

Anselm's Proslogion: The Desire for the Word

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The paper confronts an important tension in Anselm's project in the Proslogion that mirrors a conflict in how the Proslogion has been read. Some readers see the Proslogion as the successful search for necessary and indubitable arguments, while others read the work as expressing pious incapacity to understand God. Historians of philosophy tend to do the first, historians of religion and spirituality, the second. The paper argues that Anselm's project in the Proslogion, is one that Anselm himself views as both necessary and paradoxical. The paper examines the way in which "faith seeking understanding," the ontological argument, and the derivation of the divine attributes from the original formula in the Proslogion repeat this pattern of yielding conclusions which are both necessary and paradoxical.

Anselm does not just claim that language and experience allow the conclusion that God exists; he claims that neither language nor experience make sense without God. However, Anselm holds with just as much fervor and excess that neither language nor experience can make any satisfying sense of God. This dyad of views is common to any number of medieval thinkers, but Anselm pushes both of these principles to such extremes that together they become two halves of the paradox, that the nature of God is both inaccessible and obvious. His heroic efforts put me in mind (anachronistically) of St. Ignatius's exhortation to pray as if everything depended on God and act as if everything depended on oneself. Anselm is claiming something analogous, reasoning as if human intelligence can understand God, the most intelligible object, and praying as if reason is completely unequal to the task of grasping anything about God, even in the most incomplete sense.

There is a tendency, I think, to read only half of this diptych in Anselm, either the half claiming to have found necessary and indubitable arguments, or those expressing pious incapacity to understand God. Historians of philosophy tend to do the first, historians of religion and spirituality, the second.¹ Marilyn Adams, recognizing both motives in Anselm, creates a distinction to dissolve the apparent contradiction, contrasting what it is to understand God, at least to some extent (the project of the treatises), with what it is to see or experience God (something which could never be achieved in this life).² While this is clearly a distinction

¹ For theologians like Anselm Stolz, Anselm's starting point, like his end point, is in theology. He concludes that "faith seeking understanding" means the attempt to "attain a vision of God through an understanding of what the faith says about God." Anselm Stolz, "Anselm's Theology in the Proslogion," in The Many-Faced Argument, ed. John Hick and Arthur C. McGill (New York: McMillan, 1967), 185-6. For an even stronger reading of Anselm as mystical theologian see Paul Evdokimov, "L'aspect apophatique de l'argument de Saint Anselme," in Spicilegium Beccense (Paris: J. Vrin, 1959), 233-258. More philosophically orientated commentators like Adams, Hopkins and Richardson, Henry and others ultimately agree or would agree with Adams that even if Anselm has mystical or religious aspirations, his project is an intellectual and ultimately philosophical one, both in terms of its means and ends.

² Marilyn Adams, "Praying the Proslogion: Anselm's Theological Method," in The Rationality of Belief (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 17-8. Marcia Colish seems to recognize the same duality in Anselm without seeing

Anselm implicitly makes and would recognize, Adams seems to use it to domesticate the problem, to take the anguish out of it in a way that is not consonant with Anselm's aspirations for his work. For, according to Anselm, the purpose for which the human mind is created is not, as Kant thought, to recognize the moral law, but to know and love the supreme good. As Anselm argues in the Monologion, the rational power is the power to distinguish "the good from the not-good, the greater good from the lesser."³ This power is useless unless its distinctions are true and unless it then love the greater good over the less, and, ultimately, the supreme good above all others.⁴ Since, then, what matters to Anselm passionately is direct and immediate access to God and since this is the passion that motivates his rational explorations, the impossibility of reaching the former with the latter creates excruciating tension for Anselm.⁵ This tension creates an impasse Anselm reaches again and again, and attempts to overcome again and again.⁶ Anselm seeks to establish (and sees himself as successful in establishing) with necessary reasons what he holds at the same time is paradoxical.

The aspiration to necessary reasons is most obvious. What Anselm strives for, not only but most famously in the Proslogion, are arguments that seem to start with nothing but end with everything, arguments whose conclusions are so thoroughly necessary that they are indubitable, but also so unexpected that they are astounding. What first time reader has not blinked twice on coming to the end of the ontological argument wondering how such seemingly unproblematic substitutions end in such a stunning conclusion. Thus in the Proslogion, Anselm takes as his project convincing the fool who says in his heart there is no God that God indeed must exist and cannot be thought not to exist. In the Cur Deus Homo Anselm wants to show the non-believer, functioning without any knowledge of Christ, that the Incarnation is the best and only solution for the human predicament.

We also see the reflection of Anselm's desire for necessary conclusions in his methods: the use of equipollent propositions and pure introspection, unmixed with references to authority. In arguments by equipollent propositions, the substitution of equivalent expressions for one another, Anselm forms a set of unbreakable links between premise and conclusion because each expression in the progression of the argument is the equivalent of that for which it is substituted. Anselm's own preference is for the Proslogion's "single argument" over the Monologion's

it as particularly problematic. Colish, Mirror of Language, 93. She writes, "With the proper attitude and technique, then, words about God can be true and thus necessary. At the same time, Anselm stresses, no statement about God can be totally accurate or totally convincing."

³ Anselm, Monologion in S Anselmi Cantuariensis Archiepiscopi: Opera Omnia, ed. F. S. Schmitt, vol. 1, (Stuttgart: Freidrich Fromman, 1984), chapter 68, 78, 25-6 - 79, 1. Hereafter the Monologion as well as the Proslogion and other works of Anselm will be cited from Schmitt's critical edition. Work will be cited by chapter numbers as well as page and line numbers in Schmitt's edition.

⁴ Monologion 68, 78, 23-4, 79, 1-3.

⁵ Hence Anselm would reject the separation of the spiritual and intellectual projects, for example, in Aquinas distinguishes between two sense of theology as wisdom (in one sense, the wise man is like the virtuous man who judges correctly about virtue from his own virtuous nature; in another sense, the wise man is the one who has knowledge of virtue but not virtue itself). Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae I, q. 1, a. 6, ad 3.

⁶ Cf. Emilio Bencinvenega, Logic and Other Nonsense. Bencinvenega also takes this problem to be central to Anselm's work. The different chapters of this text proposes different ways to understand Anselm's project.

multiple arguments. The Proslogion's chain of reasoning is so integrated that the links seem to disappear. Further, the lack of authorities and citations from scripture in Anselm's writing creates a single line of thought that goes down in a single swallow. Objections are considered but they are the product of and not an intrusion on the single line of thought he pursues relentlessly. Unlike later scholastic disputed questions, in which the sources are explicitly cited, Anselm so completely absorbs the tradition that the beams and bricks from which his arguments are constructed merge completely into his structure, making his voice the only audible one.

But Anselm is not only interested in establishing the necessity of the conclusions he works toward but also in displaying their paradoxical character. In Cur Deus Homo, Anselm creates an inextricable conundrum for which the solution, the Incarnation, is the necessary but also paradoxical conclusion. In the Monologion, as in the Proslogion, the paradoxes are those that follow from perfection, perfect being, and perfect language. Anselm makes language the metaphor for the Incarnation as the word made flesh, and the Incarnation becomes the model according to which to understand the shortcomings of human language. But the perfect Word of God is not a word in any ordinary sense. The Word, second person of the Trinity, is identical with God; hence, it does not merely point to but is its speaker and its referent. Further, the Word as exemplar for creation is more really the thing than the thing itself. Both the Monologion and Proslogion consider the existence and attributes of God as following from a consideration of God's nature with ineluctable necessity at the same time as they understand that nature to be absolutely impenetrable. The moment that occurs over and over again in these treatises is one where Anselm creates the greatest distance between word and thing, human and divine, and then manages somehow, as Gillian Evans puts it, to "spin threads across the chasms" he has created.⁷ This pattern of creating chasms and spinning threads across them is what I want to trace through Anselm's Proslogion.

The opening prayer of the Proslogion sets up the paradoxes that Anselm will attempt to overcome. Anselm prays to God that he might find him but wonders, "Lord, if you are not here, where will I search for you, being absent? But if you are everywhere, why don't I see you present?"⁸ Where, Anselm continues, is the "inaccessible light" in which God dwells, and how might one come to it? The condition of exile as Anselm describes it not only implies distance, but also infinite distance and ignorance; addressing God, Anselm writes, the exiled "desire to come to you, and your habitation is inaccessible. . . long to discover you, and do not know your place."⁹ These are not excesses of rhetoric; they are central philosophical and theological problems, Anselm's version of the Meno paradox. On the one hand, if one does not know God or that he exists, then there seems to be no path toward the discovery of these things, for Anselm concedes that God is infinitely beyond human comprehension and experience. How, then, can

⁷ Gillian Evans, "The 'Secure Technician': Varieties of Paradox in the Writings of St. Anselm," Vivarium 13, 1 (1975): 20. Evans, thus, also notes Anselm's penchant for paradox, arguing that he creates them in his prayers and meditations and resolves them in his logical writings. I find Anselm both creates and resolves paradox not just in the devotional writings but also in the more philosophical writings and devotional writings.

⁸ Proslogion, 1, 98, 2-3.

⁹ Proslogion, 1, 98, 3-7, 9-12.

anyone assert anything about God, who is by definition ineffable? If, on the other hand, one does know God, no proof should be necessary, since God's existence should be self-evident and indubitable. God should be so thoroughly present that his absence cannot even be thought. The notion of God as that than which none greater can be thought is meant to overcome these paradoxes, but what Anselm finds both on his own and in his discussion with Gaunilo is that in an important sense, it only repeats them.

"Faith Seeking Understanding"

Anselm constructs his path toward God by means of 'faith seeking understanding,' yet he pushes both the paths of faith and of reason so strongly and exclusively that he seems to contradict himself. In prayer, Anselm places on God the responsibility both for his seeking and his finding God. Since, trapped by the limits of his own nature, he cannot seek that which he cannot know because it is so radically distant from him, God must perform the act both of moving him toward God and of revealing himself to Anselm. Anselm prays, "Teach me to seek you, and show yourself to me seeking you, for I cannot seek you unless you teach me, nor find you unless you show yourself."¹⁰ What he writes in the form of prayer to God in the Proslogion he writes in more polemical terms in the Epistola de Incarnatione Verbi, "May it happen that those who first attempt to ascend the ladder of faith through understanding (intellectum) be forced into many errors by the defect of their understanding."¹¹

Nonetheless, the task Anselm sets for reason is to prove that God exists, even to one unwilling to believe it. Anselm describes the fruit of his search for understanding through reasoning this way: "what I formerly believed by your gift, I now so understand by your illumination, that if I were unwilling to believe you to be, I would not be able not to understand it".¹² As we have seen, Anselm describes the arguments of the Monologion, Proslogion, and Cur Deus Homo as based on reason alone, apparently designed to convince the unbeliever. Like Anselm's assertions both that he has found God and that he cannot even in principle reach God, Anselm seems to claim both that faith is the only path toward God and that reason can make its way alone. The juxtaposition of the prayer and the argument shows, once again, Anselm's peculiar version of later Ignatian spirituality, praying as if everything depends on God and reasoning as if everything depends on him.

¹⁰ Proslogion, 1, 100, 8-10.

¹¹ Epistola de Incarnatione Verbi, 7, 10-12, 8, 1.

¹² Proslogion 4, 104, 5-7. Some have concluded from this and other passages, as Koyré does, that Anselm does not intend to convince or even engage the fool but only confound or silence him, showing that his position is nonsensical. Alexandre Koyré, L'Idée de Dieu dans la philosophie de S. Anselme (Paris: J. Vrin, 1923). Barth holds a similar view. Karl Barth, Anselm: Fides Quarens Intellectum, trans. W. Robertson (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1960), 106. But I take it that Anselm does not mean to imply by this passage that all he expects to do is to reduce the unbeliever to seeing the incoherence of his own position. Rather that is the minimum Anselm hopes to accomplish.

Commentators have tried to resolve the apparent conflict in various ways. The extreme positions were classically articulated by Karl Barth (the presupposition of the name is a theological one, and its exploration is undertaken in faith) and Etienne Gilson (Anselm is “recklessly” rationalistic, his pretensions for reason “indefensible”).¹³ Others have argued that Anselm contradicts himself without knowing it.¹⁴ Still others have argued in different ways that Anselm’s project is of reasoning within faith, but that it might, though not designed for this purpose, be convincing to those without Christian faith who might approach it with an open mind.¹⁵ On this view Anselm intends his arguments both for the faithful and the fool.¹⁶ As Katherine Rogers has argued, Anselm intends “one and same argument” to do two different things: “convert the non-believer and help the Christian attain intellectus.”¹⁷

Anselm’s response to Gaunilo offers some evidence for both. Anselm opens by saying that he will reply not to the fool in whose name Gaunilo writes but to the Catholic that Gaunilo is.¹⁸ But to Gaunilo’s objection that he can have no idea of the being than which none greater can be conceived, Anselm gives two replies. One is to the fool (relying on the ability of the mind to order greater and lesser goods), and the other is to the “Catholic” (appealing to the Pauline notion that the invisible things of God are seen through the things that are made).¹⁹ Part of the “single” in “single argument” is, then, a single argument convincing to both the believer and non-believer.

This double reliance on faith and reason is also evident in the sources for the argument, insofar as there are any. First, as is well-known, the ‘fool’ of Anselm’s argument is a figure found in the psalms. John Clayton makes the point that Anselm would have “confronted the fool of the psalms” at least twice a week in psalm 13 and 52 in the Benedictine cycle of weekly prayers.²⁰ Thus an idea which would have been deeply entrenched in Anselm’s prayer life

¹³ Barth, 55-59 and Koyré, 204 ff. Etienne Gilson, Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages (New York: Scribner’s Son, 1951), 26.

¹⁴ M. J. Charlesworth, “Introduction,” in St. Anselm’s “Proslogion” with “A Reply on Behalf of the Fool” by Gaunilo and “The Author’s Reply to Gaunilo,” ed. and trans. M. J. Charlesworth, (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1965), 34-40. Charlesworth claims that Anselm’s practice is rationalist but that Anselm’s description of his work in terms of an older patristic conception of theology does not match his practice. David Pailin contends that the arguments are meant to be based only on reason but that they assume a kind of “Neoplatonic” faith. David A. Pailin, “Credo et Intelligam as the Method of Theology and of its Verification: A Study in Anselm’s Proslogion,” in Analecta Anselmiana 4, 2 (1975): 120.

¹⁵ André Hayen, “The Role of the Fool in St. Anselm and the Necessarily Apostolic Character of True Christian Reflection,” in The Many-Faced Argument, ed. John Hick and Arthur C. McGill (New York: McMillan, 1967), 176.

¹⁶ Like many, I think that the ‘fool’ in Anselm’s argument is not so much an atheist but the atheist or at least agnostic within the believer. Hayen, for example, describes the fool as “the principle of foolishness which struggles against God in all the fools.” Hayen, 169. Cf. Colish, Mirror of Language 86, who calls the non-believer in the Proslogion “a hypothetical straw man rather than an organized or contemporary threat to the Christian faith.”

¹⁷ Katherine Rogers, “Can Christianity be Proven?: St. Anselm of Canterbury on Faith and Reason,” Anselm Studies 2 (1988): 465.

¹⁸ Quid ad haec respondeat editor ipsius libelli, 130, 3-5. Hereafter Responsio editoris.

¹⁹ Responsio editoris 8, 137, 28-30; 138, 1-3.

²⁰ John Clayton, “The Otherness of Anselm,” Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie 37, 2 (1995): 136.

inspires him to construct an argument addressing those lacking faith. Further, van Buren argues that the Psalms contain many descriptions of God which Anselm's formula, the being than which none greater can be conceived, seems to echo. He cites for example, Psalm 77: 13 "who is so great a God as our God?" and Psalm 25: 3 "The Lord is a great God and a great King above all gods."²¹ Other possible sources include Seneca and Augustine.²² I find it fitting and consonant with the feel of the text that Anselm should have been inspired by all these sources - Hebrew, Roman, and Christian - and that Anselm should hear them all speaking with the same voice.

But Anselm clearly intends more than a kind of double reliance on faith and reason; his description of his own method is not faith and reason but faith seeking understanding. The Proslogion begins from faith in several senses. First, I think it is clear from Anselm's practice that he does not mean by faith the presupposition of all or even some of the basic principles of Christian faith articulated in the creed. He presupposes faith in the sense that faith poses the questions for which he seeks understanding, such as the existence of God, the nature of God or the reasons for the Incarnation. Further, he presupposes faith in the sense that faith entails an intense desire to know about the subjects he explores by reason.²³ What makes the Proslogion possible is surely the passion expressed in its opening prayer. It moves Anselm to shake off the torpor of the mind and awaken in it the desire to love God; as we will see in the prayers, this first movement toward God is for Anselm the sine qua non of the journey to God. Lastly, he presupposes faith in the concepts and rational processes of the human mind.²⁴ To reject those concepts and processes, which is what Gaunilo attempts in the name of the fool, is for Anselm to be irrational, to have rejected even one's own ability to think and argue. Assuming that the mind is rational, like assuming the desire to reach God, is for Anselm to assume something so basic that it is hard to object to as a starting point for the argument.

In Brian Stock's problematic, the development of literacy, faith is to understanding as the oral is to the written. Thus, Stock describes faith as "a received text" and understanding, "an established one," and faith seeking understanding is going from a received text to an established one.²⁵ Like Stock, I would describe the movement from faith seeking understanding in linguistic terms: faith is the desire for and belief that reason can forge an unbreakable link between words and things; to seek understanding is to move toward making that link.

²¹ Paul M. van Buren, "Anselm's Formula and the Logic of 'God'," Religious Studies 9 (1973): 280.

²² Augustine describes God as "that to which none is superior" in De Libero Arbitrio Voluntatis II, vi, 14, v, 12.

²³ Cf. Adolf Kolping, Anselms Proslogion-Beweis der Existenz Gottes (Bonn: Bouvier, 1939), 15-20, and Barth, 17.

²⁴ Cf. Southern, Portrait in Landscape, 125.

²⁵ Stock, Implications of Literacy, 343.

The 'Argument':²⁶ Conceiving the Inconceivable God

What is, I think, peculiar to Anselm is not just the project of faith seeking understanding, but also a sense of the completion of that journey as both ineluctable and impossible. No part of Anselm's work exemplifies his particular way of shaping of the trajectory from faith to understanding more than the Proslogion's 'unum argumentum'. We can see this if we go back through the way in which the different ways of describing faith seeking understanding operate in the Proslogion. The description of God as 'that than which none greater can be conceived' is, he says, what he believes God to be and wishes to understand.²⁷ If faith in one sense is that which proposes the problems for reason to solve, in the Proslogion's opening prayer, the task faith gives to reason is described both as accessing the inaccessible and comprehending the incomprehensible, and as making visible what is always present, and locating what is everywhere. Anselm thus not only creates a chasm for reason to cross but also claims that in the formula it has already been crossed, or rather that there is no chasm at all, that what faith seeks is already given in the very thinking of God. The equivalence of the paradoxical with the necessary accomplished in the Monologion in different steps, the Proslogion accomplishes in one step, for Anselm claims with this formula to make self-evident what he also holds cannot be made evident to any degree.

Faith as the desire to traverse the gap between what faith believes and what reason understands is also expressed in the attempt to think 'that than which none greater can be thought'. For to think it is to reach God via a single, long extension of the mind upward, the shape of the ascensus mentis ad deum which pervades Anselm's writing. Thus, the formula itself describes faith, for it describes the striving of the mind to transcend itself, to grasp what is beyond it. The aim of Anselm's argument is to show that the object of his desire actually exists, and he inscribes that desire in the language he uses to make the transition from desire to possession, that is, in the formula itself.

It is prayer which describes the desire of faith to make what it desires present. The formula also captures, some commentators have noted, the essence of prayer. For in prayer, Aidan Nichols points out, "one must never be content with one's current images of God but

²⁶ There has been great debate about whether the "unum argumentum" of the Proslogion means the formula "that than which none greater can be conceived," the arguments of chapters two and three proving the existence and necessary being of God, or the derivation of the major attributes of God that occupies the whole text. While it is clearly anachronistic to think of the argument for God's existence as the single argument, in the end I am not sure it matters whether we think of the argument as the original formula or the formula together with the conclusions that follow from it, for Anselm thinks of the attributes as following as necessarily as existence from the original formula. On this point, cf. Barth, 13-14. For a full account of the literature taking these different views, as well as an account based on the notion of 'argumentum' in Medieval dialectic, specifically Boethius's notion of argument, see Toivo Holpainen, Dialectic and Theology in the Eleventh Century (New York: E. J. Brill, 1996), 133-45. Holpainen, however, seems to assume Anselm's arguments (in the modern sense) to be syllogistic rather than by equipollent propositions, and thus the formula for him is a "middle term" joining the subject, God, and other predicates Anselm discusses in the Proslogion.

²⁷ Proslogion 2, 101, 3-5.

strive constantly to transcend them towards a reality which is of its nature *semper maior*.”²⁸ This is exactly the path on which the notion of ‘that than which none greater can be conceived’ sets the mind. For Paul van Buren, Anselm has captured in his formula the essence of a religious sense of God for “religion consists in going to the limits of language, to the edge of nonsense.” The longing that religion embodies “finds linguistic form in stumbling, stuttering attempts to say the most that could possibly be said” about God.²⁹ Prayer is the point of intersection of language and desire in a special way. For the project of prayer is to reach God in words; prayer both expresses the desire for God and aims to effect union with him. Thinking the ‘being than which none greater can be conceived’ does all these things at once; representing succinctly the paradox of prayer: simultaneously expressing the infinite distance between the human mind and God and traversing it.

Lastly, as I noted above, the faith that Anselm begins from is in one sense, faith in reason. Anselm's argument, like any kind of reasoning, Anselm would claim, assumes the ability of the mind to form concepts which are not mere fictions but which capture and reveal reality, at least to some degree. Many have noted that there is at least a sense in which the formula is a merely “subjective” concept, that is, that it tells us more (or even only) about our own abilities to conceive rather than anything about objective reality.³⁰ But in a certain sense the name or formula is no different from any other human conception; all conceptions are the sum of what we think something to be but claim to be about the thing itself. This particular conception is more expressly and more perfectly both a statement about the human mind and its limits at the same time that it, again more expressly and more perfectly, purports to refer beyond itself to the thing itself. For, on the one hand, the formula is empty of any content directly about the thing itself, referring only to the limits of human conception; on the other hand, unique among all conceptions, this one is guaranteed to refer to the object it names.

Moreover, the formula serves as the key to understanding its necessary existence and the rest of its attributes, i.e., because this being is that than which none greater can be conceived, it is everything it is better to be than not to be. As shall see, however, following out the implications of this same name lead to the conclusion that almost nothing can be said about it. In his reply to Gaunilo, Anselm is forced into the specifically verbal version of this paradox. For after responding that even the fool must conceive of something when he says that than which none greater can be conceived, Anselm argues that even if this being is inconceivable, it can be conceived as inconceivable. “In a certain way,” he writes, “‘inconceivable’ can be conceived although that cannot be conceived of which it is appropriate to say [that it is] ‘inconceivable’”.³¹

²⁸ Aidan Nichols, “Anselm of Canterbury and the Language of Perfection,” *Downside Review* 103 (1985): 207.

²⁹ Paul M. van Buren, “Anselm’s Formula and the Logic of God,” 285-6. Van Buren contends, however, that the formula works on the religious but not the rational or philosophical level. Yet Anselm clearly intends for it to do both, so it remains to be seen how the formula comes out of rational as well as religious faith.

³⁰ Arthur C. McGill, “Recent Discussion of Anselm’s Argument,” in *The Many-Faced Argument*, ed. John Hick and Arthur C. McGill (New York: McMillan, 1967), 69.

³¹ *Responsio editoris* 9, 138, 7-8. Dazeley and Gombocz contend that Anselm has here created two levels of language by claiming that x is unthinkable but claiming that ‘x is unthinkable’ is thinkable. They argue that this creates a problem for Anselm’s argument. Although they explain the problem in multiple ways, I think the simplest

Moreover, Anselm writes, “nothing prohibits ‘ineffable’ from being said, although that cannot be spoken of which is said to be ‘ineffable’.”³² Thus the formula repeats the paradox of the opening prayer in which God is both self-evident and inaccessible; it is thus both uniquely opaque and uniquely revelatory of its object; as a piece of language it is both uniquely impoverished and uniquely powerful.

The reason that Anselm assumes is also the ability of the mind to distinguish and order greater and lesser degrees of being; it is faith in what Louis Mackey calls the “logic of hierarchy.”³³ Anselm makes this reliance explicit in his reply to Gaunilo; Gaunilo can and does conceive of this being and Anselm explains how: “For anything which is less good, in so far as it is good, is similar to the greater good. Hence it is clear to any rational mind whatever that by ascending from the lesser goods to the greater good from which something greater can be known, we can make a fairly good conjecture about that greater than which nothing can be conceived.”³⁴ Anselm takes it as evident that being in the mind and being in reality are ordered as lower to higher.³⁵ As Louis Mackey points out, the first and most basic ordering of lower to higher which makes the others possible, is that of word to thing. “Unless,” Mackey writes, “we can rely on the binding of language to reality, none of the other hierarchies we imagine - all of which purport to represent the aggregate of things in an array of words, - can be trusted.”³⁶ Since in this one (and only one) case, that to which the name refers must exist, the argument proves the possibility of ordering lower to higher in the form of the order of words to things. It is like the point of pyramid uniting language and being, guaranteeing that language and being, which further down the pyramid are more distantly related, nonetheless share a ground which guarantees their

way of understanding it is to say that if Anselm can claim by this maneuver that the being than which none greater can be conceived is thinkable and on another level unthinkable, Gaunilo can claim the same thing, i.e., that he can think the formula in so far as he understands the words, but that he cannot think it at the level of understanding how existence must be predicated of it. See Howard L. Dazeley and Wolfgang L. Gombocz, “Interpreting Anselm as Logician,” *Synthese* 40 (1979): 86-90. Anselm cannot, then, as he does later in his reply, claim that Gaunilo contradicts himself. I think Anselm’s response would be that there are different levels of language and of grasping the significance of the formula but that one must move through them in the order in which he does in the *Proslogion* itself. For it is only because he understands the formula that he can derive its attributes and then understand the sense in which he cannot understand the being named by the formula. To put it in a way Anselm might appreciate, one can and one must understand the formula to understand why it cannot be understood.

³² *Responsio editoris* 9, 138, 6-7.

³³ Mackey, *Peregrinations*, 80.

³⁴ *Responsio editoris* 8, 14-18.

³⁵ There are different views about how much of an assumption this actually is. Southern, like many other contemporary philosophers and commentators, takes the ordering of being in reality and being in the mind to be a specifically Neo-platonic assumption. Southern, *Portrait in Landscape*, 134. Mackey argues, however, that both the atheist and theist in their dispute effectively agree that real existence is greater than ideal being or else they would have no significant dispute. “It is,” he concludes, “a presupposition that could be denied only at the cost of trivializing the point at issue.” Mackey, *Peregrinations*, 82. Mackey is right, but I think others might reply that exactly what commentators claim invalidates the argument is not its assumption that real and ideal existence are different but its assumption that they are ordered as lesser to greater. For modern logic there is no relationship between existence in the mind and in reality, and thus no way in which they can be ordered. See for example, Dazeley and Gombocz, “Interpreting Anselm as Logician,” 91.

³⁶ Mackey, *Peregrinations*, 80.

connection. The formula, in Mackey's words, "locate[s] the moment of linguistic soundness, the plenitude of presence from which other language may deviate but to which it is always bound."³⁷

For all that, however, there must be a distinction as well as a necessary and unbreakable connection between the words of the formula and the conclusion that what it names must exist. Conceiving and understanding the formula must be distinct so that Anselm can get to his conclusion without assuming it, but they must be inextricably linked so that once the notion is conceived the being it names is understood to exist. Gaunilo, as Mackey has pointed out, attempts to "drive wedges" between word, thought, and thing which are linked in the argument.³⁸ Gaunilo argues that he can say the words but has no conception or understanding to go along with it. He grasps it, he says, only "according to the word," i.e., "as by one who does not know it and only conceives according to the movement of the mind produced by hearing the word and attempting to fashion for itself the signification of the perceived word."³⁹

In his response, Anselm must rejoin word, thought, and thing Gaunilo has divided without so completely merging them that his argument is unnecessary or fallacious. Anselm refuses to let Gaunilo make the claim that he has no understanding of the formula. For, Anselm argues, if he understands the words, he understands, and if he understands, the notion is in the understanding. And if in the understanding, it is understood.⁴⁰ Moreover, Anselm reminds Gaunilo, if he conceives at all on hearing the formula, then he conceives of a being which cannot even be conceived not to exist, and if he does not conceive, then he cannot conceive of the non-existence of that being.⁴¹ However, Anselm distinguishes some things more sharply than Gaunilo. For example, he claims that conceiving the non-existence of the being greater than which none can be conceived is different from conceiving the non-existence of any other object, but Gaunilo asserts that they are exactly the same.⁴² Gaunilo has claimed that God's non-existence (like that of any other real object) cannot be understood but can surely be conceived, as Gaunilo or the fool himself does. Anselm counters that we can conceive but not understand the non-existence of anything that actually exists, except of the being than which none greater can be conceived, of which we can neither conceive nor understand the non-existence. But Anselm makes a yet finer distinction. For he says that in one sense no existing object can be conceived not to exist, because then one would conceive existence and non-existence at the same time. On the other hand, he says we can conceive of the non-existence of objects we know to exist because we can conceive of their non-existence, while we know their existence.⁴³ Thus Anselm not only

³⁷ Mackey, *Peregrinations*, 81.

³⁸ Mackey, *Peregrinations*, 89.

³⁹ *Quod ad haec respondeat quidam pro insipiente* 4, 127, 19-21. Hereafter *Pro insipiente*.

⁴⁰ *Responsio editoris* 2, 132.

⁴¹ *Responsio editoris* 3, 133.

⁴² *Pro Insipiente* 2, 125, 14-20.

⁴³ *Responsio editoris* 4, 134, 10-18. Anselm seems to know his distinction is almost too fine to be clear, for after making it, he adds, "If one will distinguish between the two senses of the statement . . ." as if to say that it is no small feat to understand his distinction. *Responsio editoris*. 4, 134, 13-14.

distinguishes between understanding and conceiving the non-existence of real objects, he adds a distinction between two different ways of conceiving the non-existence of real objects.

My point is that the simplicity of the original argument becomes, in the debate with Gaunilo, a web of fairly complex and fine distinctions. Anselm's reply to Gaunilo combines identifications too obvious to be doubted (and thus seems to consist of arguments which have the form, "these must be the same because they are the same") and distinctions so fine they seem almost without a difference. Thus, the reply, like the original text, seems to waver between the plainly obvious and the hopelessly obscure. In that sense, Anselm keeps repeating his original experience in searching for the formula. That single argument was, he writes in the prologue, both tremendously elusive – in despair he almost gave up his search for it as it kept escaping him – and almost perfectly self-evident – so clear that it forced itself upon him.⁴⁴ Southern captures Anselm's original hope as he set out to find his argument in the intuition that "if God exists, there must be a level of experience at which it is impossible to think of God as not existing." The ambiguity in the argument, Southern goes on to explain, is in figuring out "what level this impossibility can be made to appear." "Must," he asks, "the demonstration await the experience of the Beatific Vision? Or can it, at the very opposite extreme, be made out at the level of linguistic-logical analysis?"⁴⁵ Southern quite rightly concludes that Anselm claims the latter and Gaunilo the former. Anselm cements that perception in his claim that for someone to reject his argument amounts to saying that he cannot conceive or understand what he says.⁴⁶ "If such a one is found," Anselm concludes, "not only should his word be rejected but also he himself should be condemned."⁴⁷

However, it is also true that in some sense that Anselm also claims the opposite, that demonstration of God's existence and nature is indefinitely postponed. He does so explicitly in the passages I have already cited (and to which I return below) where he concedes that God is greater than can be understood. But further there is a kind of recognition of it in Anselm's direction that Gaunilo's objections and his reply must be included in any further publication of the work.⁴⁸ By Anselm's own decree, the possibility of the argument's rejection is given along with his assertion that it cannot be rejected. By this I do not mean that Anselm thinks his own arguments in response to Gaunilo are failures or that they might not be persuasive to Gaunilo or others. Rather, I mean that the fact that he must make them at all is a failure to achieve what he originally aspired to the Proslogion. Gaunilo's very objections show that despite what he says, the non-existence of God can be thought. To be sure, Anselm maintains to the end that it cannot be consistently thought, but while that might satisfy him if his task were only an abstractly intellectual one (for then one could simply write off the rejection of the argument to ignorance

⁴⁴ Proslogion, Prooemium, 93, 10-19.

⁴⁵ Southern, Portrait in Landscape, 135-6.

⁴⁶ Responsio editoris 9, 138, 13-4.

⁴⁷ Responsio editoris 9, 138, 14-15.

⁴⁸ The Life of St. Anselm Archbishop of Canterbury by Eadmer, ed. and trans. R. W. Southern (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), 31.

without looking back), or if the point were only to win no matter how many rounds he might have to go with objectors. But Anselm's project is not merely intellectual, but existential, and his hopes for the project is not just to prove his conclusion but to prove it simply, elegantly, and indubitably with one "single argument." On those terms, Anselm has not succeeded and admits as much.

Following the Logic of Perfection

As many have pointed out, Anselm's text does not stop with the conclusion that God exists. Anselm goes on to follow out the logic of the being than which none greater can be conceived, deriving the rest of the divine attributes from the original formula. In each case, Anselm begins with the notion that God must have a certain quality because it is better to have it than not, but he always ends up showing that there is some contradiction in attributing it to God. So, sensibility seems to require a body; omnipotence seems to include the capacity to do evil, being compassionate seems to mean being subject to passion, and being passionless seems to exclude compassion.⁴⁹ By way of a solution to these problems, Anselm crafts a different sense of each perfection that can be attributed to God. God can perceive but in a higher way, without going through a corporeal sense.⁵⁰ God is compassionate such that, he explains, "when [God] sees our suffering, we feel the effect of mercy but [God] do not feel the affect."⁵¹ God cannot be corrupted, cannot lie, and cannot make what is true false, because, Anselm explains, to do those things is impotence rather than power. These things are called capabilities by "another manner of speaking [*alio genere loquendi*]."⁵² Anselm goes on to explain that we say something is when it is not (saying 'it is so' to confirm a statement about what is not the case) and call something a doing or action when it is a kind of inactivity (e.g., sitting or resting).⁵³ In these cases Anselm exposes the deceptiveness of the surface of language which hides a deeper and sometimes opposite meaning. Anselm, true to his tendency to make paradoxical necessary and vice versa, gives a paradoxical twist to his solution: "since the more one has this power [to do evil, lie, etc.], the more powerful are adversity and perversity in him and the more powerless is he against them."⁵⁴ Having distinguished two senses of power or capacity, Anselm uses the term in two different senses within the same sentence, drawing attention to the tension between the two.

Justice poses a problem both in itself and in terms of its consistency with mercy. In the course of working to solve the problem of how God can be just when he saves the wicked, Anselm seems to make it worse. "For you save the just because justice goes with them, but the damned you free by justice. Those [the just] supported by their merits, these [the unjust] in opposition to their merits. Those knowing the good you have given, these ignoring the evil you

⁴⁹ *Proslogion* 6, 104, 20-22.

⁵⁰ *Proslogion* 6, 105, 4-6.

⁵¹ *Proslogion* 8, 106, 11-12.

⁵² *Proslogion* 7, 105, 12-16.

⁵³ *Proslogion* 7, 105, 18-24.

⁵⁴ *Proslogion* 7, 105, 26-7.

hate.”⁵⁵ When mercy is added to justice, the conundrum deepens. Anselm reasons that if God is merciful because good, and good because just, then he is merciful because just.⁵⁶ But how is God merciful because just? “Help me,” he prays, “so that I may understand what I say.”⁵⁷ The solution requires a distinction only slightly less problematic sounding than these intensifications of the problem. As in the case of mercy, which required a distinction between what we experience versus what God feels, Anselm explains that God is just not because of what is appropriate to the judged but because of what is appropriate to God as the highest good.⁵⁸

Like the formula/argument, in the derivation of these attributes Anselm moves from paradox to resolution to further paradox. These chapters manage to bring to mind both later scholastic developments and more mystical theology. For, on the one hand, the opening discussion of each attribute essentially lays out the reasons on both sides of the question of whether the attribute can belong to God; Anselm then goes on to resolve the question in the manner of a responsio. On the other hand, Anselm tends to run together the reasons pro and contra a quality as a divine property, both in the ‘problem’ phase of his discussion and in the resolution. Both objections and responses sound less like dialectical arguments and more like an attempt to get beyond reason and language, to move toward their breakdown as a way of more closely representing the unrepresentable. What I think is most striking about Anselm is that he takes both projects to be the same. Following out the logic of the divine being leads him to conclusions which are indubitable, found in the identity of word and things, subject and predicate, and paradoxical, signifying the gap between reason or logic and what Anselm is seeking.

In the second half of the text, the pendulum swings and stays on the side of mystical theology. The attributes of sensibility, omnipotence, justice, and compassion follow from the understanding of God as everything that is better to be than not to be. But in chapter eleven, there is a shift. From here on, understanding can no longer be a positive guide; the chain of argument can no longer be from what we think it is better to be to God. Anselm must abandon this line of reasoning as he realizes that it is God who defines what is better and what those “better” attributes consist of: “For that alone is just which you will; and that alone unjust which you do not will.”⁵⁹ After a short survey of the attributes which are by definition the excess of those things in human experience (infinity in time and space),⁶⁰ Anselm reflects on the ambiguous “progress” his argument has made thus far. God is, he concludes, found and not found, seen in part but not wholly.⁶¹ His conclusion, now attempting to escape the limits of his own experience, is that God is not that which none greater can be conceived but is a being “greater than which can be conceived.”⁶² Anselm pauses to note the paradox of his position vis-

⁵⁵ Proslogion 9, 107, 224-26.

⁵⁶ Proslogion 9, 108, 5-7.

⁵⁷ Proslogion 9, 108, 8-9.

⁵⁸ Proslogion 10, 109, 4-6.

⁵⁹ Proslogion 11, 109, 18-19.

⁶⁰ Proslogion 12-13, 110-111.

⁶¹ Proslogion 14, 111, 11-14.

⁶² Proslogion 15, 112, 16-17.

a-vis God: "O whole and blessed truth, how far you are from me, who am so near to you! How remote you are from my sight, though I am so present to yours."⁶³ He concludes more negatively, "Everywhere you are wholly present, yet I do not see you . . . in you I am moved and I am, yet I cannot come near you."⁶⁴ As John Clayton notes, Anselm's quest has " a paradoxical outcome:" "the nearer he comes to understanding God the more he sees that God is not to be understood."⁶⁵

Anselm struggles to lift himself out of this darkness by attempting to understand the way in which God possesses the perfections he has thus far enumerated. The incompleteness of his vision of God, he concludes, is due to his inability to grasp all of these perfections at once as attributes of a single, perfect being.⁶⁶ This conclusion leads to the paradox true for all divine attributes, that they are not parts of God's being "but all are one; and each of these is the whole which you are, and which all the rest are."⁶⁷ The problem is especially pointed in the attempt to articulate the nature of divine eternity. "You were not yesterday, nor will you be tomorrow; but yesterday, today, and tomorrow you are. Rather, you are neither yesterday nor today nor tomorrow but simply you are, outside all time For nothing contains you, but you contain all things."⁶⁸ Anselm concludes, God and only God is wholly what he is and "he who is."⁶⁹ Thus, the philosophical name of God has led to the biblical name of God. As Louis Mackey writes, Anselm has gone "from what we call Him to what He calls Himself."⁷⁰ What is surprising about this is not that Anselm claims the consistency between the metaphysical with the biblical account of the divine nature but the derivation of the biblical from the metaphysical. In some ways, it is equivalent to Anselm's claim that he has shown the "necessary reasons" for the Incarnation in Cur Deus Homo.

Anselm appends to this name of God a brief derivation of the second and third persons of the Trinity. The Word of God can be nothing other than God himself; nor can the love between God and Word be anything less than God or the Word, since God loves himself and the Word to the same degree that they are.⁷¹ These names, like all the others, are identical with the divine being, perfectly derivable and substitutable for the other names. Anselm concludes almost triumphantly, "this is the one necessary being in which is every good, or rather which is all and the only and the whole and only good."⁷²

Anselm has found that which he sought and ends in ecstasy over his success. Or so it seems at first blush. A closer look, however, reveals that the ecstasy is only projected rather than

⁶³ Proslogion 16, 112, 27, 113, 1-2.

⁶⁴ Proslogion 16, 113, 2-4.

⁶⁵ Clayton, 138.

⁶⁶ Proslogion 18, 114-115, 24-5, 1.

⁶⁷ Proslogion 18, 115, 1-4.

⁶⁸ Proslogion 19, 115, 11-15.

⁶⁹ Proslogion, 22, 116, 15-16.

⁷⁰ Mackey, Peregrinations, 99.

⁷¹ Proslogion 23, 117, 12-14.

⁷² Proslogion 23, 117, 20-22.

achieved, not grounded in the present enjoyment of God but only in anticipation of that enjoyment. Anselm writes, "if individual goods are delectable, conceive in earnestness how delectable is that good which contains the pleasantness of all goods. If created life is good, how good is creative life?"⁷³ Anselm admits that he cannot describe or fully conceive this joy which "eye has not seen nor ear heard."⁷⁴ Instead he prays for the increase in his desire for it: "Let my soul hunger for it; let my flesh thirst for it; let my whole substance desire it, until I enter into 'the joy of the Lord' 'who is' God three and one."⁷⁵ "Let me progress in knowledge of you here, and there let it be made full; let me grow in love for you, and there let it be full; so that here my joy may be in great hope, and there in full reality . . . Meanwhile, let my mind meditate and let me tongue speak therefrom."⁷⁶ Anselm ends in the uncertainties of the subjunctive, in the contrasts between "here" and "there," and stuck in the "meanwhile [interim]," praying for the union that, even given the revelation from which the Proslogion began, has not yet occurred.⁷⁷ The strong message he conveys is of the distance between where he wants to be and where he is.

My point is not that nothing has been achieved in the Proslogion. Surely it has. Anselm has moved from God as 'the being than which none greater can be conceived' to God as a being 'greater than can be conceived', from God as possessor of a list of attributes to that being in whom these multiple attributes are (somehow) one, and from the only being who is wholly who he is to God as three in one. His progress in grasping God's being has quickened his desire and added joy to his longing by giving more reality to its object. My point is that the progress is in a sense paradoxical; he has moved to a sense of God as beyond his grasp and has increased rather than satiated his desire.

⁷³ Proslogion 24, 117-18, 26, 1-4.

⁷⁴ Proslogion 26, 121, 6-9.

⁷⁵ Proslogion 26, 121-22, 24, 1-2.

⁷⁶ Proslogion 26, 121, 16-18. My emphasis.

⁷⁷ Cf. Mackey, Peregrinations, 105-6. Stolz puts the emphasis on the joy that it achieved (rather than simply hoped for) within the work and uses it to support his view of the Proslogion as a piece of mystical theology. See Stolz, 190-1.