

# **Anselm's Elusive Argument: Ian Logan Reading the *Proslogion*<sup>1</sup>**

**Bernd Goebel  
Institute of Philosophy, Fulda Theology Faculty**

*In his recent book Reading Anselm's Proslogion, Ian Logan develops an original interpretation of what Anselm's "argument" consists in and of what it is worth. I discuss Logan's reading of the Proslogion (P) and present my own ideas on the subject matter. Thus, I question Logan's understanding of Anselm's claim that God 'cannot be thought not to exist', and argue that in P3, Anselm seeks to establish that it is necessary (essential) for God to have logically necessary existence, i.e. to exist in every possible world. I also put forward views different from Logan's of the relationship between the reasoning in the second and that in the third chapter of P, and of the relation of Anselm's ontological argument(s) to its best known modern counterpart, that of Descartes. I make a different proposal as to the nature of the 'single argument' mentioned by Anselm in the preface of P and, consequently, as to the overall plot of Anselm's work. Finally, I try to adduce further evidence for Logan's claim that Anselm does not say anything incoherent when, in P15, he proves that God as 'something a greater than which cannot be thought' is also 'something greater than can be thought'.*

Anselm of Canterbury's *Proslogion* (= P) has been intriguing philosophers and theologians from the Middle Ages on for its proof of the (necessary) existence of God; but even if the chapters containing Anselm's version—or versions—of the so-called ontological argument, by some ill fortune, had been lost, the *Proslogion* would still number among the most fascinating medieval texts we know. It has been subjected to extraordinarily divergent interpretations. While one may doubt whether it has as yet been fully understood, it is at least safe to say that the *Proslogion* is one of the works in the history of thought that must have most often and most grossly been misread.

This disquieting certitude is, precisely, the starting-point of Ian Logan's new look at the *Proslogion* (including the critique traditionally ascribed to Gaunilo of Marmoutiers, with Anselm's response): "That Anselm has been consistently misunderstood and misrepresented is a central thesis of this book." (1) The remedy Logan offers is a return to the true Anselm—that is to say to the (best available) text of the *Proslogion*; hence the title of his book. He thereby hopes to establish "what he was trying to say and understand how he was trying to say it" (ibid). The best available text, according to Logan, is not F.S. Schmitt's critical edition, as it has almost unexceptionally been used in modern scholarship. Rather, it is the text contained in Ms Bodley 271, a manuscript from Canterbury that in the author's view represents the earliest collection of Anselm's complete works and was, perhaps, supervised by Saint Anselm himself at the end of his life.<sup>2</sup> This unusual choice of text does not, however, amount to very much (apart from copyright questions), since—the author hastens to say—his preferred text is almost identical to the one produced by Schmitt.

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<sup>1</sup> Ian Logan, *Reading Anselm's Proslogion. The History of Anselm's Argument and its Significance Today*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2009, 220 p., ISBN 978-0-7546-6123-8. Unspecified page numbers refer to this study.

<sup>2</sup> See I. Logan, "Ms Bodley 271: Establishing the Anselmian Canon?", in: *The Saint Anselm Journal* 2 (2004), 67–80.

Although various English translations of the *Proslogion* are around, none is to Logan's liking.<sup>3</sup> That is why, in the third and by far longest chapter of the book, he not only provides the text contained in Ms Bodley 271 (indicating even its abbreviations), but also a new translation of the *Proslogion* and the debate with Gaunilo. Three other chapters are mainly, though not exclusively, historically oriented. The second chapter, entitled "The Pre-text: the dialectical origins of Anselm's argument", explores the sources and the sixth and seventh chapter the medieval and modern reception of Anselm's "argument"; the second chapter also includes a section on Anselm's account of the relationship between faith and reason. The fifth chapter is an investigation into the nature of this argument. It also contains an overall interpretation of Anselm's *Responsio* (= *R*), while the fourth chapter takes the form of a commentary *ad litteram* on the *Proslogion* itself. Chapter eight deals with contemporary interpretations of Anselm's argument; for the most part, it is a meta-critique of recent criticism concerning his ontological argument. The first chapter is a short introduction. Logan concludes his study with some brief reflections on the philosophical significance of Anselm's argument.

I will proceed as follows. The first section casts a quick look at Logan's exploration of the sources and reception of the *Proslogion* and a somewhat closer look at his account of how Anselm conceives of the relationship between faith and reason (I). I will then discuss Logan's defence of what he takes to be Anselm's ontological argument<sup>4</sup> as well as his recurrent claim that Anselm's ontological argument makes use of a "performative contradiction". I will argue that his defence incorporates some important insights, whereas there is really no such thing as a "performative" contradiction involved in the ontological argument (II). In a third section, I will criticize what one may call Logan's "Anselmian Fundamentalism" —that is, his refusal to reformulate Anselm's argument in modern or contemporary language. This will turn out to be an attitude which, unsurprisingly, he is unable to keep up himself as some few examples will prove (III). I will then try to show that this very method of his debars him from an even remotely adequate understanding of Anselm's claim in *P3* that God cannot be thought not to exist. I will argue that in *P3*, Anselm seeks to establish that it is necessary (i.e. essential) for God to have logically necessary existence, i.e. to exist in every possible world (IV). These shortcomings also affect Logan's view of the relationship between the reasoning in the second and that in the third chapter of the *Proslogion*, and the relation of Anselm's ontological argument to its best known early modern counterpart, that of Descartes (V). The sixth section will examine and, indeed, question Logan's account of what the *unum argumentum* mentioned by Anselm in the preface of the *Proslogion* consists in. I will make a different proposal as to the nature of the 'single argument' and the overall plot of the *Proslogion* (VI). Finally, I will try to adduce further evidence for Logan's claim that Anselm does not say anything incoherent when, in *P15*, he proves that God as 'something a greater than which cannot be thought' is also 'something greater than can be thought' (VII). This essay is principally a review of Ian Logan's book. At times, however, I use it as a pretext to put forward my own ideas on the subject matter.

<sup>3</sup> See I. Logan, "Whoever understands this: on translating the *Proslogion*", in: *New Blackfriars* 89 (2008), 560–574.

<sup>4</sup> Logan himself never uses the modern expression "ontological argument" to refer to Anselm's *Proslogion* proof (or proofs) that God (necessarily) exists. This term may indeed be infelicitous. Yet its use has become so much a matter of course that it can almost be regarded as a proper name. For Logan's claim that this proof is not all there is to Anselm's "*Proslogion* "argument", see part V.

## I.

A notorious debate in modern scholarship has focussed on the question as to which sources were decisive for the make-up of Anselm's theology—whether Augustine's philosophical theology or the translations and commentaries pertaining to the Liberal Arts, especially to the science of logic. Here, Logan emphasizes the “importance of dialectic in Anselm's thought, particularly as it is developed in the work of Boethius” (7). Yet he does not deny the overriding influence of Augustine: “It was this Boethian/Aristotelian outlook that coloured Anselm's Augustinianism” (ibid). And Logan does not go so far as some who have refused to speak of philosophy in Anselm except for his works chiefly concerned with problems from the Liberal Arts as the *De grammatico* or the *Logical Fragments*.<sup>5</sup> In the *Proslogion*, the author shows, the influence of dialectic mainly operates on the methodical level. In particular, Anselm makes extensive use of Cicero's and Boethius's theory of argument. This background has to be taken into consideration when it comes to tackle a real *Crux interpretum* with regard to the *Proslogion*: to determine what exactly Anselm referred to with his famous phrase *unum argumentum* (see below, section VI).

On the other hand, Logan stresses Anselm's Augustinianism when it comes to the problem of how to relate faith and reason. In his seminal article on faith and understanding in Augustine, Norman Kretzmann has pointed out that Augustine's philosophical theology aims at supplanting propositional faith by propositional understanding;<sup>6</sup> still, this does not affect the necessity of existential faith—or the “way of faith”, as Logan puts it. The same is true of Anselm's project of *fides quaerens intellectum*. Here, I think, Logan is right. But he goes on to assign a very strong role to faith in Augustine when he interprets him as holding that it is “impossible to attain understanding without faith's acceptance of the authority of scripture and the church” (23); and he makes it sound as if Anselm accepted this principle, too. Now, it is questionable whether Augustine really meant to say such a thing. When Augustine calls faith the “ladder of understanding” in *Sermo CXXVI*, quoted by Logan, he need not be taken to have held this principle, nor does Anselm when he recalls this Augustinian phrase in his *De incarnatione verbi*. For this principle is very hard to reconcile with Anselm's famous claim in the first chapter of his *Monologion* that “someone who, as a result of not hearing or not believing, is ignorant” of God and the things Christians believe about God and his creatures, can “in great part persuade himself of these matters by reason alone, if he is of even average intelligence”. (The *Monologion* and *Proslogion* are designed as companion pieces, so that a closer look at the *Monologion* would doubtlessly have been to the advantage of Logan's book.)<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Anselm's undeniable preference for the point of view of the committed believer ought to be understood quite otherwise. It seems to reflect his conviction that while every rational being may in principle come to see the truth of the main tenets of the Christian religion, the volitional and emotional constitution of an unbeliever will hinder him

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. J. Marenbon, *Early Medieval Philosophy: An Introduction*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983, 95–98, 104, who takes Anselm to be “a rational, speculative theologian” rather than a philosopher of religion. Unless we want to say that the Neo-Platonists (and, indeed, Plato himself if we take into account his unwritten doctrine) were not philosophers, there is in my eyes very little to recommend this view.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. N. Kretzmann, “Faith Seeks, Understanding Finds: Augustine's Charter for Christian Philosophy”, in: T. Flint (ed.), *Christian Philosophy*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990, 1–36.

<sup>7</sup> See T. Holopainen, “The *Proslogion* in Relation to the *Monologion*”, in: *The Heythrop Journal* 50 (2009), 590–602.

to such a degree that very often—or even as a rule—he or she is practically quite unable to get there. This is not to say that it is easy for the committed believer to get there—quite apart from the intellectual challenges involved. Even a professed Christian like Boso in Anselm’s dialogue *Cur deus homo* who is eager to understand his faith has to be helped to control his emotions and desires if he is to achieve his aim.<sup>8</sup>

Another reason why Logan might wish to consider this rival interpretation is that he clearly states that the *Proslogion* argument is an exercise in philosophy (cf. 114), that it is “accessible to any reasonable person” (ibid.) and that its “soundness” is “recognisable, whether one is a believer or not” (117). The alleged principle that faith is a *conditio sine qua non* of understanding what Christians believe about God, then, either has to be restricted, since it does not apply to everything Christians believe about God; or it is not, as I have suggested, what Anselm means. One may perhaps hold that to Anselm’s lights, “the discovery of (...) truths about God requires faith”, while one does not need faith “in order to understand the argument” once it has been discovered by some believer and is there in the public arena (87; my italics). Yet this still seems to be at odds with the *Monologion* situation where a solitary non-believer comes to understand the truths of the Christian faith merely through rational inquiry.<sup>9</sup>

There are a few more queries one might have with regard to Logan’s portrayal of Anselm’s theological method. Thus, he maintains that “what is characteristic of Anselm’s approach in comparison to those who went before him” is “the lack of restraint he feels concerning the use of the liberal arts” (20). But this does not seem correct, since it equally applies to Eriugena, Berengar of Tours and even to the early Augustine (and, of course, to Boethius himself).<sup>10</sup> Again, Logan contends that for Anselm, authority is the rule against which the results of his intellectual efforts should be measured; and he takes Anselm to hold (in *Cur deus homo* I, 2 and I, 18) that “confirmation is required from a greater authority before the outcome of his rational proof is to be accepted” and (in *Monologion* 1) that the necessity of those conclusions of his which are not confirmed by any greater authority (*maior auctoritas*) “remains provisional until support is provided by a greater authority” (22). But this is inexact. In *Monologion* 1, Anselm just says that the necessity of (hypothetical) conclusions of this kind remains provisional; however, he does not say there that it remains so until they are confirmed by some greater authority. Later, in *Cur deus homo* I, 2 he explains that conclusions of this kind remain provisional “until God shall in some way reveal to me something better”. What “something better”, arguably, refers to here is *altiores rationes*—“higher reasons”, and not any future authoritative teaching of the Church.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. B. Goebel, V. Höslé, “Reasons, Emotions and God’s Presence in Anselm of Canterbury’s Dialogue *Cur deus homo*”, in: *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 87 (2005), 189–210, esp. 202–206.

<sup>9</sup> Apart from that I fail to see what sense Logan’s claim could make that “[f]aith is necessary for understanding, but once understanding is attained then understanding is not dependent on faith” (98). Certainly, if faith is a necessary condition for understanding, the latter will be dependent on the former in a very strong sense.

<sup>10</sup> See my “L’autorité issue de la raison. La théologie comme philosophie chez Jean Scot Erigène” and “Autorités sacrées ou raisons dialectiques? La querelle sur la méthode dans la théologie du XI<sup>e</sup> siècle”, in: O. Boulnois, P. Capelle-Dumont (eds.) *Philosophie et théologie au Moyen Âge. Anthologie*, vol. 2, Paris: Cerf, 2009, 89–103; 105–121.

Logan is right to underline that Anselm judged the results of his rational inquiry to be entirely consistent with Christian authorities, especially with the Scriptures and the teaching of the Church fathers. But it must not be forgotten that these authorities stood in need of interpretation themselves. On the few occasions he interprets the Scriptures, we can observe that, when a conflict loomed, he was rather inclined to reconcile the Scriptures with his philosophical theology through a non-literal interpretation of the former.<sup>11</sup> Logan further believes that when Anselm in *P2* prays that God may give him an understanding of his faith, this must be taken to mean that any such insight is a gift which “possesses a fundamentally supernatural character. God determines the extent to which Anselm understands.” (91) But praying for understanding that God (necessarily) exists as a divine gift does not presuppose that God determines, or interferes with, the normal course of arguments, or that he adds something to them. If it did, it would turn Anselm’s argument into a fairly obvious *petitio principii*, or deprive it of its philosophical character.<sup>12</sup> Yet Logan believes that Anselm’s argument is successful, and he never calls its philosophical character into question. Logan opines that “Anselm appears to make greater claims for human reason than Aquinas” (170). He may still make greater claims for human reason than Logan is prepared to admit.

The two chapters on the medieval and modern reception of the *Proslogion* argument are among the most instructive of the book. They show very well how much the argument was alive from the thirteenth century onwards in the Philosophy of Religion of the West—a fact that is often ignored by modern commentators who tend to think of the argument as a medieval non-starter unearthed by Descartes, or an early-modern eccentricity rediscovered by Charles Hartshorne. The thirteenth-century exponents of the argument depicted in the sixth chapter, for instance, include Alexander Nequam, William of Auxerre, Alexander of Hales, Richard Fishacre, Bonaventure, Thomas of York, Peter of Tarentaise, Henry of Ghent, William of Ware, Giles of Rome, Peter John Olivi, and John Duns Scotus. What is more, Logan does not content himself with a mere history of the argument. He also tries to systematize, and respond to, the most famous objections to and reinterpretations of it, especially those of Aquinas, Kant, Hegel, and Karl Barth.

## II.

The ontological argument has been held in higher esteem during western intellectual history than is often recognized today. Philosophers have for the most part treated it with respect since its revival in the second half of the twentieth century. It even has a small but seemingly growing number of supporters amongst philosophers of late.<sup>13</sup> By contrast,

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<sup>11</sup> Several examples of this exegetical method can be found in the *Cur deus homo*. The method is however most clearly formulated in *De casu diaboli* 1: “*Sed non tantum debemus inhaerere improprietati verborum veritatem tegenti, quantum inhiare proprietati veritatis sub multimodo genere locutionum latenti*”; cf. B. Goebel, “Foi et raison dans la théologie philosophique de saint Anselme”, in: O. Boulnois, P. Capell-Dumont (eds.): *Philosophie et théologie au Moyen Âge. Anthologie*, vol. 2, Paris: Cerf, 2009, 124; Id., “The Myth of the Eleventh Century: Hans Blumenberg’s Anselm”, forthcoming in the Proceedings of the “Saint Anselm and his Legacy” conference at Canterbury in April 2009, edited by Giles Gasper and Ian Logan.

<sup>12</sup> See B. Goebel, V. Hösle, “Reasons, Emotions and God’s Presence in Anselm of Canterbury’s Dialogue *Cur deus homo*”, 206–209.

<sup>13</sup> For a list of recent supporters of the ontological argument, see my “Nachdenken über den ontologischen Gottesbeweis. Eine Diskussion philosophischer Einwände gegen seine beiden Grundformen mit einem Blick auf

Christian theology, with very few exceptions, has recently been rather dismissive of the ontological proof, or has suggested that it should not be regarded as a proof of God's existence at all. Logan is one of these rare exceptions. He defends its being an argument proper against Hegel and Barth; he defends its validity against Aquinas, Kant and numerous modern critics such as Findlay, Rowe, Kenny, Oppy, Sobel, and David Lewis. The latter, for instance, has quite unnecessarily introduced a much stronger premise into Anselm's argument than there really is: "whatever exists in the understanding and exists in reality is greater than it would be if it did not exist in reality."<sup>14</sup> By contrast, Anselm's corresponding premise merely is that "it is greater for X [sc. 'that' or 'something a greater than which cannot be thought'] to exist in reality than not to so exist." (178) Again, some have criticized that in the *Proslogion* there is no proof of the uniqueness of God: Anselm, so the objection goes, simply and arbitrarily interchanges the indefinite description *aliquid quo maius cogitari nequit* with the definite description *id quo maius cogitari nequit*. But according to Logan, the *Proslogion* encloses an implicit proof of God's uniqueness: "anything that is not uniquely X is not X, since X is whatever it is better to be than not to be. (...) X's uniqueness follows as part of the *unum argumentum*" (185). That is why Logan introduces the shorthand "X" for either "something a greater than which cannot be thought" or "that a greater than which cannot be thought" (cf. 6).

More than once, Logan—rightly, I think—complains that critics of the ontological argument have failed to pay attention to X's being a "special case". When Kant objects that no existential proposition is analytic (cf. 158), or when Hume's Cleanthes argues that there can never be a contradiction involved in denying the existence of something (cf. 160), this is all very well—for anything except for 'something a greater than which cannot be thought'. For Anselm claims to have proved that in the special case of God as X, these rules, precisely, break down. This is also true for the commandment 'Do not move from conceptual inquiry to ontological commitment', the infringement of which has, more recently, been repudiated as the "Anselmian Sin" (cf. 192).<sup>15</sup> Logan is right that objections of this type are simply question-begging. Rather than valid objections, they are epitaphs to the ontological argument which already presuppose its demise.

There is another, more controversial point that Logan repeatedly makes to revalue the ontological argument. According to him, the trick, as it were, of Anselm's argument is that it makes explicit a 'contradiction in performance'. This contradiction is committed by anybody who seriously denies the existence of God as X (cf. 115; 121; 158). A 'contradiction in performance' is a contradiction between the propositional content of an assertion and my saying it (cf. 158), one that "arises between what is thought and the active process of thinking it" (121). Accordingly, Logan insists, it is not simply by means of an "analysis of the concept of God" that Anselm hits upon this contradiction in the denial of God's existence, but "by means of an analysis of the act of thinking about God" (121, cf. 115). Indeed, the whole argument rests upon the idea that "[t]hought about God cannot be separated from thought about

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die zeitgenössische Theologie", in: *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 51 (2009), 107, notes 6–7.

<sup>14</sup> D. Lewis, "Anselm and Actuality", in: Id., *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1, New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983, 11.

<sup>15</sup> F. Zabeeh, 'Category-Mistake', in: *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 23 (1962), 278.

the thinking subject” (199), as is witnessed by the cognitive element in the formula ‘something a greater than which cannot be thought’.

Now, performative contradictions unquestionably constitute a veritable kind of contradictions to be avoided by any reasonable person. They are easily overlooked unless we come to see our utterances as speech acts. But does Anselm’s *reductio-ad-absurdum* argument really make use of a contradiction of this kind? Unfortunately, the author does not give any other example of such a contradiction. Standard examples are “Nothing is ever true” (if claimed to be true), and, more obviously still, my saying “I am not saying anything now”. There is no internal contradiction here between the subject and predicate, and there is no contradiction at all if the first sentence is uttered by a parrot and the second just written on a blackboard. Whether Anselm’s ontological argument really makes use of such a contradiction or not can, of course, only be decided if we know what the argument consists in. There is little agreement today concerning the exact structure of Anselm’s ontological proof, and Logan may have been wise not to add another detailed analysis to the debate. On the other hand, the proof in *P2* is commonly thought to imply a *reductio-ad-absurdum* argument to the effect that

“if X did not exist in reality, then X would not be X.”

Logan also appears to understand it thus.<sup>16</sup> But then, it would seem, the argument in *P2* purports to prove that to exist in reality is part of X’s essence—or, to put it another way, that it is necessary that X really exists (i.e. that it is necessary—because essential—for it to exist in the real world). Viewed this way, however, the contradiction involved in my saying or thinking that “X does not exist” is just an ordinary, albeit rather spectacular, contradiction between the subject “X” and the predicate “does not exist”. It is of the same type as the contradiction involved in my saying that two and two equals five, or that the angular sum in a triangle is more or less than two right angles. The contradiction will, of course, only become evident to someone whose thinking is concerned with Anselm’s proof. But this is nothing out of the ordinary and does not specify a contradiction in performance.

Moreover, the subject-relative element in Anselm’s concept of God as X (‘that a greater than which cannot be thought’, where ‘greater’ means ‘better’) does not appear to be indispensable. ‘The most perfect being’, i.e. a being that is perfect in any respect, seems to be an equivalent expression. Logan is perfectly justified in pointing out that Gaunilo’s concept of *maius omnibus* (‘the greatest of everything’) does not capture the meaning of X (cf. 115), since what is great or even the greatest in the real world may be not so in another possible world. However, the most perfect being would not be most perfect if a better than it could be thought. What Logan, really, might be aiming at is another intriguing fact. Suppose that the ontological argument—an *a priori* proof of the (necessary) existence of God—is successful. This would mean that an analysis of what we are doing when we engage in the apparently innocent act of *conceiving of God* reveals that we thereby commit ourselves rationally to affirm God’s (necessary) existence. Still, the contradiction implied in our thinking the proposition “X does not (necessarily) exist” would not be one between the propositional

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. e.g. 178: “that there is only one way of thinking of X – as really existing”.

content and the proposition's being thought. Rather, it would be a contradiction between its subject and its predicate.

### III.

One of the most striking features of Logan's book is its almost general dismissal of modern and contemporary interpretations of the *Proslogion* argument. More often than not, he complains, they lead us away from the true Anselm. They do so by the "intrusion of non-Anselmian improvement into the presentation of the argument" (177), by introducing terms such as "necessary existence" or "perfect being" whilst Anselm "eschews the language of necessity and perfection concerning X" (190),<sup>17</sup> by substituting the Anselmian "can be understood" by the un-Anselmian "can be conceived of" or "is logically possible" (cf. 193), or by calling X Anselm's "definition" of God (187). For similar reasons, Logan thinks that virtually the whole modern and contemporary discussion of what Kant dubbed the "ontological argument" constitutes a discourse of its own, one that is not part of the history proper of Anselm's argument.

I have already argued that it seems legitimate to substitute Anselm's term 'that a greater than which cannot be thought' by the expression 'the most perfect being'. In the next section (IV) I will examine Logan's claim that "Anselm does not engage in a discussion of necessary existence in the *Proslogion*, but with that which cannot be thought not to exist" (155). Presently, I would like to emphasize that if we set ourselves the task of understanding "what he [sc. Anselm] was trying to say", we are well advised not to rule out the rendering of Anselm's ideas in contemporary terms. For while the language may not be there, the ideas may; and while the language may be there, the ideas may not. Surely we do not want to claim that Anselm's *Proslogion* is almost verbally inspired. Few things would be more un-Anselmian than to insist on the words (*verba*) rather than on the meaning (*sententia*).<sup>18</sup> Logan's book helps us to understand what Anselm was trying to say, precisely because Logan himself interprets him in a language that is not Anselm's own. Thus, as we have seen, he substitutes the letter "X" for both Anselm's definite and indefinite descriptions of God. And Logan seems to be improving upon Anselm's argument himself when he takes *quod maius est* in P2 to mean "that it is specifically greater for X to exist in reality than in the understanding alone" (94). On another reading it would state "that it is generally greater to exist in reality than in the understanding alone" (ibd.); but the first meaning "is sufficient for the purposes of the argument" (95).

Many modern and contemporary interpretations of Anselm's ontological argument are doubtlessly flawed like Lewis's. But I do not think that on the whole they are as alien to Anselm as the author makes us believe. Thus, when he complains that contemporary discussions are almost universally guilty of confounding X with a "definition" of God, the lapse is, perhaps, less grievous after all. It is true that X cannot count as a definition of God in the traditional Aristotelian sense, because, arguably, God does not belong to any genus. Yet it

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<sup>17</sup> See also 98: "It is worth noting at the end of P4 that Anselm has not argued for the necessity of God's existence. He only does that in the *Responsio*. He does not use the word 'necessary' until P23 and then not in relation to God's existence."

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Anselm, *De grammatico* 4; see also note 10 above.

may still be regarded as a definition of God in a loose and popular sense, although in the Boethian tradition it is strictly speaking a mere description.<sup>19</sup> At any rate, it is difficult to see how this could affect our judgement as to whether Anselm's proof is successful or not.

#### IV.

One contemporary interpretation of Anselm's argument that Logan rejects is Sobel's claim that when Anselm argues that "X" is conceivable ("understandable"), he thereby tries to establish the logical possibility of God as X.<sup>20</sup> One may indeed doubt whether this is true. But Logan's argument designed to show that it is not true clearly will not do. Anselm, he says, "includes amongst things that can be understood, things that do not exist, citing the example of the chimera. A chimera is a mythical animal and is by definition non-existent. Thus, it cannot be said to be logically possible in Sobel's sense (...) otherwise it would not be a chimera." (193f., cf. 94) This cannot be right, because it presupposes a modern and hence anachronistic use of the word "chimera" by Anselm, as if it were a metaphor signifying something out of this world. In Anselm's *Logical Fragments*, however, "chimera" seems to be a proper name—a proper name apparently reducible to a description, since Anselm says that there is a "mental conception" corresponding to the thing it refers to.<sup>21</sup> It refers to a specific monster or kind of monster of Greek mythology. That Chimera figures in a myth does not imply that it is not existent (just like the mythical character of the beginning of Genesis does not imply that Elohim does not exist), or that no other member of its kind exists, and even if it did this would still be a far cry from saying that their existence is logically impossible.

Another point where I would say that the author has not got Anselm right is his reading of the attribute *vere* in Anselm's term *vere esse*, as applied to God alone. In Logan's view, this expression refers to the "fact" rather than to "the manner of God's existence" (86). But this sets up a false alternative, because what Logan calls the "fact" of God's existence is for Anselm nothing else than a *manner* of God's existence—namely to exist in the understanding *and* in reality (*existere in intellectu et in re; esse et in re*), as opposed to a different manner of existence, to exist in the understanding alone (*in solo intellectu esse*). Even the fool does not question that God exists in a certain manner: that he has what one may call conceptual existence. He only wants to confine God's existence to just that, to His conceptual existence, whereas Anselm sets out to prove in *P2* that once God's conceptual existence has been admitted, it is irrational to deny that God also exists in reality. So to get things sorted out in Anselm, we should not just say that, in *P2*, he purports to prove "that God

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<sup>19</sup> In *De Topicis Differentiis* 2, Boethius states that a description involves an 'understanding of the subject' through accidents or differentiae 'apart from the appropriate genus'. 'To be such that a greater cannot be thought' does indeed differentiate God as X from any other being.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. J. Sobel, *Logic and Theism: Arguments for and against Beliefs in God*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, 64–66.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Anselm, *Logical Fragments (De potestate)*, ed. A. Galonnier, in: *L'œuvre de S. Anselme de Cantorbéry*, vol. 4, Paris: Cerf, 1990, 428: "*Dicitur enim 'aliquid' quod et nomen habet et mentis conceptionem, sed non est in veritate, ut chimera. Significatur enim hoc nomine quaedam mentis conception ad similitudinem animalis, quae tamen non existit in rerum natura*". According to K. Rogers (cf. *The Neoplatonic Metaphysics and Epistemology of Anselm of Canterbury*, Lewiston: Edward Mellen, 1997, 91), we should not exclude that Anselm allows for individual concepts; but whether he does nor not needs not to be settled here, as my present point can be made in either case.

exists” (cf. 18), but that he purports to prove that God “really exists”, pleonastic as this may sound.<sup>22</sup> In *P3*, Anselm takes up his talk about God’s existing “truly”, now specifying the way in which He does: God cannot even be thought not to exist. What does this mean?

According to Logan, it does *not* mean that God “necessarily” exists (cf. 115). It is Gaunilo who comes up with that kind of modal talk, and who lures Anselm into it: “the notion of ‘necessary existence’, introduced into the debate in the *Pro Insipiente*, is employed by Anselm precisely because it is part of the argument of his opponent. The argument of the *Proslogion* did not require such terminology. For Anselm, terms like ‘existing necessarily’ (...) may be legitimately applied to God. However, they (...) derive their real meaning from the notion of ‘that which cannot be thought not to exist’ (...), but fail to convey the full significance of these notions.” (125) Logan contends that when Anselm joins in Gaunilo’s modal talk *à contre coeur* in the first chapter of the *Responsio*, he uses ‘necessarily existent’ in the sense of ‘having no beginning’, “which is a particular characteristic of ‘that which cannot be thought not exist’.” (119) But if this is all there is to it, there may well be “non-divine necessary beings“. (191) As Henry has remarked, Boethius calls the stars “necessary beings”, because they are eternal (though not outside time).<sup>23</sup> Yet, surely, one would not want to say that the stars cannot be thought not to exist. Anselm himself claims that the latter is true of God alone. So it would seem that while the predicate “cannot be thought not to exist” implies the predicate “exists necessarily”, the reverse is not true.

In order to assess these claims of the author, we first need to distinguish four senses of “God exists necessarily” that are easily mixed up. It may mean either:

- (a) “It is necessary (i.e. essential) for God to exist in reality”, or
- (b) “God has necessary existence”, or
- (c) “It is necessary (i.e. essential) for God to have necessary existence”, or merely
- (d) “It is a necessary conclusion that God exists in reality.”

Here, (d) is a so-called necessity *de dicto*, reflecting the *a priori* character of Anselm’s rational theology which is all about *rationes necessariae*; (a), (b), and (c) are necessities *de re* predicated of God himself. Now, it seems clear to me that Anselm’s occasional use of ‘necessary’ in *necesse est illud esse* and *ex necessitate est* in the first chapter of his *Responsio* is nothing but an example of (d). This use of “necessarily” is typical of Anselm and permeates many of his writings (much to the distress of less rationally minded theologians who often regard it as an attempt at God’s sovereignty).

Yet be that as it may, the really interesting question is not how the rare expression “necessarily existent” is used by Anselm. The really interesting question is how to render in contemporary terms his characteristic claim that God exists in such a way that He ‘cannot even be thought not to exist’. On the face of it, Anselm seems to be saying that God’s

<sup>22</sup> Cf. U. Meixner, *Modalität. Möglichkeit, Notwendigkeit, Essentialismus*, Frankfurt 2008, 79 (my translation): “There are two concepts expressed by the predicate *exists*, let us call them existence<sub>1</sub> and existence<sub>2</sub>. Existence<sub>1</sub> is *to be real*; existence<sub>2</sub> is *to be something, to be identical with something*. ‘To be real’ is not the same as ‘to be something’. And yet, unfortunately, many philosophers think it is.”

<sup>23</sup> Cf. D.P. Henry, “Proslogion Chapter III”, in: F.S. Schmitt et al. (eds.), *Analecta Anselmiana*, vol. 1, Frankfurt am Main: Minerva, 1969, 103; id., *Medieval Logic and Metaphysics*, London: Hutchinson, 1972, 108–109.

existence is logically necessary. In spite of this, J. Marenbon has recently argued that Anselm's claim that God cannot be thought not to exist must not be taken to mean that God's existence is logically necessary. Anselm, Marenbon points out, "thinks of possibility in terms of a single way things happen along the line of time—in broadly Aristotelian, temporal terms, that is to say".<sup>24</sup> His conclusion is that Anselm must have had the Aristotelian, i.e. historical notion of necessity in mind, according to which something is necessary if it always exists. But just like Logan, Marenbon does not tell us the whole story of Anselm's account of necessary existence in the *Responsio*. Anselm does not mention just one (Logan) or two (Marenbon)<sup>25</sup> conditions which something that cannot be thought not to exist must meet. Here are his *three* conditions for being something that cannot even be thought not to exist:

- (1) to exist always (i.e. to have neither a beginning *nor an end*)
- (2) to exist everywhere
- (3) to be absolutely simple.<sup>26</sup>

This very much goes beyond what is required for 'Aristotelian' or 'Boethian', i.e. historical necessity. Only something that satisfies these three conditions, Anselm says—and nothing else than God does satisfy these three conditions—will be such that its non-existence is strictly inconceivable, such that it cannot be thought not to exist without falling victim to a contradiction. We may take this to be a clear indication that Anselm is developing here the very notion of logically necessary existence.<sup>27</sup> There is no reason, then, to shy away from reconstructions of Anselm's argument using the language of possible worlds.<sup>28</sup> They need not be un-Anselmian at all. Now, if we suppose that the logical necessity of God's existence—that it cannot even be thought, without contradiction, that God does not exist—may well be grounded in, but not identical with, the necessity that goes along with some *essential* feature of God, this leaves us with three possible meanings of "God's existence is logically necessary":

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<sup>24</sup> J. Marenbon, *Medieval Philosophy. An Historical and Philosophical Introduction*, London: Routledge, 2007, 128; cf. *ibid.*: "there is every reason to think that Anselm's understanding of modality was completely different from that which is represented in terms of possible worlds."

<sup>25</sup> Marenbon does mention Anselm's second condition (cf. *ibid.*), which should have made him wary, as omnipresence is not required for 'Aristotelian', i.e. historical necessity. D. von Wachter who also denies that Anselm is talking about logical necessity here, names all three conditions, but misreads (3) as requiring everlastingness instead of absolute simplicity (since he disregards the qualification *cogitatione in cogitatione dissolvi potest*); see his *Die kausale Struktur der Welt. Eine philosophische Untersuchung über Verursachung, Naturgesetze, freie Handlungen, Möglichkeit und Gottes kausale Rolle in der Welt*, [http://epub.ub.uni-muenchen.de/1975/1/wachter\\_2007-ursachen.pdf](http://epub.ub.uni-muenchen.de/1975/1/wachter_2007-ursachen.pdf), 403.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. e.g. Anselm, *Responsio* 1: "*Sed et quod partibus coniunctum est, cogitatione dissolvi et non esse potest. Quare quicquid alicubi aut aliquando totum non est, etiam si est, potest cogitari non esse.*"

<sup>27</sup> Marenbon suggests that an interpretation along these lines is somehow anachronistic. But this is not so; cf. D.P. Henry, *Medieval Logic and Metaphysics*, 109: "Remarks made by Boethius and Gerbert (...) suggest that one reason why *cogitari* 'to-be-thought' is inserted, so that *non potest cogitari non esse* 'he is not possible to be thought not to be' becomes true of God, was to exalt the being of God (...). Hence while these other necessary beings are not possible not to be, they can nevertheless be *thought* not to be."

<sup>28</sup> I must confess that I do not understand Logan's argument that "to talk of possible worlds in relation to God (...) is to assume that He does not exist" (191). Surely, we do not assume that God does not exist if we say that God exists in all possible worlds. Note also that talk of God's "existence in possible worlds" does not commit us to regard God as a "worldly" entity any more than ordinary talk of God's *existence*. On many ontological accounts, a possible world may contain very diverse categories of entities for which 'to exist' amounts to something very different respectively.

- (e) “God has logically necessary existence”, or
- (f) “It is necessary (i.e. essential) for God to have logically necessary existence”, or
- (g) “It is a logically necessary conclusion that God exists in reality”.

## V.

The question of what exactly Anselm means when, by proving that God is such that He ‘cannot’ even ‘be thought not to exist’, he establishes the logical necessity of God’s existence, concerns the interpretation of *P3* and its relation to *P2*. Is Anselm’s conclusion to be understood in sense (e), (f), or (g)? According to the last reading (g), the logical necessity of God’s existence would be a mere necessity *de dicto*, one that only applies to our judgement that God as X really exists. We can, however, discard such an interpretation off-hand, because Anselm leaves no doubt that the inconceivability of God’s non-existence in reality is to be understood as a divine attribute. He concludes: “Therefore, O Lord my God, You truly exist in such a way that You cannot be thought not to exist. (...) You alone have being most truly of all, and thus most greatly of all” (*P3*).

As Logan sees it, *P2-4* seek to establish “God’s existence and the inconceivability of His non-existence” (87). “At the end of *P2*”, he writes, Anselm “had shown that X does not exist in the understanding alone, and therefore exists in reality. Here [in *P3*] he seeks to show that it is not possible to think of the non-existence in reality of X.” (96) But if this were true, the third chapter of the *Proslogion* would not add anything new to the second. For to prove that X exists in reality, and to show that X cannot be thought not to exist *in reality*, is one and the same thing. A proof to the effect that God as X exists in reality, because X would not be X if it did not exist in reality, is nothing else than a proof that (in the language of possible worlds)

- (a) “It is necessary (i.e. essential) for God to exist in the real world.” [*P2*]

Like many, if not most modern interpreters of the ontological argument, Logan seems to have overlooked that Anselm has already proved God’s necessary existence in this sense in the *second* chapter of the *Proslogion*. What Logan takes to be the achievement of *P3*, then, is really nothing over and above what Anselm purports to have done in *P2*: proving the impossibility to think that God does not exist in the real world. And yet the whole language of *P3* strongly suggests that Anselm is arguing for a conclusion that surpasses the achievement of *P2*.

But then, what is it that Anselm seeks to show in the third chapter? To my mind, the answer is that in *P3*, Anselm offers a prove that

- (e) “It is necessary (i.e. essential) for God to exist in every possible world.” [*P3*]

For, again, Anselm’s argument takes the form of a *reductio-ad-absurdum* to the effect that if God as X were not such that He could not even be thought not to exist—if, that is, X did not exist in every possible world—then X would not be X. To say that God would not be

God if He did not exist in every possible world, is identical to saying that it is necessary (i.e. essential) for God to exist in every possible world.<sup>29</sup>

Now, if something is shown to exist in every possible world, it is, by the same token, also shown to exist in the real world. So if my analysis is true, the conclusion of *P2* is implied in the conclusion of *P3*.<sup>30</sup> But then, why does Anselm bother to prove the necessity of God's existence in the real world in a chapter of its own, when he could have proved the necessity of God's existence in every possible world right away—and therefore, by implication, in the real world? Mainly, I suggest, because *P2* is—for rhetorical purposes—<sup>31</sup> designed as a refutation of the fool. The fool in the Psalm does not in the first place deny that God exists in every possible world; what he denies is that God exists in the real world. In *P2* Anselm demonstrates that the fool must be wrong. God as *X* really exists. In *P3*, he ponders the manner in which the most perfect being must exist. As a matter of fact, Anselm conceives *P3* as an enlargement upon *P2*. The proof in *P3* might well have been developed independently of the proof in *P2*. But it is not: the conclusion of the latter (“It is necessary that God exists in the real world”) figures as a premise in the former. So the answer to the notorious questions of how many proofs there are in *P2-4* should be that there are two different proofs which have been linked up with one another.<sup>32</sup>

Now that we have somewhat come to grips with Anselm's ontological proofs (I will henceforth use the plural where appropriate) in the *Proslogion*, we are perhaps in a position to determine their relationship to the proof of Descartes in the *Meditationes* (= *M*). For Logan, Descartes' argument is a move away from the *Proslogion*, because, as his reply to Gassendi shows, “it suggests that a successful ‘ontological’ argument would have to address the necessary existence of God. This is then read back into Anselm's argument in the *Proslogion*, where Anselm is supposed to have put forward an argument concerning God's existence in *P2* and another argument concerning his necessary existence in *P3*.” (155) Well, if I am right there is indeed an argument concerning the necessity of God's necessary existence in *P3*, one that goes beyond Anselm's argument concerning the necessity of God's

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<sup>29</sup> Note that this interpretation of the relationship between *P2* and *P3* presupposes that “in the real world” in (a) be used as a rigid designator. That is to say it presupposes that in all possible worlds, it always refers to this real world of ours. One could also understand “in the real world” in (a) as a non-rigid designator meaning ‘in the world that turns out to be real world’. Then it would, in different possible worlds, refer to different possible worlds (i.e. to themselves), and the difference between (a) and (f) would break down. It seems obvious, however, that in Anselm's *esse in re*, ‘*in re*’ is used as a rigid designator. This is its natural reading, and if it were not so used, Anselm would, again, only repeat in *P3* a point he has already made in *P2*.

<sup>30</sup> This point is also stressed by M.J. Charlesworth, cf. “Philosophical Commentary”, in: Id. (ed.), *Saint Anselm's Proslogion*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979, 73f.

<sup>31</sup> According to T. Holopainen (“The *Proslogion* in Relation to the *Monologion*”, 600), the “*Proslogion* is a rhetorical attempt to justify the use of rational method in theology. (...) The basic idea in the *Proslogion* is to make the reader deeply involved in the rational analysis of faith before s/he starts to suspect anything and to make him or her enjoy it.”

<sup>32</sup> In my “Nachdenken über den ontologischen Gottesbeweis” (cf. 114–118; 134), I argue that Anselm puts forward still another version of the ontological proof in the *Responsio* (= *R*). This third version differs from the arguments in *P2* and *P3* in that it explicitly makes use of modal logic. The argument in *P3* does not – although its conclusion expands the conclusion of *P2* by determining the mode of God's existence. One might therefore call the reasoning in *P2* a “non-modal”, the reasoning in *P3* a “modal”, and the reasoning in *R1* a “modal-logic” version of the ontological proof. I further claim that the “modal” argument in *P3* is really an elliptic version of the “modal-logic” proof in *R1*, and that the arguments in *P2* and in *P3/R1* are instances of the two basic forms of the ontological proof respectively.

real existence in *P2*. But even if there were not, Logan's worry would be quite unnecessary. For when Descartes claims that God "necessarily exists", he maintains nothing else than

- (a) "It is necessary (i.e. essential) for God to exist in the real world."

By "necessary existence", Descartes explains, he means "that actual existence is necessarily and always bound up with the remaining attributes of God".<sup>33</sup> Thus, if it is further true as I have argued that the concept of 'the most perfect being' is equivalent to the concept of 'that a greater than which cannot be thought', we get the following result: The *conclusion* of Descartes' ontological proof is identical, not with that of *P3*, but with that of *P2*. That Descartes was no Anselm scholar (152),<sup>34</sup> does not prove that his argument is foreign to any of Anselm's proofs: this could only be determined by looking at the texts, and it proves to be wrong in the case of *P2*. Where Anselm's proof in *P2* and Descartes' proof in *M5* differ is neither the concept of God they use nor the conclusion about God's existence they reach, but their method of proof.

## VI.

In the Preface to the *Proslogion*, Anselm says that he is going to share with his reader a recent discovery of his, which he describes as "one argument (*unum argumentum*) that would need no other to prove itself than itself alone, and would suffice on its own to establish that God truly exists (...) and whatever else we believe about the divine substance." He contrast this single argument with the "concatenation of many arguments" by which the *Monologion* was constructed. However, nowhere in the *Proslogion* nor anywhere else does he ever explain what this single argument, exactly, consists in. Unfortunately, the answer to this question is far from obvious. It is one of the great challenges of any *Proslogion* interpretation to settle it.

Here is how Logan proposes to solve this riddle. The *unum argumentum*, he says, consists in a categorical syllogism to the effect that (cf. 125):

- P-1: The God Christians believe in is X.  
P-2: X really exists and has all great-making attributes.  
C: Therefore, the God Christians believe in really exists and has all great-making attributes.

The trouble with this proposal seems to be that Anselm explicitly introduces the first premise "God is X" as a belief ("*credimus*"), so that the conclusion would inherit from it the cognitive status of a belief. And it is not illuminating at all to prove that Christians believe that God really exists and that He has all great-making attributes. But Logan thinks that

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<sup>33</sup> R. Descartes, *Réponses aux premières objections*, ed. F. Alquié, *Œuvres philosophiques*, vol. 2, Paris: Garnier, 1992, 536. See my "Nachdenken über den ontologischen Gottesbeweis", 117f. This is also overlooked by D. Henrich who characterizes Descartes' proof as one that (my translation) "makes of the concept of *ens necessarium* the *nervus probandi* of the proof. This concept distinguishes the Cartesian argument from Saint Anselm's"; cf. *Der ontologische Gottesbeweis*, Tübingen <sup>2</sup>1967.

<sup>34</sup> Interestingly, the letter to Mersenne quoted by Logan (152) makes it rather likely that Descartes read Anselm's argument in the original before the publication of the *Meditationes*.

Anselm in the *Proslogion* as well as in the *Responsio* actually tries to supply a rational proof for the identity thesis that God is X. Its truth, he observes, is demonstrated “in the main body of the *Proslogion*” (151); and at the end of his commentary in chapter four, Logan concludes: “It took Anselm most of the *Proslogion* to establish the identity of God and X.” (114) He does not tell us exactly how this identity thesis is established by Anselm. Presumably he thinks that this is being done—or rather that it is shown that it can be done—by repeated applications of the argument that X would not be X if it did not have some great-making property; and by further establishing that to have all great-making properties, is in fact everything Christians are held to believe about God’s essence: that He really exists, that He is eternal, that He is greater than can be thought etc. Likewise, Logan remarks, Anselm’s “main thrust” in the *Responsio* is to show that “what must be said of X must also be said of God”, to show that the identification of God with X is “unavoidable” (117). This is because the “main thrust” of the *Pro insipiente* (= *PI*, the critique traditionally attributed to Gaunilo) was, precisely, that “God and X are not to be identified” (ibd.).<sup>35</sup> This latter view certainly accords well with the final chapter of the *Responsio*’s main body. And it responds to a pressing problem of Christian theology brought up by the ontological argument and often not realized by theologians: if X can be shown to exist in the real world or even in all possible worlds, it becomes paramount for the theologian to identify God with X. For otherwise, she would be forced to admit to there being something more perfect than God. And that there is something more perfect than God is an assumption that is probably very difficult to reconcile with the biblical, let alone with the traditional theological notion of God.

To sum up, Logan claims that the *unum argumentum* is the proof that (C) “God really exists and has all great-making attributes.” It is a syllogism with the middle term ‘X’, the minor premise of which is the identity thesis (P-1) “God is X”; this premise, in turn, is proved true by a double procedure: by showing (a), through repeated applications of the above-mentioned *reductio* argument, that X has all great-making properties (or, rather, by showing that X can be proved to have all great-making properties through repeated applications of this argument); and by showing (b) that to have all great-making properties, is precisely what Christians are held to believe about God’s essence. To put it like this, however, is very awkward. For it is to say that the truth of the first premise (P-1) “God is X” can only be ascertained by proving, amongst others, that “X really exists and has all great-making attributes”. But this was supposed to be the second premise (P-2) of the syllogism which is Anselm’s ‘single argument’. Again, the supposed first premise is an identity claim, so that at any rate we do not have a classical syllogism. Rather than calling (P-1) a “premise” of the “syllogism” outlined by the author, we should, perhaps, say that it is a first conclusion of a quite different argument. Here it is:

- (P-1)’ X really (and necessarily) exists and has all great-making attributes.
- (P-2)’ Christians believe that God really (and necessarily) exists and has all great-making attributes.
- (C-1)’ Therefore, the God Christians believe in is X.

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<sup>35</sup> Logan rightly points out that Anselm’s defence “takes place in the context of a shared faith” and that the *Responsio* is explicitly addressed to a believer (117). When he concludes that “the traditional view that the *Responsio* is the more philosophical work must be turned on its head” (ibd.), this is, however, debatable since the philosophical reasoning of the *Responsio* is not part of a devotional exercise as it is in the *Proslogion*.

- (C-2) Therefore, the God Christians believe in really (and necessarily) exists and has all great-making attributes.

This, I would tentatively suggest, is the plot of Anselm's *Proslogion*, of which Anselm's ontological arguments in P2-4 are only a small, but important bit. Their function is to prove the first part of the first premise (P-1)' to be true. This is not a small task in itself, as anybody will acknowledge. The second premise may seem much less controversial—although, then as now, not all Christian theologians were happy with it. Note that the first conclusion does not state that Christians *believe* that the God they believe in is identical to X, but states that the God they believe in really *is* identical to X. I would not, however, claim this scheme to be Anselm's *unum argumentum* any more than I think that Logan's "syllogism" can pretend to this rank. As a matter of fact, his purported solution of the *unum argumentum* puzzle is open to another serious objection. According to Logan, Anselm says in the Preface that his single argument "must meet two criteria": It must "(α) suffice on its own to (β) establish that God exists etc. [sc. and that he is such as Christian belief has it]" (126). He then goes on to call (β) the "major criterion". But a closer look reveals that Anselm further demands that the single argument is such that it needs "no other to prove itself". So we do not seem to have two, but *three* criteria here (or rather two requirements that yield three elementary criteria). What is more, Logan's claim to a hierarchy amongst the criteria is unwarranted in the text. The single argument, Anselm says, must

- (a) prove itself (cf. "*ad se probandum*")
- (b) establish that God truly exists and that he is such as Christian belief has it
- (c) bring about (a) and, therefore, (b) all by itself.<sup>36</sup>

Why does Logan read a hierarchy in favour of (b) into this list and remains silent about (a)? For the following reason, I believe: As he presents the *unum argumentum*, it seems to satisfy neither criterion (c) nor (a). Logan proposes a liberal reading of (c) considering the proof of his *unum argumentum*'s two premises to be somehow "internal" to the argument itself (127). But this is not very convincing, as he senses himself.<sup>37</sup> Things get worse still with criterion (b), because a syllogism does not seem to be the right class of entity to be capable of a proof. Logan rejects the proposal submitted by Toivo Holopainen that Anselm's '*unum argumentum*' consists in the concept 'X'.<sup>38</sup> Holopainen's solution fares perhaps better with criterion (c), but is as hopeless as Logan's when it comes to criterion (a), unless we understand the word "prove" in an unusually wide sense. Logan and Holopainen appeal to the early medieval use of the term *argumentum*, reflecting that of Cicero and Boethius, to justify

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<sup>36</sup> See the quotation at the outset of the present section (VI). I take it that there are two criteria in Anselm's phrase "need no other to prove itself than itself alone". That is to say that it is at least possible that an 'argument' 'proves itself' not all by itself, but that it only does so with the help of at least one other 'argument'.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. 127: "That may be as close as it is possible to get to understanding what Anselm means by the term '*unum argumentum*'."

<sup>38</sup> Cf. T. Holopainen, *Dialectic and Theology in the Eleventh Century*, Leiden: Brill, 1996, 133–145; id., "Anselm's *Argumentum* and the Early Medieval Theory of Argument", in: *Vivarium* 45 (2007), 1–29. Holopainen offers a list of Anselm scholars who have shared his view on the nature of the 'single argument', cf. *Dialectic and Theology in the Eleventh Century*, 135, n. 48.

their choice.<sup>39</sup> However, the impression one gets from studying the semantics of *argumentum* in the early middle ages is that the term is equivocal to such an extent that the evidence can serve to justify almost any reasonable interpretation of the phrase *unum argumentum* whatsoever. Thus, *argumentum* in the Boethian tradition may stand for entities as different as concepts, propositions, and proofs. Perhaps, then, Anselm's three criteria concerning his *unum argumentum* should be taken more seriously when trying to establish the nature of the 'single argument'. Its terms are certainly less ambiguous. In the light of what I have said about the overall argument of the *Proslogion*, my surmise is that Anselm is referring to the proposition "God is X" (C-1)' as the *unum argumentum*. "God is X" certainly meets criteria (a) and (b), and a case can be made that it also meets criterion (c). It is unfortunately beyond the scope of this essay to justify this more thoroughly.

## VII.

In *P15*, Anselm offers a proof that God as X is 'something greater than can be thought'. For just like to have real (and necessary) existence, to be greater than can be thought' is one of the perfections without which X would not be X. He concludes: "Therefore, Lord, not only are You 'that than which a greater cannot be thought', but You are 'something greater than can be thought'." To critics and defenders of the ontological argument alike, this has often deemed unreasonable. Kenny, for instance, remarks that it is self-refuting to speak in this fashion of an inconceivable God (195);<sup>40</sup> and in the eyes of Leftow—who in a recent paper cautiously tries to make a case for ontological arguments—<sup>41</sup> *P15* "casts a pall over Anselm's whole method" (ibid.).<sup>42</sup> One might, of course, escape the conclusion that God is 'something greater than can be thought' without detriment to Anselm's ontological arguments simply by denying that it is a perfection to be 'greater than can be thought'. One might, that is, regard *P15* as a petty mistake. But let us suppose that it really *is* a perfection to be 'greater than can be thought'. Does this not run counter to Anselm's claim—an explicit premise of the ontological argument in *P2* and an implicit premise of the ontological argument in *P3*—that the expression 'X' is understandable? Does this not even make the notion of God as 'X' incoherent?

Logan thinks that it does not. "The point is not", he writes, "that we understand fully all the implications of being X, but that we can understand a phrase such as 'nothing greater than this can be thought'. That is all that is required for Anselm's argument." (196) When Anselm holds that God is 'greater than can be thought', this "does not mean that He is outside

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<sup>39</sup> Cf. 13–18; 125–125; see T. Holopainen, "Anselm's *Argumentum* and the Early Medieval Theory of Argument", esp. 10–21.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. A. Kenny, *The Unknown God: Agnostic Essays*, London: Continuum, 2004, 29.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. B. Leftow, "The Ontological Argument", in: W.J. Wainwright (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, 80–115.

<sup>42</sup> B. Leftow, "Anselm's perfect-being theology", in: B. Davies, B. Leftow (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Anselm*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, 141. Leftow is worried that if God is 'greater than can be thought', He might possess some perfection we "cannot describe" which is incompatible with a perfection we "can describe". This is, however, a problem that equally concerns the perfections we *can* describe: in the *Proslogion*, Anselm discusses some, but by no means all cases where perfections have been or might be supposed to clash. If we can – in some Leibnizian or Gödelian fashion, perhaps, that is to say *a priori* – prove the coherence of the idea of a most perfect being, we thereby prove the compatibility with one another, not only of the perfections we can describe, but of all perfections whatsoever, whether we can describe them or not.

the limits of our thought, but that He extends beyond those limits. We can think of Him (for He is within the limits of thought) and not think of Him (since he is also beyond those limits). Just as when water is poured continuously into a small jug, there is still water in the jug when it overflows.” (ibid.) Logan’s vindication of *P15* is brief. It needs to be clarified, since it explains a paradox—that we can think of God and not think of Him; that God is within and beyond the limits of thought—with an illustration. Yet I think it is essentially to the point. In the remainder of this last section, I shall defend Logan’s view that *P15* states nothing incoherent and is perfectly in line with Anselm’s ontological argument. As it has often been taken for granted that *P15* is a particularly unsuccessful piece of reasoning that must be put under quarantine lest the entire *Proslogion* becomes nonsensical,<sup>43</sup> this is perhaps no complete waste of time.

The first thing to note here is that there is no obvious conflict between the concept of *X* and the concept of ‘something greater than can be thought’. Why should ‘something a greater than which cannot be thought’ not be ‘greater than can be thought’? Surely, the meaning of ‘*X*’ alone does not rule this out. On the other hand, if ‘*X*’ is to be a concept at all, the expression “*X*”, by which it is signified, must be understandable. And in that respect at least, the concept signified by this expression must be capable of being thought. Understanding something, according to Anselm, implies thinking it (though not vice versa, as *P4* shows). In its first step, the ontological proof in *P2* explicitly presupposes that the definition of God as *X* can be understood—and that in that respect, the most perfect being can indeed be thought.

The author of the *Pro insipiente* seems to have been the first to deny that the most perfect being is such that it can be thought and understood at all. For, says Gaunilo, the most perfect being is certainly very different from anything we know, so that we cannot even make conjectures (*conicere*) as to what it is like (cf. *PI* 4). This he regards as a fatal objection against Anselm’s ontological argument. According to Gaunilo, God is not capable of being thought in the way Anselm’s ontological arguments require God to be thinkable. Against Gaunilo, Anselm insists that conjectures concerning the nature of God can indeed be made: thus, a higher good known to us will be more similar to the most perfect being than a lower good (cf. *R8*). To refute Gaunilo’s claim that the most perfect being must be inconceivable and hence unthinkable, Anselm proposes the following distinction:

“But even if it were true that that a-greater-than-which-cannot-be-thought cannot be thought or understood, it would not, however, be false that ‘than which a greater cannot be thought’ can be thought and understood. For just as (...) one can think ‘unthinkable’, although that to which it corresponds to be unthinkable cannot be thought, so also, when it is said ‘than which nothing greater can be thought’, there is no doubt at all that what is heard can be thought and understood, even if the thing-than-which-a greater-cannot-be-thought cannot be thought or understood.” (*R9*)

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<sup>43</sup> Another example of an advocate of the ontological argument who is not happy with *P15* is F. Hermann; cf. “Der ontologische Gottesbeweis”, in: *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 44 (2002), 251, note 26: the reasoning of *P15* is (my translation) “untenable due to its inconsistency”.

According to Anselm, then, there is a difference between ‘thinking the concept’ of a thing and ‘thinking the thing’ conceived of ‘itself’. However, Anselm does not say much about the nature of this difference, nor does Logan.<sup>44</sup> We can, perhaps, understand this distinction in the following manner: to ‘think the concept’ of a thing means to understand its definition (or a description of it that captures something essential); to ‘think the thing itself’ means to understand its definition *and* to seize all its essential properties.

Does this make sense? Well, I think it does. Consider, first, the well-known definition of a ‘person’ by Boethius. To understand this expression is not only to ‘think the concept’ of a person, but also ‘to think’ and to understand—supposing the definition is true—‘the thing itself’. This is because the definition contains all the essential properties of a person: its individuality, substantiality, and rationality. Now consider the expression “the entire set of Anselm’s writings”. Whoever understands this expression, ‘thinks the concept’ of this set, but normally does not ‘think the thing itself’, even if he might do so with the help of a complete list of Anselm’s writings. Finally, consider the expression “the set of all prime numbers” (a set being such that all its elements are essential to it). To understand this expression, for us, is to ‘think the concept’ of this infinite set. It is never to ‘think the thing itself’, because a finite mind is incapable of thinking it thus. And the same holds true of God as X: one can understand the formula ‘that than which a greater cannot be thought’ and thus think God according to His concept, as is presupposed by the ontological proof. However, God cannot be ‘thought himself’; God is greater than can be thought.

I can think of at least two possible reasons why this is so. (1) The ontological argument takes as its starting point the description of God as a most perfect being (X). By this description, we can grasp something essential of God, and of God alone. To this extent, God can be conceived of and thought by us. But it does not allow us to grasp the entire essence of God. The whole essence of God cannot be grasped by any description. God, that is, cannot be defined. And in that respect, God is inconceivable and unthinkable. If we know that there is (one single) most perfect being, then we know that God exists. But we do not fathom entirely what it means that God exists if we know that a most perfect being exists. (2) Here is another way of reconciling the conclusion of *P15* (that God is ‘greater than can be thought’) with the ontological proof: The description of God as a most perfect being *is* a complete essential definition of God, albeit not a generic one. God is not essentially a most perfect being *and something else*. In that respect, God can be thought. Yet we cannot wholly understand God’s essence, because there are perfections of which we may now not have a notion, or because there are infinitely many perfections so that we cannot form a concept of them all. We cannot hence grasp all of God’s essential properties. And in that respect, God is inconceivable and unthinkable. Again, If we know that there is (one single) most perfect being, we know that God exists. But we do not fathom entirely what it means that God exists if we know that a most perfect being exists.

There may be other reasons why God as X is ‘greater than can be thought’ that do not affect the meaningfulness of the proposition “God is X”. But these two—and especially the second, I should say—are rather promising candidates. What Kenny and others have failed to

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<sup>44</sup> Logan briefly mentions this distinction but does not analyse it; cf. 195.

distinguish is (a) the property referred to by Anselm when calling God something ‘greater than can be thought’, and (b) the property of being altogether unthinkable.<sup>45</sup> Unlike the latter notion, the former does not exclude God’s being able to be thought in the weak sense of God’s being thinkable according to the concept ‘X’. And this alone, as Logan rightly observes, seems to be the sense required by the ontological argument.

*Reading Anselm’s Proslogion* is a very stimulating and thought-provoking study. Any Anselm scholar—historians, philosophers and theologians alike—will profit from reading it. It is rich in insights and lucidly written throughout; the reasoning is always clear. One of its merits is that the author does not only consider the literature on Anselm written in English—although French-, Italian-, or German-speaking scholars might still wish for more. My various critical remarks should not obscure the fact that Logan’s work is an important contribution both to the historiography of Anselm’s argument and to the debate about its significance today. As Alvin Plantinga remarked thirty-five years ago, the claim that some version of the ontological argument is sound “is often met with puzzled outrage or baffled rage.”<sup>46</sup> One may hope that the reception of Ian Logan’s book on the *Proslogion* will prove that nowadays, more broad-minded attitudes prevail.

Anselm, *Monologion*, ed. F.S. Schmitt, *S. Anselmi Cantuariensis Archiepiscopi opera omnia*, Stuttgart: Frommann, <sup>2</sup>1984, vol. 1, 1–87.

Anselm, *Proslogion*, ed. F.S. Schmitt, *S. Anselmi Cantuariensis Archiepiscopi opera omnia*, Stuttgart: Frommann, <sup>2</sup>1984, vol. 1, 89–122 (= P).

Anselm, *Responsio editoris (ad Proslogion)*, ed. F.S. Schmitt, *S. Anselmi Cantuariensis Archiepiscopi opera omnia*, Stuttgart: Frommann, <sup>2</sup>1984, vol. 1, 130–39 (= R).

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Anselm, *Cur deus homo*, ed. F.S. Schmitt, *S. Anselmi Cantuariensis Archiepiscopi opera omnia*, Stuttgart: Frommann, <sup>2</sup>1984, vol. 2, 37–133.

Anselm, *De casu diaboli*, ed. F.S. Schmitt, *S. Anselmi Cantuariensis Archiepiscopi opera omnia*, Stuttgart: Frommann, <sup>2</sup>1984, vol. 1, 227–276.

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<sup>45</sup> Another perspicuous example of this confusion is J. Marenbon’s claim: “[i]f being able to be thought – conceivability – is made equivalent to possibility, then God, being greater than can be thought *and so not able to be thought*, is impossible”, cf. *Medieval Philosophy: An Historical and Philosophical Introduction*, 128–129 (my italics).

<sup>46</sup> A. Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974, 217.

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