

Dermot MORAN

"Neoplatonic and
Negative Theological
Elements in Anselm's
Argument for the
Existence of God in
the Proslogion"

Pp. 198-229

**PENSÉES DE L'« UN »
DANS L'HISTOIRE
DE LA PHILOSOPHIE**

Études en hommage au professeur
Werner Beierwaltes

édité par

Jean-Marc NARBONNE et Alfons RECKERMANN

LIBRAIRIE PHILOSOPHIQUE J. VRIN
LES PRESSES DE L'UNIVERSITÉ LAVAL

2004

NEOPLATONIC AND NEGATIVE THEOLOGICAL ELEMENTS IN ANSELM'S ARGUMENT FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD IN *PROSLOGION*

Dermot MORAN

Thinking the One: The Challenge for Christian Philosophy

How can one *speak* of the divine source of all, if that source is itself a transcendent unity about which one cannot speak, even to say that it *is*, or is a *being*, or even that it is *one*? How can the mind reconcile its own inability to think this divine One with its deep desire to become one with the One, a desire which brings it into deepest unity with its own being? This is the theological challenge bequeathed to Christianity by the pagan Neoplatonic tradition¹. To pose the question in the terms that became canonical for the Middle Ages, namely, in the words of St. Paul: How can God, "who dwells in inaccessible light (*qui lucem habitat inaccessibilem*)" (I Timothy 6:16), be seen "face to face (*facie ad faciem*)" (I Cor. 13:12)? How can we see God as He is, *sicuti est* (as promised in the First Epistle of John 3:2)? For the tradition stemming from Augustine, true *beatitudo* consists in the vision of God.

The Christian tradition from Clement of Alexandria to Nicholas of Cusa produced diverse and ingenious solutions to this problem. Johannes Scottus Eriugena (c.800-c.877), for instance, reconciles the demand for the "immediate and pure contemplation of the divine essence" (*divinae essentiae pura contemplatio atque immediate*,

1. See Werner Beierwaltes, *Denken des Einen. Studien zur neoplatonischen Philosophie und ihrer Wirkungsgeschichte* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1985).

Periphyseon I.447a-b) with the recognition of the limitations of the human mind, by arguing that to see God through His theophanies is to see Him as He is, since each theophany is a *self-manifestation* of the divine (*theophania, hoc est dei apparitio, Periphyseon* I.446d)². Two centuries later, St. Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109), in his meditations on faith seeking understanding in his two early treatises, *Monologion* (1076) and *Proslogion* (1077/1078), also sought the countenance of God: *quaero vultum tuum (Proslogion* I)³. As a Christian philosopher, Anselm's aim is bring the soul back from exile and, arriving at the homeland, to see God's face: "I was made in order to see you" (*ad te videndum factus sum, Proslogion* I), but after the Fall, our hearts retain a certain darkness and can see only darkness (*Proslogion* XIV). Before we can see God, we must contemplate the nature of the divine. Indeed, the *Monologion* is dedicated to meditating on the "essence of the divine" (*divinitatis essentia, Monologion*, Prologue), using reasons and not borrowing anything from Scripture. Anselm is fully aware of the limitation of the human intellect – *angustus intellectus meus (Proslogion* XVIII) – and its inadequacy in measuring the incomprehensible being of God. The mind can only think of God in terms of aspects or parts, but there are no parts in God. God is in a certain way fills all things and contains all, *implet et complecteris omnia*, for Anselm (*Proslogion* XX) providing the conceptual background for Nicolas of Cusa's conception of the divine *complicatio* in *De docta ignorantia* Bk II ch 3. Moreover, Anselm's famous description of the divine as *aliquid quo*

2. I. P. Sheldon-Williams, ed., *Iohannis Scotti Eriugena Periphyseon (De Divisione Naturae)* Book One (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1968); Book Two (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1970).

3. The critical edition of Anselm's works is by F. S. Schmitt, *Sancti Anselmi Cantuariensis Opera Omnia*, 6 vols. (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1946, reprinted in 2 vols, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Friedrich Frommann Verlag, 1968). For the *Proslogion*, Schmitt's main manuscript is Latin Ms. Bodleian 271. For the *Monologion* and *Proslogion*, we shall cite the translation of Jasper Hopkins in his *A New, Interpretative Translation of St. Anselm's Monologion and Proslogion* (Minneapolis: Arthur J. Banning Pr., 1986). I have also consulted *St. Anselm's Proslogion*, trans. and introduced by M. J. Charlesworth (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979). In this essay, we shall refer to *Monologion*, *Proslogion*, *Pro Insipiente* and the *Responsio* according to the chapter headings (while recognising these were not always in the earliest manuscripts).

nihil maius cogitari possit (*Proslogion* II) encapsulates the dialectical tension between grasping the divine essence and recognising the necessary transcendence of this essence above all thought, since it weaves reference to the mind's conceptual abilities into the very description of the divine essence.

In this essay I propose to examine the negative theological dimension in the thought of St. Anselm of Canterbury, especially his conception of God as "something than which nothing greater can be thought" (*aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari possit*, *Proslogion* II) operates in a manner close to a negative theological formulation and, indeed, is to be understood at the same time as meaning "that which is greater than can be thought" (*quod maior sit quam cogitari possit*, *Proslogion* XV). In other words, God's infinite nature transcends our human powers of conceiving of Him; i.e., God is greater than any conceivable thing, not just any existent thing. To be greater than an existing thing would mean still simply to be measured by the created order – to be related to the hierarchy of created beings. But God's true nature is inexpressible and indeed unintelligible, it transcends all our intellectual competence. God's greatness consists in part in its being *unthinkable* to us (Anselm does not go so far as Eriugena, who claims that God's nature is unthinkable even by Himself!). According to Anselm, as I shall explore in this paper, it belongs to the divine essence to transcend all that can be thought, while it belongs to the essence of human cognition to seek self-transcendence through thinking of the transcendent divine, and indeed, it is in this respect that human being is a likeness of divine being (*Monologion* LXVI). As we shall see, Anselm is proposing an interesting alternative reading to the negative theological maxim, that denials are "more true" (*verior*), "more apt" (*aptior*), or "better" (*melior*) than affirmations concerning the deity. In a complicated dialectical manner, he wants to show, using a kind of *remotio* based on comparisons between something better or greater and something else less good or less great, that the denial of the divine nature leads inexorably to the affirmation of the God, and to the discovery of a God that transcends our ability to think Him.

Divine Transcendence and the Mind

The Neoplatonic challenge to think the transcendent One is both theological and anthropological, and raises issues that are ontological, epistemological, semantic and dialectical. It becomes necessary to scrutinise the nature of human thinking, speaking and knowing (*cogitandi, loquendi, cognoscendi*). The impetus to conceive of the unknown God forces the inquirer to assess the human mind's powers of conception, and its own experience of transcendence. Hence, the negative theological tradition, *via negativa*, already seems to anticipate a kind *critical* turn. Furthermore, this critical turn preserves the dialectical tension involved in both recognising the desire to think the one God and questioning the source of that desire.

As is well known, the Neoplatonic tradition has always attempted to express both the *transcendence* of the divine beyond all conceiving, and at the same time, recognise the *immanence* of the divine in all things, since all things, in so far as they are, are one, and hence are dependent on the One itself. But the locus or medium for the reconciliation between the immanent and transcendent aspects of the divine is always the *human mind*, made "in the image and likeness of God". The human mind both bears witness to the transcendence of the divine, since the divine escapes its comprehension, but also somehow instantiates the immanence of the divine. For Neoplatonism, Mind is always the first principle following the One. It is already not the One, yet it is the highest form of self-identity after the One. Moreover, if the One is *beyond* mind, it is still *at least* mind. There is therefore a certain kinship between Mind and One. For Christian philosophers, this kinship has been strained by the Fall, which put an enormous gulf between human and divine mind, and clothed the human mind in sensibility (according to the tradition of Gregory of Nyssa and Eriugena). It is God who enables the restoration of the relation between man and God: *deus meus, formator et reformator meus*, as Anselm says in his *Proslogion* XIV.

Moreover, it will become a significant aspect of the Christian Neoplatonic tradition, that the self-manifestation of the human mind, in human self-contemplation, somehow mirrors or re-enacts the self-manifestation of the divine mind. It is through the mind contemplating itself that it achieves insight into the hidden nature of the divine mind:

The mind, then, can very fittingly be called its own mirror, as it were (*velut speculum*), in which it beholds, so to speak, the image of this being which it cannot see face to face. (*Monologion* LXVII)

But even for the mind to initiate self-contemplation, it must turn to its source – the Divine Mind. As we shall see, Anselm handles the dialectical relation between the divine and human minds by arguing that anyone who attempts to think about the divine must recognise the limitations of human thinking but, at the same time, must conclude that even to think of God is to attain to the undeniable realisation that what is thought about (however imperfectly) must exist *transcendent to that thought*.

Anselm and the Neoplatonic Tradition

St. Anselm is often portrayed as belonging to the dawn of the age of dialectic, which would flower in the following century in the Paris schools with masters such as Peter Abelard. Anselm's proto-scholastic reasoning is often classified as initiating the transition from the Platonic to the Aristotelian conception of reason, which would dominate the period of High Scholasticism. But, despite Anselm's familiarity with the *logica vetus*, and his technical treatises, such as *De grammatico* and *De Veritate*, this is anachronistic. In fact, St. Anselm can be located squarely in the Latin Christian Neoplatonic tradition, specifically, the Neoplatonism of St. Augustine⁴. Thus, in the Preface to the *Monologion*, Anselm says he is trying not to be inconsistent with "the writings of the Catholic Fathers – especially with Blessed

4. On Anselm's relation to Neoplatonism, see A. Koyré, *L'Idée de Dieu dans la philosophie de s. Anselme* (Paris, 1923), and F. S. Schmitt, "Anselm und der (Neu-)Platonismus," *Analecta Anselmiana* I (Frankfurt: Minerva Verlag, 1969), pp. 39-71. Schmitt claims that Anselm is actually not Neoplatonic in that he does not take on board all the Platonic elements of Augustine's *De Trinitate*. Augustine's influence on Anselm is now more widely recognised. See Klaus Kienzler, "Zur philosophisch-theologischen Denkform bei Augustin und bei Anselm von Canterbury", *Anselm Studies* II, ed. J. Schnaubelt, F. Van Fleteren, et al (New York: Kraus International, 1988), pp. 353-87, and F. Van Fleteren, "Augustine's Influence on Anselm's *Proslogion*", in D. Luscombe and G. R. Evans, eds., *Anselm, Aosta, Bec and Canterbury* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), pp. 56-69.

Augustine's writings" (*maxime beati Augustini scriptis, Monologion, Preface*)⁵.

The Neoplatonic tradition of Plotinus and Porphyry entered the West through Augustine, Ambrose, Marius Victorinus, and Boethius. According to this tradition God is *beyond* all things and *before* all things. Meanwhile, Proclus exercised a covert influence through the writings of an anonymous fifth-or sixth-century Syrian Christian follower who went under the name of Dionysius the Areopagite. This author, while purporting to be the first convert of St. Paul at Athens, mentioned in Acts 17:34, propounded a Proclean Neoplatonic Christian monism in his four treatises, which were first translated by Johannes Scottus Eriugena and later by John Saracen⁶. From Eriugena to Nicholas of Cusa, this author was wrongly identified with Saint Denis, patron saint of France and supposed founder of the important medieval French abbey of St. Denis (Lorenzo Valla eventually showed the work to be a forgery). In his *Divine Names* Dionysius argues that many of the appellations for the divine in sacred scripture cannot be taken literally. It is not literally true that God is a lion, or gets angry or has a face. For the God who transcends all predication, negations are often more true or more apt than affirmations. For Dionysius, it is *more true* to say that God is not, rather than that God is, since God is "above all the things that are and are not", *super omnia quae sunt et quae non sunt*. But most importantly, as was recognised by Eriugena, Dionysius believed the Scriptures themselves taught that God could not be named and that "Nothing" (*nihilum*) is one of the names of the divine. As Johannes Eriugena will say, it is "on account of his ineffable excellence and incomprehensible infinity (*propter ineffabilem excellentiam et incomprehensibilem infinitatem*)" that the divine nature is said not to be, or to be called "nothing" (*nihil*). For Dionysius, God "is known through knowledge and unknowing" (*Divine Names* vii PG III 872a). Eriugena follows Dionysius in saying that God is "beyond the things

5. J. Hopkins claims that Augustine is mentioned only six times by Anselm, see his *Companion to the Study of St. Anselm*, op. cit., p. 16. When Anselm sent a copy of his *Monologion* to Lanfranc, he received a reply regretting the fact that he had not sufficiently recognised the authority of St. Augustine.

6. See Pseudo-Dionysius. *The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem (London: Paulist Press, 1987).

that are and the things that are not" (*super omnia quae sunt et quae non sunt*, *Periphyseon* II: 598a).

Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464) was perhaps the first Christian philosopher to have extensive access to the full breadth of the Neoplatonic tradition⁷. According to his *De docta ignorantia*, "whatever is said about God through affirmative theology is based upon a relationship to created things" (*De docta ignorantia*, Bk 1 ch. 24, para. 82), whereas

Sacred ignorance (*sacra ignorantia*) has taught us that God is ineffable. He is so because He is infinitely greater than all nameable things. And by virtue of the fact that [this] is most true, we speak of God more truly (*verius*) through removal and negation (*per remotionem et negationem*) as [teaches] the greatest Dionysius, who did not believe that God is either Truth or Understanding or Light or anything which can be spoken of. (*De docta ignorantia*, Bk. 1 ch. 25, para. 87)⁸.

According to Nicholas whereas the term *unity* is not appropriate to God, it is appropriate to refer to him using the negative appellation of *infinity*. As Werner Beierwaltes has explicated so well, Eriugena's God is the *infinity of infinities* and the *opposite of opposites*, while Cusanus' is the *coincidentia oppositorum*. In all cases, the aim is to do justice to the transcendence and infinity of the divine.

While suspicious of Scottus Eriugena (whom he associated with a eucharistic controversy raging in his day), and seemingly ignoring Dionysius, Anselm is squarely in this tradition through Augustine. This Augustinian tradition was no less insistent on the transcendence of the

7. An avid collector of manuscripts, Nicholas' library included original works by Plato (*Phaedo*, *Crito*, *Apology*, *Republic*, *Laws*, *Parmenides* and *Seventh Letter*), Origen, Tertullian, Augustine, Ambrose, Calcidius' *Commentary on the Timaeus*, Robert Grossteste's translations of Dionysius' *Mystical Theology* and *Celestial Hierarchy*, the *liber de causis*, part of Eriugena's *Periphyseon*, Avicenna's metaphysics, Albertus Magnus, Bonaventure's *Commentary on the Sentences*, Henry of Ghent's *Quodlibeta Theologica*, Moerbeke's translations of Proclus' *Elements of Theology* and *Commentary on the Parmenides*, as well as several works by Eckhart. Nicholas regarded it as his task to bring these diverse sources together through a theological practice known as learned ignorance.

8. Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa on Learned Ignorance. A Translation and an Appraisal of De docta ignorantia*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Arthur J. Banning Press, 1985), p. 84.

divine, who, as Augustine puts it, is "better known by not knowing" (*melius nesciendo scitur*, *De ordine* ii.16.44, PL XXXII 1015). For Anselm, too, God is "before and beyond all things" (*ante et ultra omnia*, *Proslogion* XX), beyond even eternal things because God has His eternity all at once (following the tradition of Boethius), whereas other eternal things experience their eternity in partial segments.

St. Anselm on the Immanence and Transcendence of the Divine

At first glance, St. Anselm's *Proslogion* ("allocation" or "address", *alloquium*), unlike his first work, *Monologion*, seems not to belong to this Neoplatonic Christian tradition. Anselm first establishes God's existence and then analyses the divine attributes (existence *per se*, immateriality, omnipotence, impassibility, supreme goodness, justice, and so on). This structure seems to follow the traditional Aristotelian questions of existence and quiddity: "is it?" and "what is it?". However, it would be wrong to presume that a distinction between existence and essence is operative here (a distinction sometimes credited to Eriugena, but more usually to the Arab commentators on Aristotle), rather Anselm belongs to the older Greek and Neoplatonic tradition, which tends to assimilate existence to the kind of being a thing has. Thus Anselm frequently uses the term *essentia* to mean "nature" and "substance" (*sive essentia sive substantia sive natura dicatur*, *Monologion* III) as well as "being" (*esse*) or "existence" (*existentia*)⁹. In fact, *Proslogion* Chapter Two, which gives the argument for the existence of God, is entitled *quod vere sit deus* ("that God truly is"), where "vere" may refer to the kind of existence the divine nature enjoys in the Augustinian tradition (God's being is *true being*, *vere esse*).

According to the Preface to the *Proslogion*, the *Monologion* was originally to be subtitled *Exemplum meditandi de ratione fidei*, and the *Proslogion* was originally titled, *Fides quaerens intellectum*. Both titles express Anselm's overall attempt to seek the inner intelligibility of

9. See Anselm, *De Veritate* ch. 9, Schmitt, *Sancti Anselmi Cantuariensis Opera Omnia* Vol. I, p.188 l. 29 (*essentia rerum*) and p. 189 l.24 (*existentia rerum*).

faith, *ratio fidei*, Anselm is seeking to explore the rational grounds for his belief in God.

Therefore, O Lord, You who give understanding to faith, grant me to understand – to the degree You know to be advantageous (*ut quantum scis expedire*) – that You exist, as we believe, and that You are what we believe [you to be] (*quia es sicut credimus, et hoc es quod credimus*). Indeed, we believe You to be something than which nothing greater can be thought (*aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari possit*). (*Proslogion* II)

Notice the complexity of the opening statement. Anselm begins from a position of belief seeking understanding, but only such understanding as the divine nature itself wishes to support in a creature. The understanding comes from God and is given to man in the measure in which God deems appropriate: “teach me to seek you” (*doce me quaerere te, Proslogion* I). This is strongly Augustinian¹⁰.

As expressed in this opening paragraph, understanding God has two aspects: *that God is* (*quia est*) and *what God is* (*quid est*). But the locution is complex. Consider the phrase *quia es sicut credimus* (“that you are just as we believe”). Does this mean that Anselm is praying to have an understanding that God exists *just as we believe Him to exist*, or to understand that God exists *in the manner in which we believe Him to exist*? Anselm, the consummately dialectical thinker, in these opening lines, is signalling that positing the existence of God cannot be separated from the conception of God which we are positing. It is not a question of affirming “something we know not what”, to employ Locke’s phrase. Rather, we are affirming something whose nature is already known to us in a certain way, that is, as not being what we can think of it. Anselm had already made clear – speaking of the Trinity in the *Monologion* – that something can be understood “through necessary reasons” (*necessariis rationibus, Monologion* LXIV), even if it cannot be “penetrated” (*penetrari*) by the intellect or expressed in words. Anselm is in fact praying that that conception of the divine nature which we currently hold through belief can be supported and sustained by the divine so that it can be turned into genuine intellection or understanding

10. See Agnieszka Kijewska, “Faith and Reason in St. Augustine, Eriugena and St. Anselm: *nisi credideritis, non intelligetis*”, in R. Majeran and E. I. Zielinski, eds, *Saint Anselm: Bishop and Thinker* (Lublin: The University Press of the Catholic University of Lublin, 1999), pp. 125-146.

(*intellectus*). But that understanding will always fall short of the infinity of God, but this does not invalidate its intrinsic or “necessary” rationality.

In the thirteenth century, Aquinas in his *Commentary on the De Trinitate of Boethius*, credits Anselm with recognising that God’s existence is self-evident in itself, “since His essence is His existence (this is Anselm’s way of speaking)” (*... quod deus esse, in quantum est in se, est per se notum, quia sua essentia est suum esse – et hoc modo loquitur Anselmus*)¹¹. Of course, Aquinas thinks that Anselm holds that the knowledge of God is both innate and self-evident to the human mind, whereas he himself maintains that only the principles used to demonstrate the existence of God may in a certain sense be said to be innate:

...we are said to have an innate knowledge of Him insofar as we can easily perceive that He exists by means of principles implanted in us by nature¹².

But Aquinas correctly realises that Anselm is not distinguishing essence from existence in this discussion. The whole point of Anselm’s argument for the existence of God is to show both *that God is* and *what God is* are reached in one and the same step (contrary to the “two arguments” view of Norman Malcolm and Charles Hartshorne)¹³. In short, Anselm is here working within the Neoplatonic tradition of the indivisible unity of the divine nature¹⁴.

11. See St. Thomas Aquinas, *Expositio super librum Boethii De Trinitate*, ed. Bruno Decker (Leiden: Brill, 1955), Q. 1, a. 3, ad. 6. Aquinas, of course, distinguishes between what is self-evident in itself and what is self-evident to us.

12. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Expositio super librum Boethii De Trinitate*, ed. Bruno Decker, op. cit., pp. 73-4.

13. See Norman Malcolm, “Anselm’s Ontological Arguments”, *Philosophical Review* 70 (1960), pp. 42-52, and Charles Hartshorne, *Anselm’s Discovery. A Re-examination of the Ontological Proof for God’s Existence* (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1965, reprinted 1991).

14. On the Neoplatonism of the *Monologion*, see Kurt Flash, “Der philosophische Ansatz des Anselm von Canterbury im *Monologion* und sein Verhältnis zum augustianischen Neuplatonismus.” *Analecta Anselmiana* II, hrsg. F. S. Schmitt (Frankfurt: Minerva Verlag, 1970), pp. 1-43.

God is not self-evident (*per se notum*)

As we have seen, one way of thinking about a being of such a complete self-identical nature is to regard its existence as self-evident. Thus, St. Thomas Aquinas, in his brief rebuttals of Anselm's argument in his *Commentary on the Sentences* Bk 1, q. 2, ar 3, *Summa Theologiae* 1. Q. 2 art. 1, *Summa contra Gentiles* Bk 1 ch. 10, and elsewhere, thought that Anselm's argument really involved arguing that God's existence is "self-evident" (*per se notum*), known in the same way as the first principles of demonstration are known. Aquinas did not have first-hand acquaintance with Anselm's text, but drew on summaries of arguments, probably the one assembled by William of Auxerre in his *Summa aurea* (c.1215-1231)¹⁵. One of his main targets is Bonaventure's version of the argument, who uses the Augustinian claim that truth dwells in us as his starting point. According to Aquinas, following Aristotle a self-evident proposition is one whose truth is perceived immediately upon grasping the terms. In this case, merely thinking about the concept or nature of God would be sufficient to force the mind to assent that God exists. As Aquinas sums up this position: "Now once we understand the meaning of the word "God" it follows that God exists" (*Summa theologiae* 1. q. 2. art. 1 obj. 2). However, it is quite clear from even a superficial reading of the *Proslogion* that Anselm does not think God's existence is self-evident, since Anselm thinks that "the Fool" or *insipiens* of the Psalms is able to *entertain* the concept of God in his head and still not realise that the referent of his concept must exist (*Proslogion* IV). If God's existence were self-evident to us, the Fool's stance would not be possible, even allowing for Aquinas' invocation of the Aristotelian distinction in the *Posterior Analytics* between what is self-evident in itself (*per se*) versus self-evident to us (*quoad nos*). Anselm does not try to justify his definition of God because he thinks it is self-evident, indeed God's existence is not at all evident to the Fool.

15. See Jean Chatillon, "De Guillaume d'Auxerre à S. Thomas d'Aquin: l'argument de S. Anselme chez les premiers scolastiques du XIIIe siècle", in *D'Isidore de Séville à saint Thomas d'Aquin* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1985), pp. 209-231.

Rather, as is obvious from the Prologue to the *Proslogion*, Anselm believes that we are moved to affirm the existence and nature of God either by a "connected chain of many arguments (*multorum concatenatione contextum argumentorum*)", (*Proslogion*, Prooemium), as he had attempted in the *Monologion* or by the "single argument" (*unum argumentum*, Prooemium) of the *Proslogion*¹⁶. Anselm intended to provide an argument in the strong sense and not just additional support to the believer who already has faith (in opposition to the view of Karl Barth). Anselm is a dialectician, one practised in the *scientia disputandi* (*Reply to Gaunilo* VII). It is true that he formulates his thought experiment in terms of someone who already has a belief in God and the issue is to ascertain whether God really is as we believe Him to be. But, Anselm always underscores the need to pay attention to the "logic of his argument" (*conexio meae argumentationis*, *Reply to Gaunilo* III). In the *Monologion*, he makes this commitment to reason quite explicit: Anselm claims that in that treatise:

... nothing at all in the meditation would be argued on Scriptural authority, but that in unembellished style and by unsophisticated arguments and with uncomplicated disputation rational necessity (*rationis necessitas*) would tersely prove to be the case. (*Monologion*, Preface)

He is working "by thought alone" (*sola cogitatione*, *Monologion*, Prologue) or "by reason alone" (*sola ratione*, *Monologion* I). Anselm is searching for the *ratio fidei*, the rationality of faith or in faith, using rational means and bracketing Christ, *remoto Christo*, leaving Christ out of account, "as if nothing had ever been known of him", as he puts it in the Preface to the *Cur Deus Homo*. Anselm is adamant against Gaunilo that he intends a rigorous demonstration on rational grounds, "not by inconclusive reasoning but by very compelling reasoning" (*non infirma sed satis necessaria argumentatione*, *Reply to Gaunilo* X). Indeed, Anselm was pressed to defend this approach against Lanfranc, who had criticised Anselm's argument for the existence of God for not relying more on scriptural authority.

16. Of course, this *argumentum* could mean a *formula* rather than an argument. G. R. Evans has suggested that it is to be understood as a *locus* or *topos* of argument, a topic, as defined by Cicero in *Topica* II.8, see G. R. Evans, *Anselm* (Wilton, CT: Morehouse-Barlow, 1989), p. 53.

The Formula: "That Than Which Nothing Greater Can Be Thought"

God is "that than which nothing greater can be thought" (*aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari possit, id quo maius nihil cogitari potest*), or "that than which a greater cannot be thought" (*quo maius cogitari nequit*). There are a number of minor verbal variations, for example the use of *maius* and *melius* over which the critics have argued, but these variations are not important.

The phrase "that than which a greater cannot be thought" was already something of a commonplace in Anselm's time, having its precursors, as F. S. Schmitt notes, in Seneca's *Natural Questions* (*qua nihil maius cogitari potest, Naturales Quaestiones*, I, 13¹⁷), two copies of which were preserved in the library at Bec, several place in St. Augustine – *Confessions*, Book VII.4.6 (CSEL XXXIII, 145, *cogitate aliquid, quod sit te melius*), *De libero arbitrio* 3.25 (PL XXXII 1273), *De doctrina Christiana* I.7.7 (PL XXXIV 22) – and in Boethius' *De consolazione philosophiae* Bk III Prose 10 (PL LXIII, 765), *id quo melius nihil est*¹⁸. Anselm himself had already employed an earlier version in the *Monologion* XV: "that than which nothing at all is better" (*est qua penitus nihil est melius*). In the *Proslogion* it is simply presented as definition that will be accepted by all (a point St. Thomas challenges).

In the *Reply to Gaunilo*, Anselm emphasises the uniqueness of the formula, that it names a *proprium* of God. In other words, it belongs to the essence of God to be that than which nothing greater (better) can be thought. The divine is such that its non-existence cannot be thought, and this expresses the divine nature. In this respect, Norman Malcolm, Hartshorne, and others are correct to emphasise that Anselm has discovered or recognised a new attribute of the divine, namely, necessary existence.

The conception in both *Monologion* and *Proslogion* is grounded in Neoplatonic assumptions concerning the hierarchy of being. In the

Monologion, for instance, St. Anselm writes that anyone who does not understand that a horse is better than a tree and that a man is better than a horse is not rational:

... if anyone considers the natures of things he cannot help perceiving that they are not all of equal excellence but that some of them differ by an inequality of gradation. For if anyone doubts that a horse is by nature better (*melior*) than a tree and that a man is more excellent (*praestantior*) than a horse, then surely this [person] ought not to be called rational. (*Monologion* IV)

Following Augustine, Anselm believes that creatures are caught up in mutability and scarcely can be said to exist in themselves (*Monologion* XXVIII), where God alone has true being (*vere esse*). In *Proslogion* III, necessary being is considered to be better than contingent being.

Anselm uses the hierarchy of being, the great chain of being, to argue not only that God is the highest being in that chain, but in fact, that the divine infinity transcends the very hierarchy itself. Cusanus' reflections in the same domain have been credited with breaking with the medieval hierarchy of being and preparing the ground for the radical rethinking of the infinity of the universe in modernity¹⁹. As Cusanus will put it, God is the mysterious conjoining of *posse* and *esse*, in *De possest*²⁰. God is not just actualised possibility, the actualisation of all possibilities. But the divine is such that even the conceptions of possibility and actuality are deficient in respect of it. God is always other than what he can possibly be thought to be. For Anselm, our understanding of the nature of God is simply a glimpse of a much greater nature; we see, as St. Paul says, *per speculum et in aenigmate*. This represents a powerful Neoplatonist element in Anselm's thinking, already evident from many passages in the *Monologion*. Thus in *Monologion* Chapter LXIV Anselm asks: "But what is so incomprehensible, so ineffable, as that which is above all other things (*Quid autem tam incomprehensibile, tam ineffabile, quam id quod super omnia est*)"? As is the case with the negative theological tradition in general, Anselm begins from the problem of *speaking* about God.

17. Seneca, *Naturales Quaestiones*, ed. F. Haase (Leipzig: Teubner, 1898).

18. Boethius, *De consolazione philosophiae* in Boethius, *The Theological Tractates and the Consolation of Philosophy*, ed., H. F. Stewart and E. K. Rand and S. J. Tester (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U. P., 1918, new edition 1973), p. 276.

19. See Karsten Harries, *Infinity and Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).

20. Translated in J. Hopkins, *A Concise Introduction to the Philosophy of Nicholas of Cusa* (Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota Pr., 1980).

Can it be that something of such a nature (*aliqua talis natura*, *Proslogion II*) does not exist, as the Fool (*insipiens*) of the Psalms believes? How can the Fool speak of God at all? Anselm shows that to speak of something is to think of it and to think of something, whose nature is to be that than which nothing greater can be thought, involves assenting to its existence outside thought.

Anselm's critic, Gaunilo, who defends the Fool's ability to deny the existence of God without contradicting himself, does not seem to be so aware of this transcendent inexpressibility of the divine nature. Indeed, in his *Reply to Gaunilo*²¹, Anselm goes to some lengths to emphasise that the positive formulation "greater than everything" (*maius omnibus*, *On Behalf of the Fool V*, or *maius omnium*, or *maximum*), frequently invoked by Gaunilo, is not to be understood as equivalent to the negative phrase "that than which nothing is greater". Nevertheless, Anselm, too, uses positive formulations especially in *Monologion*: God is the "greatest of all things that are" (*summum omnium quae sunt*, *Monologion IV*); God is *maximum* ("greatest", *Monologion I*), *optimum* ("best"), and *summum omnium quae sunt* ("highest of all things"). Anselm concludes:

... for that is supreme which so excels (*supereminet*) others that it has neither an equal nor a superior. (*Monologion I*)

He even uses the phrase "supreme reality" (*summa res*) in his *Reply to Gaunilo IV*. These conceptions of God as "greatest" (*maximum*) or "greater than everything" (*maius omnibus*) belong squarely within affirmative theology, expressing the divine nature in relation to the created order. However, as Anselm himself will point out, to discuss God in terms of relations is not address Him *substantialiter*²².

The definition, *id quo maius nihil cogitari potest* (and its variants), is in the form of a comparison, not just a comparison with anything that exists but with anything that could or might exist. Eriugena of course sees God as beyond all things that are and are not. For Anselm,

21. The actual title of Anselm's work is *Quid ad haec respondeat editor ipsius libelli. It appears that neither Anselm nor his biographer Eadmer knew the identity of the author of *Pro Insipiente* (On Behalf of the Fool).*

22. Relations do not say what a thing is in itself, according to St. Augustine, whom Anselm cites in this regard in the *Monologion*, see below.

God is beyond all existing things and all things that can be thought of as good or perfect. Anselm recognises the failure of comparative terms to reach the essence. Anselm had already pointed out, in *Monologion XV*, following Book Five of Augustine's *De Trinitate*, that a relational term does not express the "natural essence" (*essentia naturalis*) of something or reach to the substance of the thing. Anselm is here invoking Augustine's triple distinction in *De Trinitate* Bk V.iii.4 to V.v.6, between substantial predication, predication of a quality and of a relation. In other words, being *greater* than something else does not express an essential feature of something, because if the thing to which it is compared did not exist, the entity itself would not be diminished in any way. Something predicated "relatively" (*relative*) does not give us insight into nature.

Anselm recognises that his discussion of relatives here is inconclusive. But one point he makes is that, sometimes, negative predicates are *better* than affirmative ones:

But [in some cases] the negation is in some respect the better; for example, *not-gold* [is in some respect better] than *gold*. For it is better for a man to be not-gold than to be gold, even though for something [else] it might be better to be gold than not-gold (e.g., for lead). (*Monologion XV*)

In this discussion, he realises that none of these words designates (*designare*) the simplicity of the divine nature. His conclusion is that God must be whatever it is better to be than not to be, and that God alone is "that than which nothing at all is better and it alone is better than all things which are not what it is" (*Illa enim sola est qua penitus nihil est melius et quae melior est omnibus quae non sunt quoad ipsa est*, *Monologion XV*).

God is better than anything that is not itself. This is a complex and extremely subtle formulation. God is the plenitude of being, whatever it is better to be than not to be, and is better than any being which is not its own being. Anselm has arrived at his definition of God in *Monologion* by considering the nature of relational and negative predication, preparing the ground for the *unum argumentum* of the *Proslogion*. But even in this formula in the *Monologion* we get the sense of God's self-identical presence in being.

In both *Monologion XV*, and *Proslogion IV*, Anselm recognises that God must be "whatever it is better to be than not to be" (*quidquid*

melius est esse quam non esse, *Pros.* IV), and this appears to be a positive formulation, suggesting that God does possess all the properties it is worth having (perfections). This is what gives credence to the traditional interpretation of Anselm as proving God's existence and his essence as being of a certain kind. But his more considered position is found in *Proslogion* Chapter XV, where he says that God is "something greater than can be thought" (*quiddam maius quam cogitari possit*). As we have seen, moreover, Anselm insists on the negative formulation as opposing Gaunilo's "the greatest being", *summa omnium* or "greater than everything" (*maius omnibus*). As Anselm says in his *Reply to Gaunilo*:

For it is not as evident that that which can be thought of as not existing is not that which is greater than everything, as that it is not that than which nothing greater can be thought. And, in the same way, neither is it indubitable that, if there is something which is 'greater than everything', it is identical with 'that than which nothing greater can be thought'; nor, if there is such a thing, that no other like it might exist – as this is certain in respect to what is said to be that than which nothing greater can be thought. (*Reply to Gaunilo V*).

In other words, to be "greater than everything" does not mean there is only one such thing, nor, that a greater than it cannot be thought. To be "greater than everything" is still a *contingent* status which a being in this world might occupy without it being that which cannot be transcended in thought. Anselm's conception of the divine has to have this uniqueness and this mind-transcending quality. The uniqueness of Anselm's God is not fully made clear until *Proslogion* III where God is said to exist so truly that it cannot be thought not to exist. As Anselm says there, everything other than God can be thought not to exist (*potest cogitari non esse*). We shall not enter further into the modal element of Anselm's conception of God here as we are exploring its links with the Neoplatonic negative theological tradition.

The Immanence and Indwelling of the Divine

Anselm's argument recognises, and in a way enacts, the dialectical tension between the immanence and transcendence of the

divine. Although, in the *Proslogion*, he does not emphasise the immanence of the divine in all things as much as in the *Monologion*, where he declared that God is "in all things and through all things" (*in omnibus et per omnia*, *Monologion* XIV) and God is even said to "penetrate" (*penetrat*) all things, nevertheless, the theme is still present: "You fill and encompass all things" (*Tu ergo imples et complecteris omnia*, *Proslogion* XX). In the *Proslogion* argument, Anselm is stressing the immanence of God within the mind, or, better, the *intentional immanence* of the divine in the thought about the divine. This immanence or indwelling of the divine in the human intellect deserves some comment. Some commentators have argued that intentional indwelling is not the same as literal presence in the mind.

But Franz Brentano, who revived the concept of intentionality was critical of Anselm on precisely this point. When, in his *Psychology From an Empirical Standpoint* (1874), Brentano, in the course of explaining his conception of intentionality (as the "mark of the mental") by referring to the Scholastic concept of "inexistence" (*Inexistenz, in-esse*) of the thing in the mind, in an intriguing footnote he lists a number of precursors of the notion of intentionality, including *inter alia* – and somewhat surprisingly – St. Augustine's account of the *verbum mentis* and St. Anselm's argument for the existence of God:

Aristotle himself spoke of this mental in-existence. In his books on the soul he says that the sensed object, as such, is in the sensing subject; that the sense contains the sensed object without its matter; that the object which is thought is in the thinking intellect. In Philo, likewise, we find the doctrine of mental existence and in-existence. However, since he confuses them with existence in the proper sense of the word, he reaches his contradictory doctrine of the *logos* and Ideas. The same is true of the Neoplatonists. St. Augustine in his doctrine of the *Verbum mentis* and of its inner origin touches upon the same fact. St. Anselm does the same in his famous ontological argument; many people have observed that his consideration of mental existence as a true existence is at the basis of his paralogism (cp. Ueberweg, *Geschichte der Philosophie*, II). St. Thomas teaches that the object which is thought is intentionally in the thinking subject, the object which is loved in the

person who loves, the object which is desired in the person desiring, and he uses this for theological purposes²³.

Similarly, Brentano's student, Edmund Husserl, also alludes to Anselm in discussing his thinking on the nature of the intentional relation in the Fifth Logical Investigation (Appendix to §§ 11 and 20) in terms of the problems of immanence and transcendence. Husserl writes:

It is a serious error to draw a real distinction between 'merely immanent' or 'intentional' objects, on the one hand, and 'transcendent', 'actual' objects, which may correspond to them on the other. It is an error whether one makes the distinction between a sign or image really present in consciousness and the thing it stands for or images, or whether one substitutes for the 'immanent object' some other real datum of consciousness, a content, e.g., as a sense-giving factor. Such errors have dragged on through the centuries – one has only to think of Anselm's ontological argument – they have their source in factual difficulties, but their support lies in equivocal talk concerning 'immanence' and the like²⁴.

In other words, both Brentano (following Ueberweg and Husserl following Brentano) believe that the discussion of the intentional object has been dogged for centuries by the assumption that there is something called *mental* existence as a distinct kind of existence.

A similar criticism would be levelled against Descartes' argument for the existence of God in his Third Meditation by the Louvain Scholastic Caterus in his First Objections. Caterus argued that it was wrong to think of the sun-thought-by-the-mind to be a kind of sun-in-the-mind. He objects to the very notion that an idea in the mind needs to be ascribed a cause:

My question is this: what sort of cause does an idea need? Indeed, what is an idea? It is the thing that is thought of, in so far as it has objective being in the intellect. But what is 'objective being in the intellect'? According to what I was taught, this is simply the determination of the intellect by means of an object. And this is merely an extraneous label which adds nothing to the thing itself. Just as 'being seen' is nothing

23. F. Brentano, *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*. Trans. A.C. Rancurello, D.B. Terrell, and L.L. McAlister. 2nd Ed. New Introduction by Peter Simons (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 88.

24. E. Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, trans. J. N. Findlay, ed. Dermot Moran (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), Vol. 2, pp. 126-27.

other than an act of vision attributable to myself, so 'being thought of', or having objective being in the intellect, is simply a thought of the mind which stops and terminates in the mind. And this can occur without any movement or change in the thing itself, and indeed without the thing in question existing at all. So why should I look for a cause of something which is not actual, and which is simply an empty label, a non-entity?²⁵

According to this criticism Descartes is in error in assuming that the *objective being* of an object in the mind amounts to some kind of real presence in the mind, a presence which therefore requires a cause. Caterus, the Thomist, on the other hand, denies there is any *thing* really in the mind, apart from the mind's own operations which are formed in a certain way by the exterior thing itself. At stake in the argument is a theory about the mind. But Anselm too stands accused of holding such a representationalist doctrine.

The Mental Word as Universal

As Brentano and Husserl both agree, St. Anselm thinks of the mind as having something in mind when it understands. Brentano connects this doctrine with St. Augustine's account of the *verbum interius*. In the *Monologion*, relying heavily on St. Augustine, St. Anselm discusses the interior word²⁶. Anselm here sketches an account of the relation between human thought, words and things, and this account continues to form the context of Anselm's thinking in the *Proslogion*, written only a year later. There is no evidence that Anselm repudiated the reasoning of the *Monologion* or its semantic theory in his subsequent work, *Proslogion*, rather he simply sharpens and condenses his argument in the latter work.

In *De Trinitate* (one of the few works Anselm explicitly cites), Augustine distinguishes between vocal sounds used in different

25. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, *Oeuvres de Descartes* (Paris: Vrin, 1996), Vol. VII, p. 92. This English translation is from John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch, eds, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1984), Vol. 2, pp. 66-67.

26. Anselm's sources here may very well have included Augustine's *De magistro* and *De doctrina Christiana* but he especially and deliberately refers to *De Trinitate*.

languages (Greek, Latin, etc.) and the inner word "born from the knowledge which we hold in the memory" which is universal and common to all understanding (*De Trinitate*, Book XV, ch. 3, paras. 19-20). Following Augustine, Anselm thinks there is a difference between the spoken or thought word, and some kind of non-sensible "mental or rational locution" (*locutio mentis sive rationis*) or "mental conception" (*conceptio mentis*) in the mind (*Monologion X*) which is not just a sign standing for the thing, but somehow brings the "thing itself" (*res ipsa*) to view. Anselm thinks of the inner word as actually a kind of *sight* (*acies*) of the thing itself. As he makes explicit in *Monologion X*:

Now, by "mental expression" or "rational expression" I do not mean here thinking of the words which are significative of things; I mean, rather, viewing mentally, with the acute gaze of thought, the things themselves which already exist or are going to exist. (*Mentis autem sive rationis locutionem hic intelligo, non cum voces rerum significativae cogitantur, sed cum res ipsae vel futurae vel iam existents acie cogitationis in mente conspiciuntur, Monologion X*)

This having something in mind does not deny that every thought is a kind of *imago* or *similitudo* of the thing about which it is a thought.

The context of this discussion in the *Monologion* is theological. The question at issue is how God creates things through his Word, and that he and his Word are one. Anselm has been saying in *Monologion* Chapter Nine that before things are made there must be an *exemplum* of the thing to be made, also called a *forma vel similitudo aut regula*. In Chapter Ten, he explains that this *forma rerum* is actually the "expression of things" (*locutio rerum*) in the divine mind before things are made, an appeal is being made to the Christian conception of the divine ideas, Eriugena's *causae primordiales*.

In *Monologion X*, Anselm distinguishes between using sensible signs, imperceptibly thinking to ourselves these same signs, and inwardly thinking of the things themselves either through an image of the body (*imago corporis*) or through a *ratio* that is through a concept. One can say the word *homo* ("man") out loud, or think it silently, or conjure up an imaginative image of the body of the man, or else think of man through a mental conception such as *animal rationale, mortale*.

It is this last kind of silent conception that is universal and the same for all races, Anselm says, following Augustine²⁷.

This inner "word" is neither Latin nor Greek but it is a universal word necessary for any understanding. Such universal "inner" words are called "natural" by Anselm since they occur in all minds capable of understanding and are awoken by the conventional words belonging to ordinary languages (*naturalia sunt et apud omnes gentes sunt eadem*). In fact, these *verba naturalia* are truer images of things than spoken or written conventional words, and furthermore, exist *before* the conventional words are formed. They are *innate* conceptions in the mind, and moreover they are always apt for the things they designate. The natural word then is the "the principal and most proper word for a thing (*maxime proprium et principale rei verbum*)" (*Monologion X*). This is an element of pure Platonism in Anselm. When one really thinks of something that thing itself is present to the "gaze of the mind". It is precisely on this point, that Gaunilo, in his defence of the Fool's conceptual coherence in thinking of a God whom he denies exists, will use Anselm's own semantic and epistemological conceptions against him.

Referential Failure: the Case of the Fool

For Anselm, if the Fool can think of God without concluding to the existence of God, then he is suffering from a kind of referential failure; he has not followed the true necessity of reason. Now, Anselm concedes that we are not always successful in our acts of mental reference. While he asserts that it is possible to think of the thing itself, the very thing, the matter itself, *res illa* (*Reply to Gaunilo IX*) or "that itself which the thing is" (*id ipsum quod res est, Proslogion IV*), on the other hand, he also concedes that it is possible to think merely about the word or *name* (*vox*) of the thing, to somewhat idly entertain the thought of the thing, without really getting out to it and grasping it, missing its true nature and thus merely grasping some meanings more or less remotely connected with it, or just babbling.

27. See Augustine, *De Trinitate* Bk. XIV Ch. 7, para. 10; Bk. XV. Ch. 10, para. 19; and Bk. XV Ch. 14, para. 24.

This distinction between thinking of *the thing itself* and thinking of *the name* of the thing is vital to St. Anselm's explanation of how it is possible to be thinking *about* God and yet not to be compelled to the recognition that God exists. Consider his explanation of the behaviour of the Fool in *Proslogion* Chapter Four:

For in one way a thing is thought if the word signifying (*vox significans*) it is thought, and in another way when that which the thing is (*id ipsum quod res est*) is thought. Thus, in the first way, but not at all in the second, God can be thought not to exist. (*Proslogion* IV)

This is a condensed version of the distinctions Anselm makes regarding words in *Monologion* X. Gaunilo, in his critique of Anselm, makes the point that the mind must either grasp God Itself or else grasp a likeness (*similitudo*) of God. If it grasps a likeness, then the mind is not grasping God, if it grasped the thing itself then that thing could not be God, since we know (on Scriptural grounds) that God transcends our grasping and knowing. Gaunilo feels Anselm's argument does not get off the ground at all.

Having Something in Mind

Let us examine further Anselm's distinction between *merely thinking* of something and actually *understanding* it. Anselm develops the argument in the following way: to talk about God and understand what one is saying and hearing (*intelligit quod audit*), one must understand the term "God" (*deus*) even if one denies that the being referred to by that name exists, or is agnostic about Its existence. Secondly, we do understand this term "God" because we can readily agree that it signifies "something than which nothing greater can be conceived" (*aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari possit*, *Proslogion* I).

Now, having argued that someone denying God understands the term "God", Anselm introduces a new premise: "whatever one understands exists in the understanding (*quod intelligit in intellectu eius est*)". Anselm simply assumes that if we understand something, then our understanding (*intellectus*) contains that which it understands. In his *Reply to Gaunilo* he says:

Notice [though] that, from the fact of its being understood, there does follow that [it] is in the understanding. For, what is thought is thought by thinking; and with regard to what is thought by thinking: even as it is thought, so it is in [our] thinking (*in cogitatione*). Similarly, what is understood (*quod intelligitur*) is understood (*intelligitur*) by the understanding (*intellectu*); and with regard to what is understood by the understanding: even as it is understood, so it is in the understanding (*in intellectu*). What is more obvious than this? (*Reply to Gaunilo* II)

If something is understood, what is understood is in the understanding. This seems to be an Aristotelian formulation, as Brentano had noted. But what does "in" mean in the phrase *in mente* or *in intellectu* ("in the mind") or *in corde* ("in the heart")? What is it that is in my mind when I understand something? For example, from the fact that I cognise or intelligise or understand a table (grasping, in Anselmian terms, both *what* a table is and *that* it is there), it does not follow that there is actually a table in my mind, though Aristotle would probably have argued that in a sense the table without its matter, the form of the table, is in the mind, or more accurately, my mind and the form of the table are one. Speaking of something being "in" the mind is metaphorical; if the mind is not a physical location, then it cannot contain physical items within it.

A critic of Anselm, such as Gaunilo, will be happy to say that his mind contains the concept or *meaning* (*significatio*) of the term "table", but surely not the table itself. Anselm appears to believe, at least in *Proslogion* II, that whenever something is understood, then that thing itself exists in the mind, not just that the mind grasps the thing. He admits that fictional or imaginary or "false things" (*falsa vel dubia*, *Reply to Gaunilo* VI) have no existence outside the mind, but he appears to believe that they have something we might call "mental existence" in the manner in which the plan of a painting is in the mind of the painter before he sits down to paint it. In his reply, Anselm does think it is possible to understand in some sense false or doubtful things. He wants to show that anything thought about exists in the mind "in some mode or other" (*quolibet modo*, *Reply to Gaunilo* VI). Anselm will then make the inference: whatever exists in the understanding has itself got mental existence.

An unstated assumption in the argument is that there are at least two kinds of existence, which we might term *mental* existence and *extra-mental* or *actual* or *real* (*in actu*²⁸ or *in re*) existence. Anselm seems to be operating with such a distinction when he says:

For it is one thing for an object to exist in the mind (*in intellectu*), and another thing to understand that that object actually exists. (*Aliud enim est rem esse in intellectu, aliud intelligere rem esse*). (*Proslogion* II).

Things can exist in the mind (mental existence) or in actuality (real existence). Anselm gives the example of a painter (probably drawn from St. Augustine)²⁹, who first conceives of what he or she is going to paint and then paints it.

Thus, when a painter plans beforehand (*praecogitat*) what he is going to execute, he has [the picture] in his mind (*in intellectu*), but he does not yet think that it actually exists (*esse*) because he has not yet executed it. However, when he has actually painted it, then he both has it in his mind and understands that it exists (*et intelligit esse*) because he has now made it.

The painting (*pictura*) can in effect have a double existence: first, as it is in the artist, and then again as it is in physical reality. Anselm assumes that somehow it is the *same* painting which has a dual existence: "not yet actual" (*nondum facta*) in the mind (in Latin variously *in intellectu* or *in mente*) and in reality (*in re*) or simply that it *is* (*esse*).

Anselm had already made use of the example of the artisan and his creation in *Monologion* X to explain the manner in which things can be said to be in the divine mind before they are created in reality. Before a craftsman makes something he has a "mental conception" of it. Furthermore, Anselm does not discuss where the artist gets his idea in the mind. But in the context of the parallel with the divine mind, the suggestion is that the idea already resides in the mind, just as the divine ideas are one with the divine mind.

28. See *Reply to Gaunilo* I.

29. In his *Reply on Behalf of the Fool*, Gaunilo refers to a passage in Augustine's *In Iohannem*, tract. 1, n. 16 (PL XXXV 1387), where Augustine speaks of an artisan making a box in the context of a discussion of whether the idea "man" in the mind of God is a man or a part of God. The discussion goes back to Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Zeta 7, 1032a26-30.

As we know from his subsequent dispute with Roscelin, Anselm was a realist with regard to universals. But he was also a direct realist about what is known – what is known is the thing itself, rather than as a replica or image of the thing which is separate from the thing existing in reality. As Richard McKeon has put it:

Anselm's proof was an expression of his conviction that thought penetrates significantly to the ultimate nature of things. Ideas are to be considered, not as images or replicas, but as realities, and they are, like other realities, possessed of degrees of perfection³⁰.

Gaunilo, by contrast, following Augustine – whom he quotes – maintains, in *On Behalf of the Fool* III, that the painting as conceived in the mind of the artist exists only in the "art" (*ars*) of the artist, which is a part of the artist's *intelligentia*, where the thing is nothing other than the soul's knowledge and understanding. Indeed, in his *Reply to Gaunilo* VIII, Anselm confirms that he introduced the analogy of the painter simply to make the point that even *something that does not exist* can be shown to exist in the mind. But there is a sense that for Anselm it is not just the power to conceive the painting that is in the mind of the artist but the painting itself – grasped by a conception or seen as a visual image.

By analogy with the painter who thinks beforehand of his painting, Anselm now suggests that someone who is considering the very notion of "God" has actually got GOD (I use the capitals to refer to the thing itself, *res ipsa*) in his mind. Every mind has the concept "God", even though not every mind understands GOD to be. But in thinking "God", the thing thought of is in our understanding, so GOD has at least got mental existence. Of course, as Ueberweg and others have pointed out, Anselm's argument here exploits – and is misled by – an ambiguity. When we think about GOD, what have we got in our minds? Is it GOD – the actual entity – that is in our understanding? Or is it rather the *concept* of a God, that is, the *meaning* of the term "God", which is in our understanding? Anselm wants us to believe the former; i.e., GOD itself, is in our understanding and so to conclude that once we think of God we must admit that God exists – at least in our understanding; that God has at the very least got mental existence.

30. Richard McKeon, "Thomas Aquinas' Doctrine of Knowledge and Its Historical Setting", *Speculum* Vol. 3 No. 4 (Oct. 1928), p. 427.

For Anselm, to think of a man is to think about that man himself, **but** through a species or concept. Gaunilo agrees up to a point. He **concedes** that if one is talking about a man not personally known (and **who** may not even exist), one is, nevertheless, able to think about him “through the specific or general concept” (*per illam specialem generalemve notitiam*) of humanity. Gaunilo does not think this transfers to God because we have no general concept under which to think God – that is to say, God falls outside of every genus and species.

How can I think of God? For Gaunilo, I have only the word to focus on, the spoken word (*vox*) not the thing itself (*res ipsa*). Both Gaunilo and Anselm employ a distinction between the thing itself signified by a word and the word which does the signifying, Anselm’s *vox significativa* (Anselm’s distinction in the *Proslogion* IV). I can think of one without thinking of the other. However, Gaunilo, and not Anselm, makes use of the intermediary of the *sensus* or meaning, although Anselm actually invokes this *sensus* in his *Reply to Gaunilo* VII).

Why the Fool is not Compelled to Assent to God’s Existence

In *Proslogion* IV Anselm explains how it is that, if understanding the definition of God compels us to acknowledge that God exists, the Fool has not come to that conclusion himself. To defend the possibility of the Fool thinking about God and yet not assenting to God’s existence, Anselm claims that we can think of something in two ways: one way, when we entertain the word or words (*vox significans*) and another when we grasp the thing itself (*id ipsum quod res est*), that itself which the thing is. On this account, the Fool is thinking of the *words* when he denies the existence of God but if he had thought of the *res* he could not have denied the existence of God. Here Anselm is not making the necessary distinction between an inner utterance of a word, *vox*, and the act of understanding what that word means. Anselm is struggling with an inadequate semantics.

Gaunilo, on the other hand, in commenting on this view, takes a **more** sophisticated stance. As Anselm himself recognises, Gaunilo **claims** it is possible, first, to have something in mind and not understand

it; second, that one can understand something without having it in mind, **and**, third, that one can have something in mind, understand it, but still **not** be able to assert that it exists. Anselm writes:

Moreover, you maintain that from the fact that that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought is understood, it does not follow that it is in the mind (*esse in intellectu*), nor that, if it is in the mind, it therefore exists in reality (*ideo esse in re*). (*Reply to Gaunilo* I)

Anselm claims that we can on the one hand grasp the words, and secondly we can understand these words that is grasp their meaning or sense, but it is yet another matter to know that the thing signified by the words exist. Gaunilo – following Augustine (and following Anselm’s earlier account in the *Monologion*) – argues that of course when we hear the *sensible* words, the uttered expression, we have those words in our understanding and since a word *is* a thing in one sense we can be said to have a thing in our understanding. But the thing here is the sensible form of the words and even a man hearing a language that he does not know will have that limited understanding – the very sound of the words will be in his head. So we have the uttered word silently in our own minds. But this is not the “thing” to which Anselm is referring.

Gaunilo goes on to introduce a new term to the argument. He maintains that if the man also actually understands what he hears, he also has in his head not just the sound of the words but the their “sense” (*sensus*) or “signification” or “meaning” (*significatio*). This *significatio* is available whether or not the thing exists. When someone talks of a “man” one can understand what she means and even know whom she is talking about (i.e., the man who broke the bank at Monte Carlo), but that man need not exist. There need be no actual referent to a *significatio*. There is a meaning, which has an intended referent, but that in itself is no guarantee that there is an actual referent. Gaunilo is employing a very sophisticated semantic analysis, on a par with the discussions of nineteenth-century logicians from Bolzano to Husserl and Frege concerning the need to distinguish between a verbal expression, its meaning, its intended referent and its actual object.

In the *Monologion*, as we have seen, Anselm thinks of human expression in terms of divine expression and he thinks that God’s expression is a manifestation of his own essence: “For, necessarily, the Word by which the Creator speaks of itself is what the Creator is”

(*idipsum esse quod ipse est*, *Monologion* XXXIII). A word emerges from and expresses the nature itself, even though a word is also a likeness (similitude) and can – not unreasonably – be called an *imago* (*Monologion* XXXIII). Anselm appears to think that we grasp a sensible individual through an image, but that we grasp the essence itself through a kind of rational intuition of the mind. This is Platonism. When I understand the expression *homo* (“man”) then I grasp that it is a “rational, mortal animal”. Clearly Anselm thinks we can grasp some natures directly by an intuition of the mind without the mediation of signs. Anselm subscribes to the view that names can have different meanings in different contexts but that they have a true or proper *significatio*. They can be appellative of different things. Gaunilo, on the other hand, thinks all definition is *per species et differentiam*, where *per* names a significant part of the process.

In a subsequent dialogue, *De Veritate* (*On Truth*, written c. 1080-1085)³¹, Anselm is careful to distinguish between a *propositio* (*propositio, enuntiatio, oratio*) that asserts or claims truth, and the state of affairs, i.e., the thing itself (*res*), which makes the statement true. In other words, he distinguishes truth makers from truth bearers. A proposition affirms or denies something, it makes a truth claim and is therefore a *bearer* of truth, and in that respect we can speak of a “true statement”. He also thinks that a true definition actually asserts the way things really are and hence that it signifies correctly. There is an essential truth of meaning that belongs to the proposition, “the natural truth of signification”. Besides the meaning which naturally is associated with the proposition is the state of affairs which makes the statement true. As Anselm says:

The thing affirmed or denied by a true proposition is not in the statement itself, and so must not be said to be its truth, it must be called the cause of the proposition’s being true. Therefore it seems that the “truth of a proposition” is to be sought only in the proposition itself.

However, Anselm also recognises that reason can signify not only correctly but also incorrectly, a statement can be made which is false.

31. Anselm, *De Veritate* in F. S. Schmitt, *Sancti Anselmi Cantuariensis Opera Omnia*, op. cit., Vol. I, pp. 169-199, trans. in *Anselm of Canterbury*, Volume Two, ed. and trans. J. Hopkins and H. Richardson (Toronto: Edwin Mellen Press, 1976), pp.75-103.

Thus to say, “it is day”, at a time when it is actually night is to assert what is false. In this dialogue Anselm employs a three-fold distinction: between a *significatio*, what it has the power to signify, and what in fact is the case. Anselm also thinks there is a difference between what an expression *naturally* signifies – what it was “made to signify”, as he puts it – and what it can “undertake to signify”. Anselm’s Platonist semantics commits him to holding that an expression always has a fixed and immutable meaning *naturally* attaching to it, but that it can be put to use to have a different meaning and this latter sense is always fluctuating (presumably with speaker and context). In this sense, if a proposition says what it means then it already has a certain kind of truth, no matter how things stand in the world. It has truth in accordance with its power of signifying.

Now Anselm actually makes an attempt to rebut Gaunilo on exactly these terms. Having attempted to fob off Gaunilo by claiming that anything that can be thought of as existing but not actual, must be thought of as having a beginning to its existence, whereas Anselm is thinking of a being who necessarily exists, exists *ex necessitate*. If something has a beginning, middle or end, it has parts, and whatever has parts can be thought of as not existing since it can decompose back into its parts. Thus, even the *cogito* which, while I think it guarantees that I exist, does not prohibit me from thinking that I might not exist (p. 177). If the *cogito*, for Gaunilo, does not permit us to think of our non-existence then it is not the case that only God is that which cannot be thought not to exist. We can think of something as not existing while knowing that it in fact exists.

Something which has merely possible existence does not meet the criterion expressed in the definition of God – and remember what Anselm has to say about definitions in *De Veritate*. If one can think of this being at all, Anselm argues in his *Reply to Gaunilo*, it is because it cannot not exist, it is *not possible for it not to be* (*non potest non esse*, *Reply I*). Something that can be thought not to exist, can be thought not to exist at some time or place, but God must exist at all times and places and hence such an entity as thought of cannot be God. In other words, Anselm does not answer Gaunilo’s semantic criticisms but resorts to the modal argument, which had initially been asserted in *Proslogion* Three.

Anselm does reply to the charge that one can hear something and have it in mind and still not understand it. He appears to dismiss the case of someone who hears a word in a language he does not understand, and instead discusses the case of someone who hears a word in a familiar language (*nota lingua*, *Reply to Gaunilo II*) but still does not understand. Such a person either has, according to Anselm, no intelligence or a most obtuse one. If something is heard, it is understood "to some extent" (*quod auditum aliquatenus intelligit*, *Reply to Gaunilo VII*). This concept of "to some extent" or "somewhat" (*aliquatenus*) is crucial. God can only be known *to some degree*. In fact, what is known is precisely that the divine being transcends knowing, but furthermore that this transcendence of knowing can actually act as a kind of definition of the divine being.

Anselm does distinguish between simply being able to say something, i.e., to articulate it (*dicere*), and being able to understand or cognise it (*intelligere*). He also distinguishes between a total or whole understanding, understanding "well" (*bene*), as he puts it, and having a deficient and partial understanding. But he insists in his *Reply to Gaunilo* that from the fact that something is understood, then that thing must be in the mind. Whatever is thought is thought of "by means of a thought" (*enim quod cogitatur, cogitatione cogitatur*, *Reply to Gaunilo II*) and, by definition, that thought (*cogitatio*) must be in the mind, *in cogitatione*. Whatever is understood by the mind must be *qua* understood in the mind. This is a claim rather like that of Descartes against Caterus. There must be some vehicle in the mind through which something is thought or understood, and that is "not nothing", to quote Descartes. As Anselm says: "what could be more obvious than this (*quid hoc planius*)?"

Conclusion

Anselm recognises the dialectical challenge involved in talking about a God who by definition cannot be talked about. He defends the possibility not just of proving the *existence* of such a transcendent entity, but also of knowing it *to some extent* (*aliquatenus*). In just the same way, one can say that something is "ineffable" (*ineffabile*) or "inconceivable" (*non cogitabile*, *Reply to Gaunilo IX*). One can

intelligise or speculate about this entity who transcends knowing. The result of this discussion is that Anselm's argument is embedded in a context of Christian Platonism which makes it both more traditional and at the same time more original, than most commentators have noticed.