the Lord." This means that any failure to receive either healing or the material prosperity prayed for is attributed to doubt. Again what is critical is that the *conception* of the desired result actually causes it to come into existence, or so it is believed.

The ontological argument is often phrased '... greater than can be conceived' rather than '... greatest possible', and the contrast made between existence in the mind and reality. In fact the idea of conception may be thought to be entirely superfluous, until it is remembered that Anselm's purpose was to convince the 'fool' who, to his mind likewise had a conception of God but did not realize its implications, and so denied the existence of God. What Anselm was arguing for was not so much a concept of God, but that the 'fool' would receive God to Himself as Lord. Likewise the prosperity teachers are arguing not for the exercise of the imagination in conceiving of the things that may be desired, but for the implication of such visualization. The things, it is believed, may be received if visualized correctly. In both cases therefore, correct visualization leads to personal possession; a closer relationship, on the one hand, to God, and on the other, to the thing desired.

2.2 Infinite merit

A further point of contact between the ontological argument and prosperity teaching,

albeit a secondary one, derives from the idea of God as infinite, which is an aspect of God's nature implicit in the conception of the ontological argument.

With such an understanding of the perfection of God, it is not surprising that Anselm saw the atonement as related to it. With a view of God as infinite, it was a small step to the notion of infinite merit available for us in the death of Christ, such that our sins are outweighed by the transfer of this merit.

Prosperity teachers stand in the line of American fundamentalism which can trace its roots back to the Reformation and the penal substitution theory of the atonement. This sees the death of Christ as the infinite penalty for the sins of believers, such that Christ dies as a substitute. They extend this idea from substitution for the penalty of sin to include the results of sin in sickness and poverty. Thus because Jesus died, health and prosperity may be claimed, but with the further assertion of immediate rather than eschatological receipt.

Again there is no historical connection between the two sets of ideas, but it is interesting that both relate so strongly to the same basic idea.

2.3 The objections

Objection to Anselm was not slow in forthcoming. It seems impossible that simply from a conception of the perfect can come such a neat argument for the age-old problem of the existence of God. Another ecclesiastic, as is well known, attempted to show a flaw in the argument by outlining a similar statement. He argued that the same logic would hold in the case of an island. If such a perfect island could be conceived of, then it must necessarily exist. The answer is that the argument is only valid if it is applied to what is the most perfect of all, and islands are surpassable in their perfection. This means that the argument is only valid in reference to God, not for anything else. Such logic must then be taken note of by the prosperity teachers. Simply to have a conception of something does not mean that it exists, no matter how perfect it is, unless that thing is the most perfect of all, God.

In this regard Hagin and other advocates of prosperity teaching must be seen as an advance on the simple positive thinkers. I would exclude Peale here because he does base his optimism on more than psychology but rather upon the Fatherhood of God. It is however hard to see that the position of Schuller, a disciple of Peale, differs significantly from psychology (cf Schuller, 1982). It can be argued that visualization of the desired end and positive thinking is effective, but on a psychological level. It generates a mind set which is more likely to achieve success than a mind full of

pessimism and defeat. It cannot, however, be argued that this will always work because circumstances may be such as to negate the value of positive thought.

Hagin, and like-minded teachers, however stress that their concept of visualization and positive confession are more than simply positive thinking, but are effective because God is the source of the benefits prayed for. It is only because they are going to the ultimate that they can claim such confidence in prayer.

Such confidence is based on the one hand on their conception of the nature of God as almighty and loving. They see themselves in covenant relationship with the ultimate, so that any request can be answered. Any problem is not on the side of God but of men. On the other hand, and this is the source of their idea of God, their source of authority is based on a fundamentalist approach to the Bible. They therefore trust the Bible as completely the Word of God, totally trustworthy and applicable to any situation. Therefore they apply texts such as Philippians 4:19, and especially Mark 11:24 (this is quoted on all Hagin's booklets), treating them as immediate promises of God.

Both the ontological argument of Anselm and the prosperity teaching of Hagin therefore claim validity on the same grounds. The argument, perhaps cleverer in the former case, is only valid because it deals with the infinite God and not with any lesser forces.

3. THE VALIDITY OF THE ARGUMENTS

Both arguments consist essentially of two parts, a premise or assumption and a logical deduction from that assumption. In the case of the ontological argument the premise is the perfection of God, the deduction is His necessary existence. In the case of prosperity teaching, the premise is a view of God's omnipotence and acts based on a fundamentalist approach to the Bible, the deduction is then a claim of receipt of material benefits. I want here to consider briefly the second part, the deduction, before moving to what I believe is the heart of the matter, the assumption concerning God.

The objection of Kant is essentially that there is no significant difference between our conception of things that exist and things which do not exist, and so existence adds nothing to a concept. Therefore a thing which exists is not greater, or more perfect, than a thing which does not exist. I believe that here we are again dealing with the reply to the objection of Gaunilo. Anselm was careful to say that it was not his conception of God which must exist, but that God was a being such that nothing greater than Him can be conceived at all. Now Anselm is conscious of the gulf between himself and God, which is the basis of his entire argument; therefore, if

anyone can have such a conception of God, it is God himself, and this thought leads to necessary existence, albeit by circularity.

It is similar God-centredness which is relevant to the prosperity teaching. Hagin and others essentially put the initiative with man who is responsible for the faith in God, and the conception of the desired object. This must be invalid because it is based on *man's* idea, just as *Anselm's* idea of God does not have necessary existence. The validity is based upon the conception being that of *God*.

It hardly needs to be said that God's existence is in no way contingent upon someone's having a conception of him. The ontological argument concerns a proof of his existence, not a cause of it, but nevertheless God can be said to have a conception of Himself which alone would correspond to reality in a way that ours never could. I am here reminded of the old idealism where everything was reduced to mind, and the two limericks by Ronald Knox which so readily describe it, which however relate the conception to the mind of God:

There was a young man who said, "God
Must find it exceedingly odd
If he finds that this tree
Continues to be
When there's no one about in the quad."

"Dear Sir, your astonishment's odd
I am always about in the quad
And that is why the tree
Will continue to be
Since observed by, yours faithfully, God."

Neither of course does the prosperity cult believe that visualization or 'positive confession' brings the desired object into existence, but it does cause its transference to the asker. Its receipt is dependent upon the request. Thus a major criticism of the prosperity cult must be its anthropocentricity. It sees on the one hand man's initiative in deciding what he wants, with God's role that of response and of granting these requests. On the other hand, it teaches that this response is contingent upon the faith of man. One explanation therefore of the delay in receiving what is prayed for is that for large requests it takes a while to build up the necessary faith (cf eg. Sarles, 1986:343). This is surely a travesty of the theocentricity of Christianity which sees man's other role rather as a response to the will of God, and that all, even faith, is given by Him. It is a significant comment that a technique, which claims to work by its emphasis on the almightiness of God, at the same time effectively makes God subject to the whims of man.

Prosperity teaching will read its key verse, Mark 11:24, "Whatsoever *you* desire, believe that you receive it and you will" (emphasis mine), whereas as I have elsewhere commented, other indications in the Bible are that prayer is effective only if it is conformity to the pre-existing will of God. It is rather God who takes the initiative, and then if prayer is made in conformity to that will (as expressed in 1 John 5:14), then it will be granted. Here lies a more correct emphasis, for if the receipt of an object is desired by God, so *His* concept; then our request is valid, and indeed will work.

4. THE VALIDITY OF THE PREMISES

From their premises, both the arguments of the prosperity teachers and the ontological argument may claim some validity. (The ontological argument is seen as a valid deduction from its premise by such as Hartshorne and Malcolm (Plantinga, 1968:123, 136), or by Barnes, 1972:80.) The major attack on the ontological argument has however centred on its premise, that of the perfection of God. This is an assumption that prosperity teaching also makes, and which is likewise questionable.

4.1 Perfection

Now it may well be valid to argue about the moral perfection of God, such that what is right may be defined as conformity to his will, although even this is disputed ground today. The question here is rather whether God may be seen as perfect in every possible way (or else the objection of Gaunilo becomes valid), and indeed whether perfection is a valid concept at all.

It is not true to argue at this point that as we have a conception of perfection, then there must be something corresponding to that conception (just as the feeling of hunger presupposes the existence of food). Such thinking may have seemed valid to the ancient Greeks, and indeed is the root of the ontological argument, but must be discounted today.

Rather the modern view denies the existence of absolutes in any sphere whatsoever, but stresses the key concepts of development or change, and relation. It can only be argued that one thing is better than another, not that there is an absolute good. What is denied is an infinite entity, qualitatively different conception from the things that exist, because there is no evidence whatsoever for this, as there is no evidence for the existence of Platonic ideals or universals. A 'greatest possible' is then by definition impossible because some qualities such as length or number can be added to indefinitely.

In theology this is expressed in process theology where God is seen, like everything else, to be relative and developing. He is only the best at any particular time, but later he would be seen as improved. God is not transcendent, in the sense of being qualitatively different from the world, but is affected by and affects the world, a theory known as *panentheism*.

I do not believe that such a conception of God, if indeed true, necessarily invalidates the ontological argument, because the conception of God envisaged in it is a theoretical and not an actual one, except insofar as it exists in the mind of God. In this case God is always 'perfect', because his conception of what is perfect at any one time will be the most perfect there is, and He will fulfil that conception immediately. (Unless it is postulated that God can only work towards, as a process, conforming Himself to what He perceives He ought to be, which in itself is an imperfection which itself must be eliminated. But in that case there is a conception of what is perfect which itself would exist, giving two gods, which is absurd. Hence God must correspond to His own conception of perfection at any time.) However, infinity is a valid concept, and as such is used in mathematics with different properties than the simply very large. Thus to say that God is the greatest conceivable is to say more than that He is the greatest possible. It is to add a qualitative difference. Such a difference is also present in prosperity thought, although the implications of their view have not, I believe, been appreciated. A doctrine of the receipt of what is desired is possible, other things being equal; provided, on the one hand, that the desire is not too large, or that too many people are not desiring. If the world is finite, it is patently absurd to say that all prayers will necessarily be answered. Prosperity doctrine, if pressed to its logical conclusion, demands a limitless supply of what could be acquired, not just a very great one.

4.1.1 The relevance of time

If God is seen as developing in reaction to the world, the concept of time becomes vital, for God would be the most perfect only at the end of the world. However, even if God is not changing in Himself, the world clearly is in a process of development, and moreover, unless God is totally ignoring the world, its final state will be one which God desires. In either case, an eschatological consummation or final state becomes important in relation to the idea of God's perfection.

This also means that God must be seen as currently limited, whether inherently as in process theology, or, preferably to the writer, by choice. (The concept of *self*-limitation does not fall into the trap of Kenoticism where Christ is limited from without.) God does not wish to bring in the final state immediately. It can also be seen as necessary

for the sake of the genuine free-will in men.

A realization of a changing world leads therefore to two significant concepts, those of the current (self-)limitation of God, and that of eschatological, rather than present, perfection. Both of these are foreign to both the ontological argument and to prosperity teaching. The ontological argument belongs to a world view which effectively ignores eschatology, where the emphasis falls upon stability, and thus where perfection is a possible concept. Likewise, I believe that a loss of a sense of eschatology has been one of the causes of the prosperity doctrine. The loss of the sense of future has led to a concentration on the present, and as a result, biblical promises such as 2 Corinthians 9:6 are treated as having a necessarily immediate fulfilment. In the same way, the hint of any limitation in God, as it is foreign to the medieval world view of the ontological argument, is also ignored by prosperity teaching.

Their argument is of a God totally loving, totally king, totally able to answer prayers. However, as the age-old dilemma of evil makes clear, this simply does not correspond with reality. Either God is not all loving, or he is not all-powerful. There is no other explanation for the facts. The solution to this must be seen in the second half of the dilemma. Although God is all-loving, he has chosen to limit himself. There is a distinction to be drawn between the ability of God and what he chooses to do. Because of his love, and for the sake of our real free will, he has limited himself (and self-limitation to the ultimate on the cross), but has nevertheless acted to redeem us from the effect of the sins which followed from human free-will so that the ultimate good is greater than if God had not limited Himself. As Augustine inferred, it is better to have sinned and to have been redeemed than never to have sinned at all. Such a self-limitation means that God, at the present, does not answer all requests made to him. The assumption that God as a loving Father (Peale's emphasis) or omnipotent king (prosperity teaching) must give us all that we want, must be qualified. Even if we assume that the premise is true, it does not follow that we will receive whatever we ask for. A moment's reflection shows us that no father will give his children everything that they ask for; it is simply not the best for them. His love and care simply forbids agreeing with every request. A wise king also will not grant all the desires of his subjects. With his grasp of the workings of state he frequently appreciates that granting requests may sometimes seem very attractive, but ultimately is detrimental. Again validity of the assumption does not lead to validity of the argument unless it is in full relation to God.

Nevertheless, if the point of such self-limitation is because of love, for the sake of the ultimate good, it means that in the end, prayers for prosperity or healing are effectively answered, and the ultimate benefit of current suffering or other deprivation is seen to

be outweighed by the final benefits. For example, healing is seen to be total in the re-creation of the saved in a spiritual body (1 Cor. 15). Non-receipt of what is asked for in prayer is therefore not due to defective faith, but because we live in an eschatological world.

4.2 Comparability

A more cogent objection to the ontological argument is not in its idea of perfection as an absolute, for it is evident that perfection may exist. For example, a perfect square is quite possible, and perfect examples of other things not only are possible, but actually exist. Rather the assumption implicit in the ontological argument is that all things are comparable, so that it is always possible to say one thing is better than another, so that God is clearly best of all, or greater than all. Such an assumption is however clearly not the case as would be obvious if Anselm's conception was actual and not theoretical. It is not possible, for example, to compare a bear with a beetle, or a clock with a car. They are simply different. Anselm's mistake here is of a concept of greatness or perfection without relating it to any specific thing. Everything is lumped together without regard to individuality. (It is tempting to point out here that Anselm is following the path of the first sin of Adam and Eve, who were tempted to compare themselves to God, which is really illegitimate. Likewise a large factor in the error of the prosperity teachers is that men compare and then fall into envy and greed.) Technically, Anselm believes that his highest Platonic universals lose their individuality in God, but even leaving aside the existence of universals, why this should be is not clear. This 'fool' cannot see that God must be the most perfect *of all*.

The same thing is true of Descartes' formulation. It is nonsensical to say that God must have everything. Again the mistake is in the lack of specificity. What sense is it to say a being has fluidity and solidity, or perfect roundness and perfect squareness?

This point may also be related to the prosperity arguments. Again they are comparing two states on one basis, forgetting that in some cases comparison is not even possible. Their assumption is that it is always better to be healthy or prosperous, whereas in fact for some individuals entirely the opposite may be the case, and so it would be very wrong for God to grant requests for health or wealth to them. They are also guilty of lumping everything into one single category, and forgetting the individual, an interesting thing for a belief which actually is extremely centred on the individual and his prosperity rather than of the community.

5. CONCLUSION

The assumptions of the ontological argument may therefore be questioned, leading to its failure to achieve what is desired. Prosperity teaching, with similar assumptions, must therefore also be rejected.

It is doubtful whether anyone has ever been convinced of the existence of God by the ontological argument. Even Anselm formulated it from a position of faith. The ontological argument is really too full of problems, particularly as regards its premise. People come to faith in a less abstract manner. However, it is, I believe, valid to turn the argument around, so that if God exists, then he must be perfect, or more exactly, is not imperfect in anything. Such a statement is almost tautological, but does allow for the idea of change, and also for the retention of the idea of God as guarantor of moral righteousness, although the juxtaposition of these statements does cause a new set of problems.

Similarly I believe that the claim of the prosperity teachers can be turned around to give a valid, if reasonably tautological statement. In brief their position is that if a Christian has faith, God will grant what he wants, or to put it another way, God will make him what he should be. If this is turned around, it becomes a situation such that if a Christian is indeed what he should be, then he will have the faith to claim from God. He will have this because he will be aware of the will of God, and so may pray in full assurance, not just faith, that his prayers will be answered.

It is also worth noting that the ontological argument is also valid in a negative sense. That is, it is possible to define an object such that its existence becomes impossible, for example a square circle. Whether of course it is valid to say that it may be conceived of is another matter, but it certainly can be said to exist as a concept, but impossible in reality. It is probably also valid to say that the arguments of the prosperity teachers are valid negatively. Whereas in a positive sense they want to say that God will give what we desire, which is invalid, negatively it is true to say that God will never ultimately harm us, as Paul pointed out in a number of places (eg. 1 Cor. 10:13, Rom. 8:31-9). These are, however, very different matters from a belief in positive blessing.

Anselm's theory lives on, but as little more than an intellectual curiosity in theology. It is unlikely that the acceptance, qualification or rejection of the ontological argument has ever really harmed anyone, a statement that is unhappily not applicable to prosperity teaching, of which the unquestioning acceptance has done great harm, even to death (cf Williams, 1985:22). It is to be hoped that the ideas of Hagin are soon likewise only of historical importance, so that they no longer do the damage that they do at present. Just as Anselm's ideas have been found wanting, so those of Hagin fail

to prove his case.

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