

7 Anselm and the ontological argument

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) claimed that there are only three possible ways of proving the existence of God by means of “speculative reason.”¹ He called one of them “the ontological proof,” and it is often said that this (or “the ontological argument” as it is now commonly called) was first advanced by Anselm in Chapters 2 and 3 of his *Proslogion*. Anselm’s collected works run to many pages, but nothing he wrote has commanded so much attention as these short texts. Yet what was he arguing in them? And how should we evaluate his reasoning? These are questions which have been answered in a bewildering variety of ways.² In this chapter I aim only to present a brief introduction to the reasoning of *Proslogion* 2 and 3 together with some tentative suggestions as to how we might reflect on it.

FAITH, REASON, AND THE *PROSLOGION*

Anselm’s writings are not what some would regard as typical works of philosophy. Philosophers cannot, of course, avoid speaking from some viewpoint or other, but they often foster the impression that they seek only to follow “where reason leads,” and they encourage us to suppose that they have no serious beliefs to start with, especially religious ones. Anselm, however, rarely does this. Almost all of his writings are presented as the work of a committed Christian, and such is the case with the *Proslogion*. This text is conceived as a religious treatise from start to finish. It is even written in the form of a prayer.

Its first chapter sets the tone clearly with a plea for divine assistance. “Come then, Lord my God,” says Anselm, “teach my heart where and how to seek You, where and how to find You.”³ In

language full of allusions to the Bible, Anselm laments the fact that he does not see God but lives as a fallen descendant of Adam, and he begs for God to reveal Himself to him. According to Anselm, we cannot find God if God does not help us to do so. *Proslogion* 1 therefore ends with Anselm stating that his aim in what follows is to understand God from a position of faith.

I do not try, Lord, to attain Your lofty heights, because my understanding is in no way equal to it. But I do desire to understand Your truth a little, that truth that my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand so that I may believe; but I believe so that I may understand. For I believe this also, that “unless I believe, I shall not understand.”⁴

Anselm is here quoting from the prophet Isaiah, so we can understand those, such as Karl Barth (1886–1968), who maintain that the *Proslogion* is not a work of philosophy and should not be approached as such. In *Fides Quaerens Intellectum* (1931) Barth insists that Anselm’s *Proslogion* is nothing but an attempt to articulate what belief in God amounts to on the basis of Christian faith. In particular, says Barth, it is at no point concerned to justify belief in God’s existence at the bar of reason.

For all that he says about the importance of faith, however, Anselm manifestly thinks that some religious beliefs, including the belief that God exists, can be defended in what we may recognize as a philosophical manner. This fact is evident from his *Monologion*, which Anselm offers as a treatise on the existence and essence of God making no appeal to the authority of Scripture. And the *Monologion* and *Proslogion* should be read as complementary works. Anselm wrote the *Proslogion* only because he came to find the *Monologion* to be irritatingly lacking in something to pull its parts together. He describes it as “made up of a connected chain of many arguments” and says:

I began to wonder if perhaps it might be possible to find one single argument that for its proof required no other save itself, and that by itself would suffice to prove that God really exists, that He is the supreme good needing no other and is He whom all things have need of for their being and well being, and also to prove whatever we believe about the Divine Being.⁵

What Anselm describes himself as looking for here he believed he had found when reflecting on the idea that God is “something than which

nothing greater can be thought" (*aliquid quo maius nihil cogitari potest*). This formula appears early in *Proslogion 2*, and it dominates the discussion to the end of the work.

PROSLOGION 2

Anselm begins *Proslogion 2* by invoking the formula just noted. "We believe," he says, "that You [God] are something than which nothing greater can be thought." Since the Bible never explicitly speaks of God as being something than which nothing greater can be thought, one might wonder why Anselm does so. The reason may lie in the fact that his way of referring to God has parallels in non-biblical authors prior to Anselm. St. Augustine, for instance, says that God is something *quo esse aut cogitari melius nihil possit* ("than which nothing better is able to be or be thought").⁶ Then again, Seneca (c. 5 BC–AD 65) asserts that God's "magnitude is that than which nothing greater can be thought."⁷ Wherever Anselm got his formula from, however, it is clear that he does not construe it as taking God to be something than which nothing, *in fact*, is greater. Anselm is saying that nothing could *conceivably* be greater than God, that to claim that something might be greater than God is to assert what is intrinsically absurd. And it is from this basis that he develops his subsequent case.

In Psalms 15 and 53 we read of a "Fool" who "has said in his heart, there is no God." Could the Fool here be right? Anselm's reply is "No." Why so? Because, thinks Anselm, when the Fool speaks of something than which nothing greater can be thought, he can understand the words being uttered. So "the Fool understands what he hears, and what he understands is in his mind, even if he does not understand that it actually exists." It is, says Anselm, "one thing for an object to exist in the mind, and another thing to understand that the object actually exists." I can have something in mind even though there is nothing in reality that corresponds to it. Or, as Anselm, by way of example, puts it: "When a painter plans beforehand what he is going to execute, he has [the picture] in his mind, but he does not yet think that it actually exists because he has not made it." And yet, Anselm reasons, God cannot be nothing but an idea in someone's mind. Given that God is that than which nothing greater can be thought, he must exist not only in the mind (*in intellectu*) but also

in reality (*in re*). "Si enim vel in solo intellectu est potest cogitari esse et in re quod maius est."

There are two possible ways of translating this piece of Latin. To begin with, we could render it along the lines: "For if it is only in the mind it can be thought to be in reality as well, which is greater." If we translate the sentence in this way, Anselm appears to be saying that something than which nothing greater can be thought cannot only be in the mind or understanding, since it is greater to exist in reality than it is to exist only in the mind or understanding. In other words, his argument would seem to be:

1. God is something than which nothing greater can be thought.
2. God exists in the mind since even the Fool can think of (have in mind) something than which nothing greater can be thought.
3. But God cannot just be in the mind since it is greater to be in reality than it is to be only in the mind and since God is something than which nothing greater can be thought.

Yet "Si enim vel in solo intellectu est potest cogitari esse et in re quod maius est" could also be translated "For if it is only in the mind, what is greater can be thought to be in reality."⁸ And if that is what Anselm intended to convey, he is not necessarily invoking a general evaluative contrast between things existing only in the mind and things both in the mind and *in re*. He is not obviously saying that it is always greater to be *in re* than to be only *in intellectu*. Rather, he might only be suggesting (a) that we can think of something that is greater than something which exists only in the mind, and (b) that, on the supposition that God is something than which nothing greater can be thought, God cannot exist only in the mind because something real (*in re*) and greater than it can be thought. In other words, his argument would seem to be:

1. God is something than which nothing greater can be thought.
2. God exists in the mind since even the Fool can think of (have in mind) something than which nothing greater can be thought.
3. But we can think of something which is greater than something existing only in the mind.
4. So something than which nothing greater can be thought cannot only exist in the mind.

Which translation of Anselm should we prefer? It would have been nice if Anselm himself had helped us out here and elaborated on the thought in the sentence now in question. In *Proslogion 2*, however, he does not. He simply draws to a close with an emphatic reiteration of the claim that something existing only in the mind cannot be that than which nothing greater can be thought. "If then," he says,

that than which a greater cannot be thought exists in the mind alone, this same that than which a greater *cannot* be thought is that than which a greater *can* be thought. But this is obviously impossible. Therefore there is absolutely no doubt that something than which a greater cannot be thought exists both in the mind and in reality.

Yet Anselm does seem generally to have believed that being *in re* and greatness somehow go together or imply each other.⁹ So *Proslogion 2* may well be asking us to suppose that God cannot be only in the mind since it is greater to be in reality than to be only in the mind. It is, however, worth noting that, when elaborating on the reasoning of *Proslogion 2* in another work, Anselm does not stress the idea that it is better to be *in re* than to be only *in intellectu*. Instead, he explains how it can be thought that there is something greater than something that is only in the mind.

I am referring here to the text known as *Quid Ad Haec Respondeat Editor Ipsius Libelli (A Reply to the Foregoing by the Author of the Book in Question)* – a response by Anselm to a criticism of his *Proslogion* argument for God's existence coming from Gaunilo, a monk of the Abbey of Marmoutier.¹⁰ Here Anselm argues that something than which nothing greater can be thought (as opposed to something which is only *in intellectu*) "cannot be thought save as being without a beginning" while "whatever can be thought of as existing and does not actually exist can be thought of as having a beginning of existence" so that "'that than which a greater cannot be thought' cannot be thought of as existing and yet not actually exist."¹¹ In his reply to Gaunilo, Anselm also argues: (a) that something than which nothing greater can be thought must exist, whole and entire, at all times and at all places, and (b) that something which might or might not exist is not something than which nothing greater can be thought.¹² We shall later be returning to Anselm's reply to

Gaunilo, and to Gaunilo's reply to Anselm, but, even from what I have just noted, it should be clear that Anselm was to a large extent concerned to distinguish between (a) what is only in the mind and (b) that than which nothing greater can be thought, because he believed that the latter, unlike the former, must be without a beginning, must be whole and entire at all times and places, and must be not able not to exist.

PROSLOGION 3

Yet something can be both in the mind and in reality without being what Anselm took God to be. My cat is such a thing. I can form a concept of it (I can think of something matching its description, as a painter can think about a non-existent work of art). But it also exists in reality. Fond though I am of it, however, I could hardly describe it as divine. Why not? One reason (among many) is that it has not always existed, and one day it will perish. Yet those who believe in God have not traditionally thought of Him as being like my cat in these respects. They have taken Him to be something the existence of which is ultimate, underived, and belonging to him by nature. And Anselm seems to be very much aware of this fact as he proceeds to *Proslogion 3*, for here (anticipating how he will later argue in his reply to Gaunilo) he maintains that something than which nothing greater can be thought has to be something which cannot even be *thought* not to exist.

Some people have held that *Proslogion 3* presents a separate argument for God's existence to be distinguished from what we find in *Proslogion 2*.¹³ In *Proslogion 3*, however, Anselm only seems to be supplementing what he maintains in the previous chapter. There he was concerned to explain why something than which nothing greater can be thought cannot just be in the mind. In *Proslogion 3* he seems intent on adding that something than which nothing greater can be thought is, not just *in re*, but something *in re* that (in addition to being *in re*) cannot possibly fail to exist. In language that suggests that the reasoning of *Proslogion 2* is just being carried a stage further, Anselm begins *Proslogion 3* by saying "And certainly this being so truly exists that it cannot even be thought not to exist."

Anselm seeks to establish this conclusion by means of the following argument:

1. We can think of something existing which cannot be thought not to exist.
2. Such a thing would be greater than something which can be thought not to exist.
3. So something than which nothing greater can be thought cannot be something which can be thought not to exist.
4. So something than which nothing greater can be thought cannot be thought not to exist.

Or, in Anselm's words:

For something can be thought to exist that cannot be thought not to exist, and this is greater than that which can be thought not to exist. Hence, if that than which a greater cannot be thought can be thought not to exist, then that than which a greater cannot be thought is not the same as that than which a greater cannot be thought, which is absurd. Something than which a greater cannot be thought exists so truly then, that it cannot be even thought not to exist.

ANSELM AND GAUNILO

Many have thought that the arguments of *Proslogion* 2 and 3 are bad ones. Gaunilo is a case in point. According to him, Anselm is wrong, because (a) we should not think of God as being in the mind or understanding, and (b) Anselm's case for God's existence entails unbelievable consequences.

Gaunilo challenges the claim that that than which nothing greater can be thought is in the understanding by insisting on the incomprehensibility of something than which nothing greater can be thought. His basic point is: we do not understand what God (or that than which nothing greater can be thought) is, so God (or that than which nothing greater can be thought) is not in the understanding. He writes:

I can so little think of or entertain in my mind this being (that which is greater than all those others that are able to be thought of, and which it is said [i.e. by Anselm] can be none other than God Himself) in terms of an object known to me either by species or genus, as I can think of God Himself . . . For neither do I know the reality itself, nor can I form an idea from some other things like it since, as you [i.e. Anselm] say yourself, it is such that nothing could be like it.¹⁴

According to Gaunilo, "Something than which nothing greater can be thought" is nothing but "a verbal formula," a string of words which fails to furnish the basis of a proof of God's existence.

Gaunilo's second main criticism of Anselm comes in the following (much quoted) passage:

They say that there is in the ocean somewhere an island which, because of the difficulty (or rather the impossibility) of finding that which does not exist, some have called the "Lost Island." And the story goes that it is blessed with all manner of priceless riches and delights in abundance, much more even than the Happy Isles, and having no owner or inhabitant, it is superior everywhere in abundance of riches to all those islands that men inhabit. Now, if anyone tell me that it is like this, I shall easily understand what is said, since nothing is difficult about it. But if he should then go on to say, as though it were a logical consequence of this: You cannot any more doubt that this island that is more excellent than all other lands exists somewhere in reality than you can doubt that it is in your mind; and since it is more excellent to exist not only in the mind alone but also in reality, therefore that it must needs be that it exists. For if it did not exist, any other land existing in reality would be more excellent than it, and so this island, already thought by you to be more excellent than others, will not be more excellent. If, I say, someone wishes thus to persuade me that this island really exists beyond all doubt, I should either think that he was joking, or I should find it hard to decide which of us I ought to judge the bigger fool.¹⁵

Here Gaunilo seems to be saying (a) that thinking akin to Anselm's would successfully prove the existence of things we cannot seriously believe in, and (b) that something must therefore be wrong with Anselm's reasoning.

Is Gaunilo right in his critique of Anselm? A notable feature of it is its frequent failure to focus on Anselm's key formula: "that than which nothing greater can be thought." Sometimes Gaunilo more or less quotes this expression exactly. Mostly, however, he construes Anselm as arguing for the existence of something which is, *in fact*, greater than all other things. Hence, for example, and early in his reply, he represents Anselm as holding that, if God exists only in the mind, "that which is greater than everything would be less than some thing and would not be greater than everything."¹⁶ This is also how Gaunilo seems to be understanding Anselm as he offers his lost island argument, for here he denies that there has to be a best island just because we can conceive of such a thing.

But Anselm is not seeking to prove the existence of a *best* anything. As he says in response to Gaunilo:

You often reiterate that I say that that which is greater than everything exists in the mind, and that if it is in the mind, it exists also in reality. However, nowhere in all that I have said will you find such an argument. For “that which is greater than everything” and “that than which a greater cannot be thought” are not equivalent for the purpose of proving the existence of the thing spoken of.¹⁷

That which is greater than everything, Anselm adds, can be thought of as possibly not existing, while that than which a greater cannot be thought cannot be thought of as possibly not existing. And Anselm is clearly right in at least one respect here: for “that which is greater than everything” is certainly not equivalent to “that than which a greater cannot be thought.” Someone can believe that X is the greatest existing thing without needing to describe it as “that than which a greater cannot be thought.” And that which is, *in fact*, greatest *could* be very imperfect indeed.

Yet, even supposing that Gaunilo’s island is really not analogous to what Anselm means by “something than which nothing greater can be conceived,” might he not still reasonably call on us to accept his first line of criticism of Anselm? Might he not ask us to wonder whether “that than which a greater cannot be thought” signifies anything intelligible? Might he not fairly suggest that we cannot really conceive of such a thing, that it cannot truly be said to be “in the understanding”?

Well, perhaps he can. For *could* there be something than which nothing greater *could* be thought? Do we really know that there *could* be such a thing? Maybe we do. But how? Anselm does not tell us. He assumes that as soon as we hear the phrase “that than which a greater cannot be thought,” we should understand it as a label signifying a possibly existing being. But should we? Might there not, for example, be no limit to conceivable greatness? Let us suppose that we are thinking of X and that we cannot, as it happens, think of anything greater than X. Does it follow that X is something than which nothing greater can be thought? Obviously not. For, maybe, somewhere or sometime, someone might be able to think of something greater than X. Let us call this new something Y. Does it follow that Y is something than which nothing greater can be thought?

Obviously not. For, maybe, somewhere or sometime, someone might be able to think of something greater than Y. And how do we know that this process of being able to think of something greater cannot proceed *ad infinitum*? Anselm, at any rate, does not show that it cannot.

In that case, however, he has not proved that something than which nothing greater can be thought is in the mind. In reply to Gaunilo he insists that it is because

- (a) Gaunilo believes in God, so must therefore have in mind the notion of something than which nothing greater can be thought;
- (b) We can understand the notion of there being something which lacks a beginning, which cannot not exist, which exists whole and entire at all times and places.¹⁸

Anselm's "something than which a greater cannot be thought" formula is not, however, forced on Gaunilo simply by his subscription to belief in God's existence. It is not even forced on him by his allegiance to Christianity. Many orthodox Christians have believed in God without claiming that God is "something than which a greater cannot be thought." Furthermore, even if " _ lacks a beginning, cannot not exist, and exists whole and entire at all times and places" is truly predicable of something, it does not follow that the thing in question is "something than which nothing greater can be thought." We might wonder whether that formula signifies anything thinkable even though we might believe that there is something which lacks a beginning, cannot not exist, and exists whole and entire at all times and places. In this sense, we might agree with Gaunilo's claim that God is not "in the mind."

We might also agree with it for another reason. As we have seen, part of Gaunilo's case against Anselm rests on the suggestion that God cannot be thought since, even if he exists, he belongs to no genus or species. Without denying God's existence, Gaunilo here seems to be saying (a) that he cannot form a concept of God as he can of other things, (b) that his inability to do so means that God does not exist in the mind (his mind, anyway), and (c) that Anselm is therefore wrong to say that the existence of God can be proved just from an understanding of what God is. And Gaunilo is making a reasonable point here if, indeed, God, or that than which nothing greater can be thought, is taken to belong to no known genus or species, and if

one cannot form a concept of what does not belong to any genus or species.

Yet “something than which nothing greater can be thought” is a formula we can work with negatively, so to speak, and with an eye on the notion of something that could be better. Though we might find our minds going blank when faced by the phrase “something than which nothing greater can be thought,” we can surely make sense of the idea that X is not something than which nothing greater can be thought if we can think of something greater than X. We can surely say with some confidence that, for example, a rabid dog is not something than which nothing greater can be thought, for we can think of something greater than a rabid dog. And with this kind of example in mind Anselm might legitimately defend himself against the claim that “something than which nothing greater can be thought” cannot be legitimately employed in a case for God’s existence *in re*. He might argue like this:

1. God is something than which nothing greater can be thought.
2. If we can think of something greater than X, then X is not God.
3. We can think of something greater than anything which exists only *in intellectu*.
4. So something existing only *in intellectu* cannot be God.
5. So God does not only exist *in intellectu*.

And he might add:

6. God is something than which nothing greater can be thought.
7. We can think of something which can fail to exist.
8. Something which can fail to exist is less great than something which cannot fail to exist.
9. So something which can fail to exist cannot be God.
10. So God is not something which can fail to exist.

And this might be all that Anselm is arguing in *Proslogion* 2 and 3. We need not take him to be claiming that “something than which nothing greater can be thought” can be proved to be a coherent formula or a description of something which could possibly exist. All we need to take him to be claiming is that something which is only *in intellectu*, and which might possibly fail to exist, is not something than which a greater cannot be thought. And that claim, perhaps, is hardly absurd. After all, is it not plausible to suggest that something

that exists *in re* by nature has the edge over something which is nothing but a figment of someone's imagination?

THE LOGIC OF ANSELM'S REASONING

Validity

Anselm's *Proslogion* 2 argument seems to be formally valid. It begins with something like a definition: "God" is "something than which nothing greater can be thought," and it goes on to assert that something than which nothing greater can be thought is in the understanding. Then it introduces the suggestion that something than which nothing greater can be thought is not *in re* (the position of the "Fool"). Anselm's clear objective is to show that this suggestion cannot be true (his argument is what is known as a *reductio ad absurdum*: it aims to prove that, given certain premises, a particular assertion leads to contradiction and is, therefore, false). And (regardless of how we translate "si enim vel in solo intellectu est potest cogitari esse et in re quod maius est") Anselm moves to his conclusion by arguing:

- a. If something is *in intellectu* but not *in re*, something greater than it can be thought.
- b. If something than which nothing greater can be thought is *in intellectu* but not also *in re*, then something greater than it *can* be thought (from [a]).
- c. Something than which nothing greater can be thought is in the understanding but not also in reality.
- d. Something greater than something than which nothing greater can be thought can be thought (contradictory conclusion from [c]).

Anselm's reasoning here seems logically impeccable: given his premises, his conclusion appears inescapable. "Something greater than something than which nothing greater can be thought can be thought" is clearly self-contradictory. Given Anselm's reasoning, therefore, we ought to conclude that it is, indeed, absurd to say that something than which nothing greater cannot be thought does not exist *in re*. We may, of course, reject this reasoning by rejecting some of its premises. But those premises indeed seem to entail that it is

absurd to deny that something than which nothing greater can be thought exists *in re*.

Premises

Are Anselm's premises true, however?

With respect to the first one, could it be that we have no reason to think of God as something than which nothing greater can be thought? Thomas Aquinas (1224/6–1274) rightly notes that not everyone has taken the word "god" (*deus*) to signify "something than which nothing greater can be thought."¹⁹ Yet Anselm is surely entitled to stipulate what he means by "God" for the purposes of an argument. Furthermore, insofar as he is seeking to engage with what we might call the Judeo-Christian concept of God, Anselm's "something than which nothing greater can be thought" expression seems not inappropriate. As I have noted, it echoes the way in which Augustine speaks of God. In addition, it is hard to conceive of anyone in the Judeo-Christian tradition being prepared to say "There might, after all, be something greater than God." The idea that God is unsurpassably great seems to be part and parcel of Judeo-Christian theism, and to say that God is something than which nothing greater can be thought seems to be a succinct way of capturing what those in the Judeo-Christian tradition mean by "God." As Norman Malcolm puts it: "God is usually conceived of as an *unlimited* being. He is conceived of as a being who *could not* be limited, that is, as an absolutely unlimited being. This is no less than to conceive of Him as *something a greater than which cannot be conceived*."²⁰

With respect to Anselm's second premise, could it be that "something than which nothing greater can be thought" does not describe anything possible? As I have said, one might think that it does not (as some have suggested, one might think that it may be compared with expressions like "greatest prime number"). As I have also said, however, one can entertain the thought of something than which nothing greater can be thought so as intelligibly to conclude that something (e.g. a rabid dog) is not something than which nothing greater can be thought. The expression "something than which nothing greater can be thought" is hardly unintelligible. If that is so, however, we might, as Anselm does, ask whether there is something than which nothing

greater can be thought *in re*. We might also ask whether more can be said of something than which nothing greater can be thought other than that it exists *in re*.

Some would say that Anselm needs to demonstrate that there is no intrinsic absurdity in the notion of something than which nothing greater can be thought. But why should he feel the need to do so? And how could he succeed in doing so? People might claim that there are arguments to show that such and such an expression signifies nothing that could possibly exist, and politeness would then require us to examine their arguments. But what can one do to demonstrate in the abstract that a particular form of words signifies the concept of something possible (or does not express an impossibility)? By various arguments one might seek to demonstrate that there could be something rightly referred to by the form of words in question.²¹ Such arguments, however, will inevitably depend on what those who offer them take, without argument, to be possible.

Yet what of the premise "If something is *in intellectu* but not *in re*, something greater than it can be thought"? Many would reject it because, they would argue, it has to mean that existence *in re* is a perfection and, therefore, a property or characteristic of things, which it is not. And it certainly seems odd to speak of existence as a perfection, if only because "*_ exists*" does not specify a way in which that of which it is predicated differs from anything. When we say that something has a perfection, we generally seem to be noting some particular way in which it differs from or resembles a limited number of other things. But "*_ exists*" cannot serve to distinguish one thing from another since, so to speak, everything exists.

Anselm's argument, however, does not call on us to think of existing as a particular perfection. It asks us to accept (a) that thinking of something than which nothing greater can be thought is not the same as thinking of something than which a greater can be thought, and (b) that something only *in intellectu* cannot be thought of as something than which nothing greater can be thought. But (a) and (b) here are plausible claims. (a) is clearly self-evident. We would contradict ourselves by denying it. And (b) seems true since we surely can think of something greater than something which has nothing but the status of existing as an idea in someone's mind. As Anselm himself says, we can think of something which cannot fail to exist. And such a thing, so one might plausibly suggest, is greater than something

which exists only as an idea in someone's mind (and which, considered as such, can certainly fail to exist). Following Kant's discussion of what he called the "ontological proof," philosophers have often attacked the *Proslogion* while echoing Kant's assertion that "**Being** is obviously not a real predicate."²² And perhaps there is much to be said for this assertion, for it could be construed as suggesting that, as Gottlob Frege (1848–1925) put it, "*_ exists*" is not a first-level predicate (i.e. a predicate which ascribes a distinguishing property to an object or individual – by contrast, for example, with "*_ is made of plastic*" or "*_ is bald*"). And there are well-known arguments in favor of this suggestion.²³ In the *Proslogion*, however, Anselm does not seem to be arguing that "*_ exists*" is or is not a first-level predicate. Rather, he seems to be contrasting objects of thought and saying that one of them cannot be sensibly described as something than which nothing greater can be thought – the one in question being, of course, something which exists only in the mind (like, to use his example, the painting conceived by an artist thinking of what he might proceed to create). Anselm's main idea seems to be that of two thought objects, the first being something than which nothing greater can be thought, and the second being something which is only *in intellectu*, the first is greater than the second.

Thinking of God

Yet from this idea it does not follow that the Fool is wrong to deny that God is *in re* just because he is prepared to accept someone's insistence that the word "God" means "something than which nothing greater can be thought." The Fool could always say: "I am happy to allow it to be stipulated that 'God' means 'something than which nothing greater can be thought.' But on that basis alone I do not have to agree that there really is something (God) than which nothing greater can be thought."

In other words, the Fool might rightly insist that one cannot establish the existence of something *in re* on the basis of a stipulative definition. Such definitions do not, by themselves, tell us anything when it comes to what really exists. For the most part, we produce definitions of what we take to be really existing things, and we do so on the basis of what we believe ourselves to know about them. If someone asks us what, for example, an elephant is, we would probably seek

to define the word "elephant" while relying on the reports of zoologists. Mere definitions of names, however, do not, by themselves, mean that there is anything corresponding to them.

So we might side with Anselm's fool if we start by supposing that "a being than which nothing greater can be conceived and which cannot be conceived not to exist" is, so to speak, a phrase to be read within quotation marks. In other words, the Fool could always say that "a being than which nothing greater can be conceived and which cannot be conceived not to exist" is just an expression which some people (though not he) use when talking (perhaps mistakenly) of what they take to be something.

Children refer to Santa Claus, and we can buy into their talk so as to agree, for example, that it is silly, for anyone who is seriously thinking about Santa, to deny that he delivers presents on December 25. But we would not thereby be committed to concluding that someone called Santa Claus delivers presents on December 25, since we do not seriously think of anything or anybody as being Santa Claus. By the same token, so the Fool might reason, buying into the talk of believers, we might say that what believers think of as a being than which nothing greater can be thought, and which cannot be thought not to exist, certainly has to be asserted to exist by anybody seriously thinking of this object as such. But this does not mean that we are, on pain of self-contradiction, committed to thinking of anything being something than which nothing greater can be thought and which cannot be thought not to exist. Or, as Aquinas writes:

Even if the meaning of the word "God" were generally recognized to be "that than which nothing greater can be thought," nobody accepting this definition would thereby be forced to think of God as existing in the real world rather than existing as thought about (*in apprehensione intellectus*). If one does not grant that there is something than which no greater can be thought, it cannot be proved that God [sc. as so defined] really exists. And those who hold that God does not exist do not grant that there is something than which no greater can be thought.²⁴

Suppose, however, that we *are* prepared to think seriously of something than which nothing greater can be thought. In doing so, we would not have to suppose that there *is* any such thing in reality, for we can seriously think of what does not exist – as a painter can

think of a painting yet to be painted. All we would have to do is to entertain the thought of something than which nothing greater can be thought without presupposing either its nonexistence or its real existence. All we would have to do is to take it to be the thought of something possible, something the nature of which we might further reflect on. What then?

Well, if we are so prepared to think seriously of something than which nothing greater can be thought, it seems that we are committed to acknowledging an absurdity in the claim that it is only in the mind and able not to exist. At any rate, we are so committed if Anselm is right to say that we can think of something greater than what is only in the mind and able not to exist. Or, to put the point in another way, Anselm's argument is effective against us if we are prepared to refer to that than which nothing greater can be thought "constitutively" as opposed to "parasitically."²⁵

Our basic way of referring is constitutive. That is to say, when we refer to or think of things, we commonly do so without distancing ourselves from what other people think or believe. If I say "Let's think about London," we would normally go on to do so without worrying whether or not "London" is the name of a place in Britain, or a name used only in works of fiction or by deluded people who take it to be the name of a real city.

Yet suppose I say "Let's think about ghosts." We can do so since we can refer to ghosts *parasitically*. That is to say, we can latch on to what has been said about ghosts and we can think about them only on the basis of that. We can think about ghosts without being committed to anything other than a claim to understand what has been said or believed about them whether seriously (by people we may think of as deluded) or in works of fiction (by people whose writings we admire and find entertaining).

Now think about God considered as something than which nothing greater can be thought. You could think of God parasitically here. You could take "God" to be a word which some people understand as meaning "something than which nothing greater can be thought." And though you might come to agree that "God, considered as something than which nothing greater can be thought, is only in the mind and might fail to exist" is somehow contradictory, you would not be committed to supposing that there actually is a God who is (a) something than which nothing greater can be thought, (b) something

which is not only in the mind, and (c) something which cannot possibly not exist. But you *would* be so committed if you are prepared constitutively to think about something than which nothing greater can be thought, and if you are prepared to accept the premises Anselm employs in *Proslogion* 2 and 3, and if you take his reasoning there to be formally valid.

If we constitutively think of something than which nothing greater can be thought, then we ought to concede that we cannot be (seriously) thinking of something which is nothing but an idea in the mind (like the thought of an unpainted painting). And if we constitutively think of something than which nothing greater can be thought, and if "not being able not to exist" signifies a possible perfection or great-making quality, we ought to concede that we cannot be (seriously) thinking of something which might be able not to exist. Someone might say that this claim only amounts to the suggestion that *if* God exists then He necessarily exists. Yet how are we to understand the "*if*" here? It seems to imply that it is possible that God does not exist. It also seems to imply that we might consistently assert that "If God exists, and it is possible that He does not, then He necessarily exists." But is this last assertion not self-contradictory?

Anselm and thinking of God

Is Anselm arguing along the lines that I have just put forward? Does he view himself as starting from the possibility of constitutively referring to something than which nothing greater can be thought? One might think that he does not since this would leave him assuming to begin with what he claims to be out to prove in *Proslogion* 2 and 3 (i.e. that God is *in re* and cannot be thought not to exist). Anselm, however, is perfectly aware that one can think seriously of something *without asserting or presupposing that it really exists*. One might reply to this point by suggesting that all Anselm is arguing is that a definition of God implies God's real existence. Yet Anselm does not say anything, either in the *Proslogion*, or in the reply to Gaunilo, to indicate that he is reasoning as simply as this. What he does say, however, clearly shows that he thought it absurd seriously to think of something than which nothing greater can be thought while also insisting that this is something which might not exist *in re* and which might possibly not exist.

So perhaps we might well read Anselm along the lines that I indicate above. An additional reason for doing so is that Anselm is unlikely to be taking his "Fool" to be referring parasitically to God when he supposes him to have in mind something than which nothing greater can be thought. It is implausible to suppose that Anselm (or, for that matter, the author of Psalms 15 and 53) ever encountered an atheist of the sort who would say "Yes, I know what people mean by the word 'God,' but though I perfectly understand their way of talking, I cannot take it any more seriously than I take the talk of children when they refer to Santa Claus." Atheists like this just did not belong to Anselm's world (or to the world of the authors of the Psalms), so we should therefore not suppose him to be arguing with them in the *Proslogion*. That work (offered, note, as a sequel to the *Monologion*) clearly has in mind an audience composed of people whom Anselm would have expected to entertain the notion of something than which nothing greater can be thought constitutively rather than parasitically.

In this connection it is, perhaps, worth noting the tone which Anselm sets at the start of his reply to Gaunilo. He writes: "Since it is not the Fool, against whom I spoke in my text, who takes me up, but one who, though speaking on the Fool's behalf, is an orthodox Christian and no fool, it will suffice if I reply to the Christian."²⁶ This remark strongly suggests that Anselm saw his *Proslogion* 2 and 3 line of reasoning as directed to someone able and willing to think constitutively of God as something than which nothing greater can be thought. It suggests that Anselm is not writing for people who can only have, or are only willing to have, a concept of God in the way that we (most of us, anyway) have a concept of wizards or Santa Claus. It suggests that Anselm, though *without explicitly assuming that God exists*, is chiefly concerned to argue that it is not foolish to believe that there is a God *in re*. It suggests that he is out to show that thinking seriously (as opposed to parasitically) of God cannot be intellectually reconciled with holding that God might not exist.

Notice, however, that Anselm's remark about Gaunilo being an orthodox Christian need not, taken in context, be read as suggesting that Anselm is merely preaching to the choir, that he is merely explaining what believers mean by "God" (as, for example, Barth said that he is). Rather, it suggests that anyone (believer or not) who can seriously think of something than which nothing greater can

be thought (anyone who can entertain this as a legitimate object of thought, and anyone who is prepared to accept what this object of thought implies) cannot reasonably conclude that God is but an idea in people's minds. People sometimes ask whether Anselm in *Proslogion* 2 and 3 (taken together with his reply to Gaunilo) is (a) trying to take those who believe in God into a deeper understanding of what God is, or (b) trying to establish the existence of God without presupposing that God exists. The answer, perhaps, is that he is seeking to do both of these things. There is no reason why one cannot attempt to enrich the understanding of those who believe in God without also, and simultaneously, aiming to show that God exists (*in re* and not only *in intellectu*) without presupposing that there is any God at all. Given the "faith seeking understanding" bell that he rings in *Proslogion* 1, Anselm, in *Proslogion* 2 and 3 (and in his reply to Gaunilo) is clearly talking to believers. Taken as a whole, however, his line of thinking concerning that than which nothing greater can be thought does not seem bluntly to presuppose that there is a God. Rather, it seems to be conceived of by Anselm as claiming that, without presupposing the existence of God, and given certain premises, it would be absurd for someone to say that there is no God.

CONCLUSION

If that is how Anselm thinks of his *Proslogion* 2 and 3 arguments (and allowing for his reply to Gaunilo) then he defends himself well. His *reductio* argument seems valid, and his premises are hardly incredible. He has clearly not shown that *everyone* has to conclude that God is *in re* and cannot be thought not to exist (for some people may insist on thinking only parasitically of God as something than which nothing greater can be thought). Be that as it may, however, Anselm has plausibly explained how we cannot seriously think of God as something than which nothing greater can be thought without also being committed to the conclusion that God is *in re* and that God cannot possibly not exist. And, since he does so *without presupposing that there really is a God*, one might well take him to have defended belief in God's existence in a significant way. People have offered many arguments for God's existence. Some, for instance, have claimed that God exists on causal grounds (as Anselm himself does in the *Monologion*). But there are more ways than one to skin a

cat, and Anselm's *Proslogion* way is impressive. That, presumably, is why it has generated attention for several hundred years and is still being studied and discussed.

NOTES

1. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* A590/B618.
2. For an account and discussion of the ontological argument from Anselm to the present, see Graham Oppy, *Ontological Arguments and Belief in God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). For some primary texts, see Alvin Plantinga (ed.), *The Ontological Argument from St. Anselm to Contemporary Philosophers* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965). Note that what Kant called "the ontological argument" is something he found in the writings of Descartes. We have no reason to believe that Kant ever read Anselm.
3. All my quotations from the *Proslogion* come from *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works* (hereafter *Major Works*), edited with an introduction by Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).
4. *Major Works*, 87.
5. *Major Works*, 82.
6. Augustine, *De Moribus Manichaeorum*, 2, 11.
7. *L. Annaei Senecae Naturalium Questionum libri viii* (ed. Alfred Gercke, Stuttgart, 1907).
8. This point is stressed by G. E. M. Anscombe in "Why Anselm's Proof in the *Proslogion* Is Not an Ontological Argument," *Thoreau Quarterly* 17 (1985).
9. See *De Casu Diab.* 1 where Anselm (taking "being" to mean "being *in re*") says: "Just as from the highest good only good comes, so from the highest being only being comes, and all being comes from the highest being. Since the highest good is the highest being, it follows that every good is being and every being is good" (*Major Works*, 195–96). See also *Mon.* 31 and *Prosl.* 3, where Anselm equates truly existing with existing greatly.
10. We know nothing of Gaunilo other than that he was a monk of Marmoutier (located close to the modern day French city of Strassbourg). His claim to fame derives from the fact that Anselm directed that Gaunilo's reply to Anselm, and Anselm's reply to Gaunilo, should always be appended to published copies of the *Proslogion*. Readers of Anselm might usefully reflect on why he did this. A plausible theory is that he took his reply to Gaunilo to be a serious explanation of what he understood himself to be arguing in *Proslogion* 2 and 3.

11. *Major Works*, 111–12
12. *Major Works*, 112–13; 116–17; 121.
13. See Norman Malcolm, “Anselm’s Ontological Arguments,” *Philosophical Review* 69 (1960). Here Malcolm claims to find two distinct arguments for God’s existence as between *Prosl.* 2 and 3. Malcolm, however, does concede that there is no evidence that Anselm thought of himself as offering two different proofs in these chapters (p. 45).
14. *Major Works*, 161. For a similar critique of Anselm’s line of reasoning, see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* 1, 11 and *Summa Theologiae* 1a, 2, 1.
15. *Major Works*, 109.
16. *Major Works*, 105.
17. *Major Works*, 116.
18. *Major Works*, 111–13.
19. See *Summa Contra Gentiles* 1, 10–11 and *Summa Theologiae* 1a, 2, 1.
20. Malcolm, “Anselm’s Ontological Arguments,” 47.
21. Richard Swinburne attempts to do this with respect to the concept of God; see *The Coherence of Theism* (revised edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).
22. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* A598/B626 f.
23. For a full-scale defence of it, see C. J. F. Williams, *What Is Existence?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).
24. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1a, 2, 1.
25. For this distinction, see Gyula Klima, “Saint Anselm’s Proof: A Problem of Reference, Intentional Identity and Mutual Understanding,” in G. Holmström-Hintikka (ed.), *Medieval Philosophy and Modern Times* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2000). I am greatly indebted to Professor Klima for personal discussions of the distinction and its bearing on the reasoning of the *Proslogion*.
26. *Major Works*, 111.