Tuesday, October 12, 2010

ANSELM'S ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

Frank van Dun

That God Really Exists[1]

Therefore, Lord, you who give knowledge of the faith, give me as much knowledge as you know to be fitting for me, because you are as we believe and that which we believe. Indeed, we believe you are something greater than which cannot be thought. Or is there no such kind of thing, for "the fool said in his heart, 'there is no God'" (Ps. 14:1, 53:1)? Certainly, however, that same fool, having heard what I just said, "something greater than which cannot be thought," understands what he heard, and what he understands is in his thought, even if he does not think it exists. For it is one thing for something to exist in a person's thought and quite another for the person to think that thing exists. For when a painter thinks ahead to what he will paint, he has that picture in his thought, but he does not yet think it exists, because he has not done it yet. Once he has painted it, he has it in his thought and thinks it exists because he has done it. Thus, even the fool is compelled to grant that something greater than which cannot be thought exists in thought, because he understands what he hears, and whatever is understood exists in thought. And certainly that greater than which cannot be understood cannot exist only in thought, for if it exists only in thought it could also be thought of as existing in reality as well, which is greater. If, therefore, that than which greater cannot be thought exists in thought alone, then that than which greater cannot be thought turns out to be that than which something greater actually can be thought, but that is obviously impossible. Therefore, something than which greater cannot be thought undoubtedly exists both in thought and in reality.

Introduction

Anselm's ontological argument purports to be an *a priori* proof of the "existence" of God. Its conclusion cannot be anything else than a logical implication of the premises, which do not depend on experience for their justification. So, the conclusion, "God exists", must be understood accordingly. It obviously does not mean that God can be observed, experienced by the senses of sight, hearing, smell, touch or that it should be possible to construct a God detector capable of picking up the slightest traces of His presence. This is usually taken to mean that Anselm's argument fails to prove that God exists. It only proves that the proposition "God exist" can be extracted by logical analysis and deduction from Anselm's conception of God. This is certainly true. However, the question is, whether it is all the argument proves? The answer, as I shall try to demonstrate, is that it proves more than that.

Most comments on Anselm's argument simply pass over the first two sentences:

> *Therefore, Lord, you who give knowledge of the faith, give me as much knowledge as you know to be fitting for me, because you are as we believe and that which we*

[1] Chapter 2 of Proslogion, translation by David Burr. More fragments are in the appendix below. (http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/anselm.html) , consulted Sepetmber 10, 2010.

> *believe. Indeed, we believe you are something greater than which cannot be thought.*

Yet, these sentences are not just rhetorical embellishments. They frame the argument. "You are as we believe and that which we believe. Indeed, we believe you are something greater than which cannot be thought." One would do no violence to the text if one were to say that Anselm here concedes the critique that his argument does not prove that God "exists" in the sense of the word 'exist' which we use to affirm the existence of other things, such as lemmings or lemons. Anselm was a consummate logician. We should not suppose without convincing evidence that he was not aware of the logic of his argument. Indeed, the crucial question for any commentator is whether Anselm really tried to prove, and thought he had succeeded in proving, that God existed in the manner of, say, an apple, a man, the sun, or any other physical object. The answer is not in doubt. Anselm had no such intention, and made that very clear:

> *I will go even farther. Without doubt, whatever does not exist somewhere or at some time, even if it does exist somewhere or at some time, can be thought of as capable of existing never and nowhere, just as it does not exist somewhere or at some time. For what did not exist yesterday and exists today can be thought of as never existing, just as it is thought of as not having existed yesterday. Moreover, what does not exist here but does exist somewhere else can be thought of as not existing anywhere. The same goes for a thing of which some parts are occasionally absent. If that is the case, then all of its parts and thus the thing in its entirety can be thought of as existing never and nowhere. For if it is said that time always exists and the world is everywhere, it is nevertheless true that time as a whole does not exist forever, nor does the entire world exist everywhere. In addition, if individual parts of time exist when other parts do not, they can be thought of as never existing at all. Just as particular parts of the world do not exist where other parts do, so they can be thought of as never existing at all, anywhere. Moreover, what is composed of parts can be broken up in the mind and be nonexistent. Thus, whatever does not exist as a whole sometime or somewhere can be thought of as not existing, even if it actually exists now. However, "a being greater than which cannot be thought of," if it exists, cannot be thought of as not existing. Otherwise it is not "a being greater than which cannot be thought of," which is absurd. Thus, it cannot fail to exist in its totality always and everywhere.*

As Anselm, speaking as a theologian rather than a logician, acknowledges, "God dwells in an inaccessible light... His dwelling place is unreachable."[2] His "God exists" must be reconciled with these propositions. We should not lose sight of the ultimate purpose for which Anselm intended to use the argument:

> *I do not even try, Lord, to rise up to your heights, because my intellect does not measure up to that task; but I do want to understand in some small measure your truth, which my heart believes in and loves. Nor do I seek to understand so that I can believe, but rather I believe so that I can understand. For I believe this too, that "unless I believe I shall not understand" (Isa. 7:9).*[3]

Thus, for Anselm, God is what we believe Him to be and that which we believe. Moreover, the point of this belief is to help us gain understanding and truth. What a

---

[2] Proslogion, chapter 1
[3] Proslogion, chapter 1, *in fine*.

person believes about God obviously may or may not assist his desire to understand, his seeking the truth. However, the argument is not about random beliefs about or conceptions of God. The important question is, whether what Anselm believes God to be — namely, that God is something greater than which cannot be thought — helps to satisfy the desire to understand, to know the truth. The task of the logician is to explicate exactly what that belief entails, which is necessary if we want to assess how it contributes to our understanding.

The dialectical context

It is important to note that Anselm places the argument in a dialectical context.

- I believe that God is something greater than which cannot be thought
- You (the "fool" mentioned in the book of Psalms) believe that there is no such thing

The "fool" is obviously an atheist, who believes that there is no God. Clearly, however, Anselm intends to dispute not only the atheist but also the skeptic, who does not believe that there is a God. If he can refute the latter, he can *eo ipso* also refute the former. Indeed, skeptical non-belief in a proposition is implied in the belief that the proposition is false. "I believe that P is false" logically implies "I do not believe that P is true". The reverse is obviously not true. A non-thinking person may well believe that P is both true and false, but the fact that nonsense is psychologically possible does not make it logical — it does not give it being or make it a reality. A thoroughgoing skeptic would believe neither that P is true nor that P is false. His two non-beliefs do not contradict one another. Yet, even the thoroughgoing skeptic is not immune from Anselm's argument, if his non-belief in the proposition "There is such a thing as Anselm's God" matches the non-belief implied in the atheist's belief that there is no such thing and if he nevertheless concedes understanding what kind of thing Anselm's God is.

Anselm takes it for granted that the skeptic accepts the following propositions about himself:

- I understand the claim that there is a God.
- I do not believe that there is a God apart from my understanding that claim.

Anselm's goal is to show that this combination of assertions is self-contradictory. However, his argument cannot achieve its purpose, if the opponent does not accept its premises. For example, quite a few opponents would refuse to say of themselves that they understand the claim that there is a God: "God? What is that supposed to mean?" Anselm meets the objection forthwith by substituting a definition ("a being than which no greater being can be conceived")[4] for the one-word appellation 'God'. Obviously, it is *his* definition, an explication of what *he* means when he speaks of God. It should be a sufficient answer to the objection "God? What is that supposed to mean?" for it is in fact like the definition of a mathematical concept, which no rational skeptic is likely to admit as incomprehensible. Even if one does not believe there is *a number than which no greater number can be conceived* apart from one's understanding of the italicized expression, one should not deny that the question whether or not it exists is meaningful.

[4] We should not run with the word 'greater' and suppose that we are dealing with a question of size. There is a sense in which the "greatest" natural number is not unspeakably large but very small indeed: what mathematics would we have if we did not have the number one, the fundamental building block of all of arithmetic and hence of mathematics? The number one is present everywhere in the order of mathematical things, which is not the case for any other number.

The definition is crucial to the argument. As Anselm warns his readers, he is not defining God as, for example, "that which is greater than any other thing". He has no intention to argue that one who understands *that* definition must believe that there is such a thing apart from his understanding the definition:

> *It is not, it seems, so easy to arrive at the same conclusion with respect to "that which is greater than all other things", for it is not all that obvious that something which can be thought of as not existing is not nevertheless greater than all things which actually exist.*

Moreover, Anselm is not even trying to prove that the God he addresses as "Lord" is the one and only being greater than which cannot be thought of. Neither is he trying to prove that there are three or four gods. Proving the existence of any specific number of gods is obviously more demanding than proving that at least one god exists. If it is thought that Anselm made it easy for himself by shifting the argument to a defense of the weaker, vague claim then it should be remembered that his aim was to refute the fool's "There is no God", not to engage in Christian let alone Catholic apologetics. Anselm's argument leaves open the possibility of an infinite number of beings greater than which cannot be thought. To narrow down that possibility to one God requires reading into his text what is not there. The argument does imply, however, that if there are several different gods that conform to the definition then the being of one cannot be thought of as greater than the being of another. Thus, if they are of the kind Anselm has in mind, all gods (whatever their number) must be thought of as equally great in being. The argument is also not concerned with demonstrating that a god must be thought of as a person. Its only concern is the refutation of the thesis "There is no being greater than which cannot be conceived." This thesis, Anselm claims, must be false if it is meaningful.

As we shall see, the notion of *physical* existence is immaterial, not relevant to the logic of the argument. It only serves as an example. The same argument would defeat the skepticism of, say, a numerical being, for which "exists" means "can be identified as a number". For Anselm, physical or numerical existence is not the issue. His point is that if there are orders of physical, numerical, personal or any other kind of being, then the fool's proposition "There is no God" is false relative to every single one of them.

Given his definition of what kind of being God is, Anselm takes on the claims of a skeptic who admits to the following propositions:

- I understand the claim "there is *a being than which no greater can be conceived.*"
- I do not believe there is *a being than which no greater can be conceived* apart from my understanding that claim.

Because the expression 'a being than which no greater being can be conceived' is unwieldy, it may be helpful to substitute a shorter one for it. Let us coin a new word, 'soeth', to refer to the concept identified by the expression.

At this stage, the skeptic has conceded that God is in the understanding. Anselm now argues that God cannot be in the understanding alone. The argument proceeds as follows.

(1) **Suppose (with the skeptic) that God is in the understanding alone.**

(2) **Given Anselm's definition of the idea of God, the skeptic accepts that a soeth is in the understanding alone.**

(3) **Now, a soeth can be conceived to be outside the understanding, even if we do not believe that it actually is anywhere else than in the understanding.**

This is not per se problematic. One may (and probably does) believe that Mickey Mouse is in the understanding alone. Yet, one may imagine Mickey to be apart from our understanding, without believing that he actually is.

(4) **However, it is greater for a thing that is in the understanding to be also apart from our understanding than for it to be in the understanding alone.**

This step in the argument relies on giving the word 'greater' a special, uncommon interpretation. The relation between "it is a thing greater than which cannot be conceived" and "it is greater for a thing to be here and there than to be only here" is not immediately obvious.

(5) **Hence, it appears the skeptic must conclude that a soeth can be conceived to be greater than it is.**

The skeptic accepts that a soeth "exists" but only in the understanding. Nevertheless, according to Anselm's proposition (3), this means that the skeptic can conceive such a being to be outside, or apart from, the understanding. Now, Anselm deploys his proposition (4) to derive (5). As noted, (4) is not immediately obvious.

(6) **However, as the skeptic will agree, "a soeth can be conceived to be greater than it is" is absurd.**

(7) **Therefore, (2) must be false**.

(8) **Therefore, given Anselm's definition, we must conclude that (1) is false — which means that *God must be not only in but also apart from our understanding*.**

Let us now take a closer look at the argument by making explicit its logical elements and relations as well as the concepts involved in it that require semantic interpretation.

Formal matters

First, we note that Anselm holds it self-evident that if anything can be meaningfully said ("MS") about something ("x") then x is a logically possible or conceivable ("**M**") object of thought:

A0	MSx ⇨ **M**x

We have to bear in mind that **M**x does not imply that x is outside the understanding. The rule and its qualification are clearly presented in the following passage:

> *But certainly that same fool, having heard what I just said, "something greater than which cannot be thought," understands what he heard, and what he understands is in his thought, even if he does not think it exists.*

Anselm's assumption here is that if I understand claims about God then we may say that God "exists" in my understanding or in my mind. He apparently proposes to treat the understanding or the mind as if it were a place, but we should not make too much of this metaphor. The point is that we can imagine things that are only in our imagination just as well as we can imagine things that are elsewhere, apart from our minds (although we may

not *know*, or know for sure, that they are). On the one hand, think "leprechaun" or "Darth Vader"; on the other hand, think "English village without a pub" or "alternate physical universe parallel to but separate from the universe in which we exist".

The proposition "There is a being than which no greater being can be conceived" is Anselm's point of entry into the argument. It expresses his own belief, which he wants to defend against the skeptic. We can write it in symbolic shorthand as follows

G	$(\exists x)(\forall y)\ [\ x \neq y\ \mathbf{\&}\ \mathbf{M}y :\rightarrow\ \sim M(\boldsymbol{\beta}y > \boldsymbol{\beta}x)]$ [5]

The quantifier "∃x" has a purely *logical* meaning. It should **not** be read as "there exists at least one thing x" or as "there is somewhere, someplace in the physical universe a thing x". Logic is not simply concerned with things that only exist (in some peculiar sense of the word "exists" that is of interest to a particular group of people). Does Mickey Mouse exist? Not if we are doing physics, but if we want to make a logical analysis of the Walt Disney stories about Mickey, Minnie, Goofy and the rest of them, we cannot do without acceptance of their existence (in the universe or realm of being presupposed in those stories). To make sense of Anselm's argument, we need to treat the expression "x exists" as a predicate, not as an unqualified expression of logical quantification. 'There is a thing x' does not mean the same as 'there exists a thing' (in the common understanding of 'exists'). It is therefore essential that one does not surreptitiously substitute the meaning of the latter expression for that of the former. In the following interpretation of the argument, I shall write "x exists" in symbols as "E(x)"[6] and use the expression '*x exist*' as shorthand for '*x is in some other realm of being than the realm of being constituted by the things that are in a person's thoughts*'. The obvious example of "another realm of being" would be the physical universe, but Anselm's argument does not depend on that example. It would be the same if he had never heard of physical things and thought of "x exists" only in connection with, say, mathematical things. The latter are not only in the understanding of any person but "exist" apart from it. Of course, the physics-suggesting example of the painter and his painting in Anselm's text would have to be replaced with something like this:

> *For when a mathematician thinks ahead to what he will prove, he has the proof in his thought, but he does not yet think the proof exists, because he has not worked it out yet. Once he has supplied the proof, he has it in his thought and thinks it exists because he has worked it out.*

---

[5] In words: **there is at least one thing** x ["∃x"] such that **for every thing** y ["(∀y)"], y *is different from* x ["x≠y"] **and** ["&"] y *is in our understanding* ["**M**y"] **only if ["→"]** it *is not conceivable* ["~M"] that *the being of y is greater than the being of x* ["**β**y > **β**x"]. In other words, x **is a thing** such that **for every other thing** y, **if** y is in our understanding **then** x's being must be conceived at least as great as y's being.

[6] Thus, the propositional form "Salisbury Cathedral exists" means that *there is* a thing that *is* Salisbury Cathedral and that it *exists*. Suitable symbolic expressions would be "E(Salisbury Cathedral)" and "(∃x)(x=Salisbury Cathedral & E(x))". Note that without the explicit or implied specification of a particular realm of being, these are just open formulas, not closed propositions that can be assigned an unambiguous logical value ("true", "false"; "proven", "not proven"; "possible", "impossible"; etcetera). For example, in the realm of historical being, there was a time when Salisbury Cathedral did not yet exist, just as there may well come a time when it no longer exists. It may never exist in the fictional realm of being in which a counterfactual history of the world is imagined to take place. If we restrict physical being to the sorts of things textbooks in physics deal with, we would have to say that not a single cathedral exists or can exist, just as we would have to say that no so-called secondary qualities (e.g., colors, odors), no feelings, no persons (not even physicists) exist or can exist. We can have all sorts of things in mind, but we have to *order* them in appropriate realms of being if we want to *think* about them. Most of the time, we can rely on our intuition and experience to select the right or appropriate realm of being, but they are far from infallible guides.

The predicator "is a soeth" is defined formally as follows

Def	Soeth(x) := (∀y) [x≠y **&** **M**y :→ ~M(**β**y > **β**x)]

Then we can rewrite **G** as follows:

G*	(∃x)(Soeth(x))

With these reformulations, the ontological argument now purports to show the logical incompatibility of the following propositions accepted by the skeptic ("the fool") as mutually compatible:

- It is conceivable that at least one soeth exists.
- No soeth exists.

In symbols

F1/A1	M [(∃x)(Soeth(x) & E(x))]
F2	~ (∃x)(Soeth(x) & E(x)) [7]

F1/A1 indicates that both the fool and Anselm accept the proposition in question.

Obviously, the skeptic will not object to the use of the name 'God' to refer to a soeth he concedes may conceivably exist — after all, what's in a name? Then we can eliminate the logical quantifier "(∃x)" and replace the variable *x* with the proper name '*g*' (as a stand-in for 'God')

F1'	M [Soeth(g) & E(g)]
F2'	~ E(g)

From F1', it follows immediately that it is *conceivable* that g exists.

F3	M [E(g)]

Applying A0 to F3, we derive that g is in the understanding:

F4	**M**g

Now we come to the essential ontological premise of the whole argument:

[7] Read "~" as "It is not the case that".

It is greater for a thing that exists in the understanding to exist also apart from our understanding than for it to exist in the understanding alone.

Anselm's formulation was this:

> *And certainly that greater than which cannot be understood cannot exist only in thought, for if it exists only in thought it could also be thought of as existing in reality as well, which is greater*

We would be making a caricature of Anselm's argument if we were to say that there can be no *being than which greater cannot be conceived* because one can always imagine one that is exactly like it except that it is slightly fatter, or quicker, or more radioactive. What Anselm has in mind is this: to our understanding, one being is *greater* than another if it belongs to more orders of being than the other does. In that sense, numbers are *greater* than physical things. Although numbers and physical objects exist not only in the mind but also in their proper mathematical, respectively physical realm of being, numbers pervade (in a sense to be explained below) the physical realm; but physical objects do not exist in, nor do they pervade, the mathematical realm of being. That is gist of the argument: we cannot think of a soeth as belonging to the order of things in the understanding without thinking of it as belonging also to the order of physical beings or any other order of being such as the order of mathematical things. Nothing can be a soeth that does not belong to every realm of being.[8]

I suggest we interpret Anselm's ontological premise as follows:

> *If a thing x is in the understanding alone and if a thing y is nearly like it, except that it is not only in the understanding but also conceivably exists apart from the understanding, then the being of y is conceivably greater than the being of x.*

For "x is nearly like y", we write "x≙y". Note that "x≙y" can be true only if "x=y" is false.

A2	$(\forall x)(\forall y)\,[\, x \triangleq y \,\&\, \sim E(x) \,\&\, \mathbf{M}x \,\&\, M(E(y)) \,\&\, \mathbf{M}y :\!\rightarrow M(\boldsymbol{\beta} y > \boldsymbol{\beta} x)\,]$

We now define *another* being, g*, which is nearly like g, except that it is not only in the understanding but also conceivably exists apart from it. Thus, by definition, g*≙g, **M**g* and M(E(g*)) are true for g*. This is in contrast with g, for which only **M**g is true by definition. Admittedly, A2 is not a literal interpretation of the original text and is bound to be the first point of attack for anyone wishing to dismiss the above as a reconstruction of Anselm's argument. However, it fits the argument. Hence, while it may not be the best fit, it is adequate.

The skeptic will now accept that g* might conceivably exist, although he still does not admit to believing that g exists:

F5	$g^* \triangleq g \,\&\, \sim E(g) \,\&\, \mathbf{M}g \,\&\, M(E(g^*)) \,\&\, \mathbf{M}g^*$

[8] However, this "belonging to an order of being" does not imply that a soeth exists in that order as other things in it do.

This satisfies the antecedent condition of A2, i.e., "$x \triangleq \mathbf{y}$ & $\sim E(x)$ & $\mathbf{M}x$ & $M(E(y))$ & $\mathbf{M}y$". From A2 and F5, follows

F6	$M(\boldsymbol{\beta}g^* > \boldsymbol{\beta}g)$

Since "$g^* \triangleq g$" implies "$g^* \neq g$" and $\mathbf{M}g^*$ is trivially true for g^*, we now have enough concessions from the skeptic to satisfy the antecedent condition (" $x \neq y$ **&** $\mathbf{M}y$ ") in the *definiens* of **Def** and to derive the following from the definition of g as a soeth:

F7	$\sim M(\boldsymbol{\beta}g^* > \boldsymbol{\beta}g)$

However, F7 contradicts F6.

F6 must therefore be false. Evidently, the conjunction of F1, F2, A0, A1 and A2 is thereby shown to be false also — because it was from these premises that F6 was derived. Therefore, at least one of those propositions must be false. Obviously, Anselm is not willing to repudiate any of his own premises. Moreover, A1 is the same proposition as F1. Consequently, there is no doubt in Anselm's mind that the cause of the contradiction must be F2 ("no soeth exists"), in particular F2' ("g does not exist").

Hence, "g does not exist" must be false, and F2 too. Therefore,

$\sim$F2'	$E(g)$
$\sim$F2	$(\exists x)(Soeth(x) \ \& \ E(x))$
Q.E.D.	

Thus, under the interpretation given above, Anselm's argument does prove the "existence" of a soeth, i.e., its being not only in the understanding. Of course, the argument is still a *reductio ad absurdum*, not a positive, constructive proof of "the existence of any soeth", let alone the one Anselm addresses as "Lord". However, it was never Anselm's intention to provide a positive, constructive proof. His aim, as noted above, was to refute the skeptic, to prove that nobody who understands *his* definition of God can consistently claim to believe that there is no God apart from the understanding. Even without a constructive proof, the proposition "$\sim$F2" is still undeniable. It is, as modern philosophers would say, a synthetic a priori truth, or a truth derived from such truths. It is not a proposition derived from Anselm's definition alone — i.e., it is not analytically true — but from the combination of the definition and the [in Anselm's mind, "evident"] rules and axioms (A1, A2) of the argument, none of which are or can be reduced to formal tautologies. The negation of A1 is not a formal contradiction; neither is the negation of A2. Thus, we can avoid Anselm's conclusion by denying either A1 or A2, i.e., by refusing to accept that a soeth might conceivably exist apart from the understanding or that it makes sense to quantify the being of something by considering to how many orders of being it belongs. In either case, however, we would be merely refusing to think about what Anselm invites us to think about — unless, of course, we had good reasons for justifying our refusal. Merely wanting to avoid a conclusion is not a good reason.

Existence

Let us consider for a moment the quantifier" ∃x", which we have used in formalizing Anselm's proposition **G**. It is sometimes called "the existential quantifier", and then it is read as "there exists an x" or "an x exists". Accepting that reading, some people have argued that "exists" is not a predicate but a logical quantifier. In other words, they *want* to read "∃x" as "there *exists* an x" and then read that as "there is a physical thing x that exists in physical space-time". However, they are plainly wrong in supposing that they are then still doing purely logical analysis.

When we speak of existence in the context of an argument or theory, existence is always relative to a particular realm of being. Mathematical points, which are zero-dimensional objects, do not physically exist, but they do exist in the mathematical realm.[9] There are infinitely many numbers, but none of them is a physical thing that can be located anywhere, at any moment in any physical realm — including the physical universe *we* inhabit. To be sure, there are many countable physical things in our universe, but only because there exist beings (notably human beings) that can count; and they can count only because they understand numbers. Thus, if we want to analyze a text presupposing the existence of objects from different realms of being, e.g., physical and mathematical objects, we need to use predicates, "is a physical thing" and "is a mathematical thing", to keep the analysis intelligible while indiscriminately quantifying over the mixed universe. Or else we need to resort to the technique of many-sorted quantification, which comes down to having formally separate quantifiers ("$\exists^1$x", "$\exists^2$x", etcetera) for each of the realms of being under contemplation. In other words, we need quantifiers that have certain predicates *built into them*, as it were, to serve as selectors picking out one or other realm of being.

As we have seen, Anselm was aware that the existence of physical things is contingent. However, God, if properly thought of — i.e., as Anselm thought of God — must be thought of as necessarily existing, everywhere and always in the physical universe. It is therefore out of the question to try to locate God *in* the physical universe, to put Him somewhere among all the other things that physically exist, to give His physical co-ordinates. We might say that Anselm's God exists physically in the sense that He belongs to the physical realm because He *pervades* the entire realm of physical being.

Anselm's God is not the only thing that pervades the universe, realm or order of physical being. We cannot deny that there *are* things (e.g., numbers) that nevertheless do not *exist* as elements or identifiable objects in that universe. Yet, numbers are everywhere in the physical universe; indeed, every number is everywhere. We might say, therefore, that numbers *pervade* the realm of physical being, and that, if that were not the case, there would be little if any understanding of that realm. We could hardly have an understanding of the *order* of physical being, if there was no truth to what the Psalmist said, viz., that everything is disposed according to measure and number and weight, none of which is itself a physical thing. Without numbers, there would be no physical order *for us*. The physical elements or objects might still exist, but they would not constitute an order of being. We would not know them as *physical* things, say, as conceivably being related to one another by laws of physics. They would be just... things. We might still be aware of the existence of some of them in the manner of a spider's being aware of light and dark, heat and cold, the presence of prey in its web, etcetera, but we would not have the conception that such things constitute an intelligible order, a realm of being.

---

[9] Many people like to make fun of Scholastic philosophy by referring to the question "How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?" Would they make fun of mathematics by referring to the question "How many mathematical points are there on the head of a pin?"

Once we have the notion of an order of being, we can see that Anselm's argument proves far more than God's belonging to the physical realm. He belongs to and pervades every realm of being. That makes Him a necessary being *tout court*, not just a physically necessary being.

Being in the understanding

We might wonder, however, whether Anselm's concept of God is different from the concept of the greatest "natural" number (1, 2, 3,...). The mere fact that we can formulate the expression "a natural number greater than which cannot be conceived" does not prove that a corresponding number "exists" in the realm of mathematical being or even in the mind. Indeed, there is no natural number "than which greater cannot be conceived." For *any* natural number N that we may have in mind, we can immediately think of several larger ones, e.g., $N+1$, $N+2$, $Nx2$, $Nx3$, and if $N>1$, N^N. We may not be able to actually compute any one of them, but that is not the point. The number defined as "the number of atoms in the universe at this very moment raised to the power of twice the number of atoms in the universe at that very same moment" is not actually computable, but mathematically, it is a number — and one that would be computable, if certain physical limitations were overcome. However, it is obviously not a number greater than which cannot be conceived. Therefore, if Z were supposed to be a natural number greater than which cannot be conceived, it would have to be mathematically equal to $Z+1$ and to Z^Z, which is not possible. Although the form "a natural number greater than which cannot be conceived" can be in the mind, it cannot be understood to refer to a mathematical object — something that has existence in the order of mathematical being.

Although numbers "exist" in the mind, they do not "exist" only in the mind but elsewhere also. That *elsewhere* is evidently not the universe of physical things but the universe of mathematical things. In fact, the reality of mathematical things, such as natural numbers, and by implication, the reality of the mathematical realm of being (the order of being of mathematical things) is independent of what is "in the mind" of any mathematician or other human being. While people can invent mathematical objects, they cannot claim that anything they invent is a mathematical object merely because they say so. They have to check whether it qualifies. Indeed, they can *discover* mathematical objects without having to invent them. No number can be thought of as existing *only* in the mind, unless one were to change the subject by re-defining "a number" as something that has no necessary relations to other numbers — i.e., as something else than a mathematical thing.

The crucial question, of course, is whether the concept of a soeth is as incoherent as is the concept of a natural number than which no greater natural number can be conceived. Would Anselm's argument cut any ice with a person who is skeptical not only about the existence of soeths but also about the coherence of Anselm's definition of them relative to orders of being? The obvious difference between the concepts of a soeth and an unsurpassable natural number is that the former applies to any beings whatsoever, while the latter applies only to numbers.

A soeth cannot be located along any dimension of space or time in the order of physical existence (or located in any other order of being). In the usual, both colloquial and scientific, sense of the word 'exist', this means that no soeth exists because no *empirical* proof that a soeth exists can be given, or that no soeth exists because we cannot give directions to where it is. We cannot, as it were, point it out, saying "Now it is there; a moment ago it was here." Yet, the ontological argument shows it is undeniable that a soeth belongs to the order of physical existence — indeed, to every order of being. For the same reason: although a soeth must be thought to belong to the order of mathematical things (otherwise it would not be a soeth), it does not do so as any particular number (or other mathematical thing) but as something that is undeniably mathematical. Still for the same

reason, a soeth must be thought of as belonging to the order of logic, even if nothing in that order (no particular axiom or rule of deduction) *is* that soeth. Again, a soeth must be thought of as belonging to the order of persons, not in the sense of being this or that person but in the sense of being undeniably personal. One way of expressing all of this is as follows: if we understand the concept of a soeth then we cannot deny that it is *of* every conceivable order of being, even if we cannot locate it *in* any of those orders — even if it is unlike any other thing in any one of them. One would contradict oneself by saying that it does not "exist", no matter which order of being one had in mind.

Every argument is an act of the mind, an act of intelligence or understanding. We can argue about imaginary things; and when we do, we should obviously not conclude from the fact that we argue about them that they physically or otherwise exist except in our minds as things we imagine. Nevertheless, not all things in the imagination or in the mind are equal. No argument about Mickey Mouse will prove that Mickey exists as a physical being, much less that he pervades the entire realm of physical being — a fortiori, that he pervades every realm of being. The fictional characters created by Walt Disney, or William Shakespeare, leprechauns, ghosts, Thomas More's Utopia, UFOs, and the like are all things we can think and indeed argue about. This is what Anselm means when he says that they exist in the understanding. He obviously does not mean to imply that anyone who is thinking about *Hamlet*'s Ophelia must believe that Ophelia is a historical figure that existed at some time, at some place as a physical person. God, however, is not like Ophelia, Mickey Mouse, a leprechaun or UFO, none of which is or can be defined as a being than which nothing greater can be conceived. The same goes for things that we do believe exist outside our understanding. No argument about apples will prove that they pervade the entire realm of physical being, a fortiori, every realm of being — much less will it prove that every single apple does so. In contrast, as Anselm believes Him to be, God does pervade every realm of being. Thus, Anselm's idea of God is truly exceptional.

Everything we can say, everything we can theorize or argue about is based on ideas in our minds. Even when we assert that the physical or material universe would exist if there never had been or would be a human person (or some other kind of intelligent life), we cannot but admit that in that case the assertion would not have been made. We arrive at the idea of *a physical universe independent of our existence as intelligent beings* by an act of abstraction — and not a simple one at that, if we consider the physical science needed for proving its cogency. There is a sense of the word 'exist' in which it is obvious that, if it were not for the existence of intelligent life, nothing would exist. All the elements or chunks of matter swirling, hurtling through space, all the explosions and collisions happening there, all the electromagnetic fields fluctuating throughout it, etcetera, would not exist in any meaningful sense — because they would mean nothing if there were no beings for whom they could have meaning. *We* can imagine that those things happen regardless of the existence of intelligent beings, but we can do so only because of our intelligence. *We* can have theories explaining why this independent existence must be — but, again, only because we are intelligent. Without intelligent beings, matter would not matter. Only intelligent beings can decide not to mind the mind.

There is, therefore, a sense of the word 'exist' in which we can say that, although intelligence did not physically create it, there would be no physical universe but for the existence of intelligent minds. Indeed, the notion that intelligence did not physically create the physical universe, is itself a product of intelligence. The same is true for mathematics, and for other realms of being as well. Indeed, it is true also for soeths. They would be nothing without the existence of intelligent minds. However, given Anselm's conception of what a soeth is, that means that if there were no soeths — no beings that belong to every conceivable order of being — then there would be no order of being that is *necessarily* outside our minds. Having the idea of a physical object does not logically compel us to

accept that there is a physical realm of being apart from our minds; nor does having the idea of numbers compel us to accept that there is a mathematical realm independent of the ideas we have about numbers. In contrast, once we have Anselm's idea of God, we can no longer consistently doubt that there is an order of being out there — hence, that what we have in mind (say, about physical or mathematical objects) may or may not match what is out there, may or may not be true. In that sense, the idea of God as a being greater than which is inconceivable makes us intelligent in a way we could not be, if we did not have the assurance that there is truth to be found and falsehood to be avoided. We might still be intelligent in a loose, metaphorical sense, for example, intelligent in the way a spider spinning its web is intelligent — but that would be a mindless intelligence. It is mere anthropomorphism to say that a spider *knows* how to spin a web.

Although our thinking necessarily involves only things that are in our minds, it is not limited to them. We can have in our minds conceptions of things that are apart from our minds. Of course, any inference from such conceptions is still in our minds. It would not prove anything about what is out there unless we had the assurance in our minds that we could not think of them except as referring to things that exist apart from our minds. Even so, thinking about them would avail nothing if the two realms of being were not in some sense commensurable, if they were not aspects of a single realm of being.

We can go a step further in the direction of what I take to be Anselm's thought and note that the origin of the science of the physical universe (hence, our understanding of it) is in the idea that the physical universe is not just elements or chunks of matter, explosions, collisions, electromagnetic fields, etcetera. The origin of science was the idea that the happenings in "nature" could be understood — that is to say, ordered in intelligible categories. In short, it was the idea that there is an *order* or realm of physical being. Hence came the idea of laws of physical being ("nature") and therefore of knowing about nature without knowing its in fact unknowable multitude of particulars. Of course, it would be extreme intellectual parochialism to suggest that the idea of order, hence of being, has meaning only in connection with physical happenings. Indeed, it is perhaps the least likely object to which the idea can be attached, if only because dead, inorganic, inanimate, unintelligent matter is the farthest removed from our self-understanding as living, organic, animate, intelligent beings.

Objective being

Anselm's conception of God has this logical implication, "God is a necessary being". Other conceptions of God (or conceptions of other beings) do not. What difference does it make, whether or not one has the concept of a necessary being that pervades every realm of being. The answer must be, "Quite a big difference." For we have a conception that ensures that all those different realms of being are not like confetti but rather different aspects of a single order in which literally every intelligible thing, everything that can be thought through, has its place. Do we think of the several sciences as temples each of which is dedicated to a separate deity whose truth is incommensurable with that of every other deity? Or do we think of them as temples that are all of them dedicated to the same deity, notwithstanding that each of them follows the example of a different saint? Anselm's stance on this is clear. The different orders of being of which we are aware — such as the order of things that are in our minds as against orders of things that are outside our minds — come together, cohere, in a single all-encompassing realm of being. That grand cohesion is opened up to us if we believe, with Anselm, that there is a being greater than which cannot be thought.

Of course, the above comments shift the weight of the argument onto the notion "realm or order of being." Therefore, we have to ask whether the concepts of order of being and of things that have different degrees of "greatness" in terms of orders of being are

meaningful. It would seem that they are not meaningful, if we could simply assume that an order of being is what we believe it is and because that is what we believe. However, that assumption defies common sense. Could there be, for example, an order of evil, foolishness, mathematical mistakes, logical fallacies, and the like? Certainly, we can *believe* that such things are orders of being, but then we can believe almost anything. Problems arise as soon as we try to *think* of them as orders of being. Evil, foolishness, mathematical mistakes, logical fallacies, and the like are essentially manifestations of disorder or conflict and therefore cannot be thought of otherwise than as *privations* of being. Although we can speak of disorder and point to places and times where it exists, we can only do so because we have the idea of order even in the absence of an existing example of the relevant sort of order. "This cannot be right; this is not in order (but do not ask me what exactly is wrong with it)." In contrast to this, we do not need to have the idea of disorder to be able to recognize and think about order. Order is not a violation of any principle of disorder. Disorder has no principles. In terms of physics, as disorder (entropy) increases information is irretrievably lost until ultimately nothing (i.e., no order whatsoever) remains. This nothing is not a void; it is utter confusion, lack of information — nothing that can be known or understood otherwise than as absence of order. (See the postscript below for a comment on what this may mean for a reader of the Bible.)

We may at first think that something is an example of disorder, yet discover later that the phenomena in question are simply manifestations of a strange order of which we previously had no idea. Not everything that looks like disorder is disorder. Nevertheless, from the *existence* of disorder in one form or other we cannot infer that there *is* disorder, i.e., that disorder constitutes a realm of being—that it is a real thing or being. Can there be a science of evil (as distinct from a systematic study of phenomena that show a lack of goodness)? Can there be a science of mathematical mistakes (as distinct from paying close attention to where a mathematical argument goes wrong)? If the answer is negative, it implies that there can be no order of being evil or mistaken, even if there are orders of being which make it possible to say, "This is evil" or "That is a mistake."

While there may never have existed a truly, fully or completely good person, the concept of a good person is not at all illogical. In contrast, how could there conceivably be a person who was truly, fully, completely evil, yet still able to function as a person among persons? (The Devil does his works in the same manner as a Machiavellian prince, by appearing to be what he is not — which proves that he can only function in devilish ways because he understands goodness.) Similarly, although there may never have existed a truly, fully, completely healthy animal, health can be understood as the order of an animal organism, but we cannot have a logically coherent concept of an animal organism that is nothing but sick or malfunctioning in every possible way. One cannot think of goodness (or health) as being deprived of evil (sickness), or as failing in one's attempts to be evil (sick). Logical fallacies are committed. One can only think of them of as failed attempts at reasoning logically or as willful attempts to mislead by abusing speech to conceal the logic of one's reasons. One cannot think of being logical as being deprived of nonsense, or as failing to achieve nonsense.

Logic, mathematics, biology, psychology, ethics, natural theology and other sciences are concerned with principles of order just as much as physics or chemistry is. Many orders of things, many realms of being, occupy the minds of intelligent beings. Nevertheless, either all of these orders are parts of an order of intelligible things or they are disconnected. If they are disconnected then no science could contradict another (because they would be sciences of different things), and all truth would be relative to one or other realm of being. However, if they are all parts or aspects of an order of intelligible things, there is a level of being where everything comes together and everything is in principle subject to a judgment that is independent of any particular perspective. This, I believe, is where Anselm is leading

us. We can have the idea of a being that pervades all realms of being and therefore connects everything to everything else. Because we have that idea, all realms of being, all orders of things, *are* connected. Unless the idea is shown to be incoherent, the being to which it refers *is*. It is at any rate in the mind, but being what it is, it cannot be only in the mind. It may not be attainable by us, mere mortals, but there is such a thing as truth — not just truth in physics, chemistry, biology, psychology, ethics, economics, or whatever; not just truth in science, literature or any other art; but truth in an absolute, non-relative sense. This, I take it, was what Anselm set out to prove: God, as Anselm thinks of Him, is a necessary being. He is that which all orders of being have in common, possibly the only thing they have in common. Thus, He satisfies Anselm's requirement, "I believe so that I may understand."

P.S. On creation

For the reasons indicated above, it would seem that Anselm has to reject the traditional notion of *creatio ex nihilo*. Indeed, his God is "as we believe and that which we believe", viz., a being than which no greater can be conceived. It would not make sense to say that such a being (which we would not know of if we did not have the intelligence to understand its concept) can physically create anything merely because *we believe* it to be omnipotent and capable of bringing stuff into existence. It can only guarantee that there is something outside our individual minds and that it is intelligibly the same for all of us, despite the fact that there are many of us who are not all of the same mind about everything. Again, we have to keep in mind that, if the above comments are acceptable, Anselm is concerned with being, i.e., intelligible orders, not with naked physical, material existence, which can be in — and according to the second law of thermodynamics always tends toward — complete disorder. Our idea that there is order out there, apart from whatever order there might be in our minds, comes with (from) Anselm's idea of God. In that sense, God can be called the creator of the physical *universe* or physical *order* of being — but this would not imply that he created the physical matter in that order or could control the causal forces that agitate it. In a somewhat related sense, we may say that Newton created the order of physics without creating any matter. However, Newton "created" by discovering what he what he already believed had to be there, and had to be there in an intelligible way.

Anselm's idea of God guarantees the intelligibility of what is out there, hence, our intellectual capacity to discern order and disorder, truth and falsehood, good and evil. In that sense, the idea of God makes us human. It would seem therefore that Anselm's idea gets rid of the problem of *excessive non-disciplinary evil*[10] (earthquakes, floods, tsunamis, the dangers posed by wild animals, the wanton violence of men, etcetera). His God is not omnipotent in any physical sense of the word, e.g., capable of re-arranging matter at will. Rather, His omnipotence *is* the idea of objective truth, hence of right judgment. Consequently, Anselm's God only "works" through those who really and rightly believe Him, not by taking over their bodies or wills but by giving knowledge of the truth of that faith.

It is obviously easy to find many passages in the Bible that do or at least appear to contradict Anselm's idea of God, but then Anselm was a Catholic. The Bible needs interpretation. Nevertheless, I do not think much in the Bible can be construed as an outright rejection of Anselm's view. In any case, reading the bible with as little prejudice as I could muster, I was struck from the very beginning by the fact that "creatio ex nihilo" has only a flimsy basis in the text. Going out on a limb and without attempting a systematic exegesis, I would point out the following:

[10] I owe this term to Anthony Flood.

The first sentence of Genesis I (which is an atypical chapter compared to the rest) does state (in the Hebrew version) that "In *a* beginning, God *had* created Heaven and Earth." Then we learn that "the Earth *has* been terrifying and chaotic, also dark." That is not an advertisement for work well done! It does not suggest that the creation of which is written had anything to do with an *order* of things.

The text continues: "But God's breath floated over the surface of a great body of water. And God uttered: 'Let there be light!'; and there was light." Next, we have the mother-of-all-judgments: "Then God judged the light to be good."

Except for the fact that the same name[11] is used, the subject of the first sentence does not seem to be the subject of the third and the rest of the Bible.[12] Note the undetermined nature of the first sentence: "*a* beginning" (for it is not part of the story to be told, only what we see when the curtains go up but the main character has yet to appear), "created" (with no indication of how or when; it does not even figure among the "six days of creation"). Here we have at best a reference to a dark, sinister, mechanical and mute impersonal force. It may be "creative" but it does not look like a "creator".

From the third sentence onwards, the picture changes: God makes his appearance as a living (breathing), rational (uttering), in short, personal being. He *speaks* the world into being, i.e., creates order by speaking. None of the "creations" in the six days is *creatio ex nihilo*: the raw matter was already there, but it was no more than that until God's word made the difference. The "creations" order that dark matter intelligibly by introducing distinctions in the light of understanding that is available. The essential layers of existence — the physical (light, dark, wet, dry, changing, unchanging), organic vegetative growth, animal life, human exceptionalism ("in his image he created them"[13]) and their dependence on the dark, primitive material layer — are all identified as preconditions of personal life, which is the theme of everything that follows. The mysterious, sinister God of Darkness and Chaos of the first sentence is never mentioned again.

It is, I believe, far easier to read "creatio ex nihilo" *out of* the Bible than it is to read it *into* it. As for other "mechanical" interventions (apart from the original one in Gen 1:1), they are mostly small and directed to specific individuals or groups, set in an early tribal context where myth, legend and facts easily fuse in a tradition of oral history. They are also of the let-this-be-a-lesson-to-you kind, explicitly motivated by moral considerations. They are definitely not earth-shattering interventions. And they are never "exceedingly non-disciplinary evil."

The apparent exception is the Flood. However, it appears that, in the second millennium B.C., the Flood was accepted as part of the history of the world nearly everywhere in the early civilizations of the Near and Middle East. It had presumably to be worked into any grand history. Moreover, the biblical setting for the Flood episode is interesting: mating with the "daughters of men" (an earlier hominoid species?), the "sons of God" (Homo potentially-sapiens?) produce a race of monsters. When the monstrous breed faces extinction (the Flood), God — without regret or remorse — does not even attempt to save it or any substantial part of it by some sort of mechanical intervention. He does not even give Noah a boat, which would have been a small gesture if he were

---

[11] As I read the texts, the one thing that both Gods have in common is that they are *not man*. "In a beginning no man had created heaven and earth"; "No man's breath…" etc. All true, but as the story unfolds, it becomes clear that God is to be thought of as the source or principle of all exclusively personal qualities — hence, he becomes eventually "the Father".

[12] Perhaps, the desire to affirm strict monotheism led the Jews to de-emphasize the radical difference between Gen 1:1 and Gen 1:3. On the Christian side, John's "In *the* beginning was the Word" unambiguously identifies God with The Word — *logos, ratio* — as the source of light and understanding. Speech is the creative personal act. In the rest of the story after that first sentence, God is mostly shown as thinking, deliberating and speaking to, even arguing with, people.

[13] In His image: they do not, to be sure, pervade every order of being, but they can nevertheless access them with their intelligence.

indeed an omnipotent demiurge or architect-of-everything. Instead, he gives him more *words*: instructions for building a boat. The only available defense against natural disasters is intelligence. If God had been an exnihilator (one who creates from nothing), he could simply have wiped the slate clean and started anew. Instead, he told good old Noah how to survive the looming disaster. Noah was a simple, gentle, morally good but still biologically (genetically) flawed man, with a weakness for alcohol. After all, he too was a child of the age of corrupt giants. Through Noah, their genes would survive to the present day. With Noah, a *new covenant* is struck; no *new man* appears. Compared to the ideologues of the nineteenth and twentieth century, who were continually promising a New Man, God comes across as definitely modest and commonsensical.

The biblical stories make much more sense if that first sentence Gen 1:1 is interpreted as I read it than if one supposes a Grand Exnihilator. God is essentially the Word. Except metaphorically, when bad things happen to bad men and are interpreted by the biblical narrators as punishment, he is never presented as a physical, mechanical interventionist. Is it not in the nature of reason to be unable (and to know itself to be unable) to move things *except within, or through the actions of, intelligent physical persons*?

I short, I do not think there really is a need to present God as *refusing* to intervene (for whatever dark, impenetrable "reasons" that contradict his defining statement, that light is good), when the textual evidence abounds that he is not acting out of character by not intervening. (When Jesus confronts Satan, he does not resort to the Indiana Jones trick and shoot the dagger-twirling bastard: he confuses him with arguments. Surely, that is the essential Christian teaching regarding reason and force — that, and the fact that although power wins in the short run, as demonstrated by the crucifixion, its victory is never more than a passing event: only the argument lasts until the end of time.)

I do not recall whether I expected to find many tall tales of the Almighty when I began reading the Bible. In any case, it quickly struck me that the emphasis was, on the one hand, on the physical impotence of God, and on the other hand, on his infinite wisdom of judgment. It also struck me that he was not good at predicting human things. The books show him to be taken by surprise on many occasions: his not knowing what sort of companion Adam would like, his exclamation "Lo and behold, man has become as one of us!", his anger at the offspring of the Sons of God and the Daughters of men, and so on and on.

Anselm's God, whose existence as pervading the realm of physical being is the object of the ontological argument, is not a denial of God's Word but its affirmation. Every order of being originates (in the sense explained above) in the intelligence, provided it is an intelligence that has the capacity to form the thought of an intelligent being greater than which cannot be conceived. But intelligence is the ability to apprehend order — without order there is nothing.

Frank van Dun

Back to Medieval Source Book

ANSELM ON GOD'S EXISTENCE

God's existence was to some extent obvious for medieval theologians. They simply knew he existed. Nevertheless, they attempted to prove his existence anyway, and the basic strategies employed by them are the ones used every since. Here two approaches are presented. The first, by Anselm, is perhaps the most puzzling. While it has not been all that popular with the average believer, it has fascinated philosophers, and even today there are respectable philosophers who accept it.

Anselm himself is equally fascinating, since he combined the seemingly disparate roles of saint, ecclesiastical leader, and major philosopher. He was born in 1033 near Aosta, which is now in Italy. At the age of twenty-three he quarreled with his father and began a period of wandering through France on what seems to have resembled an educational grand tour. After trying the schools at Fleury-sur-Loire and Chartres, he arrived at the Benedictine abbey of Bec, which was enjoying an excellent reputation thanks to Lanfranc, who served as both prior and master of its school. Anselm entered the abbey as a novice in 1060 and rapidly rose to eminence. When Lanfranc moved to the new monastery founded at Caen in 1063 by William, the Duke of Normandy, Anselm became prior at Bec, a position he held until he became abbot in 1078.

By that time William the Duke had become William the Conqueror and was in the process of reorganizing England. He had brought Lanfranc over as Archbishop of Canterbury, and when Lanfranc died William Rufus, who had succeeded William the Conqueror as king of England, imported Anselm to be the new archbishop. Anselm arrived in 1093 and almost from the moment he touched English soil he was fighting with William to gain ecclesiastical freedom from royal control. By 1097, he was conducting the battle from exile, and was allowed to return only in 1100, when Henry I succeeded William Rufus. He got along no better with Henry, however, and in 1103 was back in exile, returning only in 1107 when the stubborn king and equally stubborn archbishop worked out a compromise that became the standard formula for settling church-state quarrels in the twelfth century. Anselm died in 1109.

If Anselm was sure of himself in ecclesiastical politics, he was equally so in theology. His associate and biographer Eadmer gives a remarkably telling deathbed scene. It was Palm Sunday, and one of those clustered around Anselm's bed remarked that it looked as if the archbishop would be celebrating Easter with God, Anselm replied, Well, if that's what God wants I'll gladly obey him, but if he prefers to let me stay here long enough to solve the problem of the origin of the soul (which I've been thinking about a great deal lately) I would gratefully accept that opportunity, because I doubt if anyone else is going to solve it once I'm gone.

Something should be said about the intellectual climate in Anselm's time. The main conflict in the eleventh century was between those who saw theology as little more than Bible commentary and those who felt that rational analysis and argument was needed. The first group argued that God was such a mystery, so intellectually inaccessible, that we could hope to talk about him at all only in the symbolic language he himself had graciously given us for that purpose. Nor could we expect to get beyond that language, to infer other truths from it by reason.

Anselm's writings place him securely in the second group. As he suggests at the beginning of the Proslogion, sin has so darkened our minds that we cannot hope to reach the truth unless God graciously leads us to it. He does so by offering us the truth through revelation and by inspiring us to accept that revelation in faith. Once we accept the truth on that basis, however, we can

hope to reason out proofs for what we have already accepted through faith. God is rational, and what he does is rational, and we ourselves are blessed with reason. Thus we should be able to discover the rationality of God's actions, at least to some extent. We are like students who, unable to solve a mathematical problem, are given the answer to it and then discover they can reason out why that answer is correct.

If later theologians found themselves uneasy with this approach, it was because they suspected that even the most brilliant student could not be expected to work out the problem quite as well as Anselm thought he had. In his other major work, the Cur Deus Homo (Why God Became Man), he offers an explanation for the Christ's incarnation and crucifixion which essentially argues that God had to do it that way because it was the only logical course he could follow, given the divine attributes of omnipotence and justice. God had to redeem humankind or else the eternal purposes for which it had been created would have been thwarted and God's omnipotence would have been compromised; yet humankind also had to be punished for the fall or else God's justice would have been compromised. Anselm's argument - which explained the course of sacred history not only in broad outline but in excruciating detail - made the whole thing very accessible to human reason, perhaps too accessible. Later theologians suspected that the rationality was achieved by trapping God within the rational structures of the created world. In the final analysis, God was not very much like us, and we could not explain his actions by assuming he had to follow the same rules we do. Abelard, writing somewhat later, suggested that the world was, after all, God's creation and he could do as he pleased with it. If he wanted to forgive humankind, why could he not simply forgive it?

PROSLOGION

Chapter 1: Encouraging the Mind to Contemplate God

Come on now little man, get away from your worldly occupations for a while, escape from your tumultuous thoughts. Lay aside your burdensome cares and put off your laborious exertions. Give yourself over to God for a little while, and rest for a while in Him. Enter into the cell of your mind, shut out everything except God and whatever helps you to seek Him once the door is shut. Speak now, my heart, and say to God, "I seek your face; your face, Lord, I seek."

Come on then, my Lord God, teach my heart where and how to seek you, where and how to find you. Lord, if you are not here, where shall I find you? If, however, you are everywhere, why do I not see you here? But certainly you dwell in inaccessible light. And where is that inaccessible light? Or how do I reach it? Or who will lead me to it and into it, so that I can see you in it? And then by what signs, under what face shall I seek you? I have never seen you, my Lord God, or known your face. What shall I do, Highest Lord, what shall this exile do, banished far from you as he is? What should your servant do, desperate as he is for your love yet cast away from your face? He longs to see you, and yet your face is too far away from him. He wants to come to you, and yet your dwelling place is unreachable. He yearns to discover you, and he does not know where you are. He craves to seek you, and does not know how to recognize you. Lord, you are my Lord and my God, and I have never seen you. You have made me and nurtured me, given me every good thing I have ever received, and I still do not know you. I was created for the purpose of seeing you, and I still have not done the thing I was made to do.

Oh, how miserable man's lot is when he has lost what he was made for! Oh how hard and dire was that downfall! Alas, what did he lose and what did he find? What was taken away and what remains? He has lost beatitude for which he was made, and he has found misery for which he was not made. That without which he cannot be happy has been

taken away, and that remains which in itself can only make him miserable. Back then man ate the bread of angels for which he now hungers, and now he eats the bread of griefs which he did not even know back then. Alas for the common grief of man, the universal lamentation of Adam's sons! He belched in his satiety, while we sigh in our want. He was rich, we are beggars. He happily possessed and miserably abandoned, we unhappily lack and miserably desire, yet alas, we remain empty. Why, since it would have been easy for him, did he not keep what we so disastrously lack? Why did he deprive us of light, and cover us with darkness instead? Why did he take life away from us and inflict death instead? From what have we poor wretches been expelled, and toward what are we being driven? From what have we been cast down, in what buried? From our fatherland into exile, from the vision of God into blindness. From the happiness of immortality into the bitterness and horror of death. What a miserable transformation! From so much good into so much evil! A heavy injury, a heavy, heavy grief.

I have come to you as a poor man to a rich one, as a poor rich to a merciful giver. May I not return empty and rejected! And if "I sigh before I eat" (Job 3:4), once I have sighed give me something to eat. Lord, turned in (incurvatus) as I am I can only look down, so raise me up so that I can look up. "My iniquities heaped on my head" cover me over and weigh me down "like a heavy load" (Ps. 37:5). Dig me out and set me free before "the pit" created by them "shuts its jaws over me" (Ps. 67:16).Let me see your light, even if I see it from afar or from the depths. Teach me to seek you, and reveal yourself to this seeker. For I cannot seek you unless you teach me how, nor can I find you unless you show yourself to me. Let me seek you in desiring you, and desire you in seeking you. Let me find you in loving you and love you in finding you.

I acknowledge, Lord, and I give thanks that you have created in me this your image, so that I can remember you, think about you and love you. But it is so worn away by sins, so smudged over by the smoke of sins, that it cannot do what it was created to do unless you renew and reform it. I do not even try, Lord, to rise up to your heights, because my intellect does not measure up to that task; but I do want to understand in some small measure your truth, which my heart believes in and loved. Nor do I seek to understand so that I can believe, but rather I believe so that I can understand. For I believe this too, that "unless I believe I shall not understand" (Isa. 7:9).

Chapter 2: That God Really Exists

Therefore, Lord, you who give knowledge of the faith, give me as much knowledge as you know to be fitting for me, because you are as we believe and that which we believe. And indeed we believe you are something greater than which cannot be thought. Or is there no such kind of thing, for "the fool said in his heart, 'there is no God'" (Ps. 13:1, 52:1)? But certainly that same fool, having heard what I just said, "something greater than which cannot be thought," understands what he heard, and what he understands is in his thought, even if he does not think it exists. For it is one thing for something to exist in a person's thought and quite another for the person to think that thing exists. For when a painter thinks ahead to what he will paint, he has that picture in his thought, but he does not yet think it exists, because he has not done it yet. Once he has painted it he has it in his thought and thinks it exists because he has done it. Thus even the fool is compelled to grant that something greater than which cannot be thought exists in thought, because he understands what he hears, and whatever is understood exists in thought. And certainly that greater than which cannot be understood cannot exist only in thought, for if it exists only in thought it could also be thought of as existing in reality as well, which is greater. If, therefore, that than which greater cannot be thought exists in thought alone, then that than which greater cannot be thought turns out to be that than which something greater

actually can be thought, but that is obviously impossible. Therefore something than which greater cannot be thought undoubtedly exists both in thought and in reality.

Chapter 3: That God Cannot be Thought Not to Exist

In fact, it so undoubtedly exists that it cannot be thought of as not existing. For one can think there exists something that cannot be thought of as not existing, and that would be greater than something which can be thought of as not existing. For if that greater than which cannot be thought can be thought of as not existing, then that greater than which cannot be thought is not that greater than which cannot be thought, which does not make sense. Thus that than which nothing can be thought so undoubtedly exists that it cannot even be thought of as not existing.

And you, Lord God, are this being. You exist so undoubtedly, my Lord God, that you cannot even be thought of as not existing. And deservedly, for if some mind could think of something greater than you, that creature would rise above the creator and could pass judgment on the creator, which is absurd. And indeed whatever exists except you alone can be thought of as not existing. You alone of all things most truly exists and thus enjoy existence to the fullest degree of all things, because nothing else exists so undoubtedly, and thus everything else enjoys being in a lesser degree. Why therefore did the fool say in his heart "there is no God," since it is so evident to any rational mind that you above all things exist? Why indeed, except precisely because he is stupid and foolish?

Chapter 4: How the Fool Managed to Say in His Heart That Which Cannot be Thought

How in the world could he have said in his heart what he could not think? Or how indeed could he not have thought what he said in his heart, since saying it in his heart is the same as thinking it? But if he really thought it because he said it in his heart, and did not say it in his heart because he could not possibly have thought it - and that seems to be precisely what happened - then there must be more than one way in which something can be said in one's heart or thought. For a thing is thought in one way when the words signifying it are thought, and it is thought in quite another way when the thing signified is understood. God can be thought not to exist in the first way but not in the second. For no one who understands what God is can think that he does not exist. Even though he may say those words in his heart he will give them some other meaning or no meaning at all. For God is that greater than which cannot be thought. Whoever understands this also understands that God exists in such a way that one cannot even think of him as not existing.

Thank you, my good God, thank you, because what I believed earlier through your gift I now understand through your illumination in such a way that I would be unable not to understand it even if I did not want to believe you existed.

Anselm now proceeds to deduce God's nature from the same basic definition of him as something greater than which cannot be thought.. He arrives as all the standard attributes: creative, rational, omnipotent, merciful, unchangeable, just, eternal, etc. It is, in effect, a theological tour de force.

Anselm's thoughts did not go unchallenged, however. His first major critic was Gaunilo, a monk in the abbey of Marmoutier. Gaunilo's reply is the only bit of writing we possess by him, which is a shame, because in it we encounter a very perceptive mind, although a radically different one than Anselm's.

GAUNILO: HOW SOMEONE WRITING ON BEHALF OF THE FOOL MIGHT REPLY TO ALL THIS

To one who questions whether (or simply denies that) there exists something of such a nature that nothing greater can be imagined, it is said that its existence is proved in the first place by the fact that anyone denying it already has it in his thought, since upon hearing it said he understands what is said; and in the second place by the fact that what he understands necessarily exists not only in the mind but in reality as well. Thus its existence is proved, because it is a greater thing to exist in reality as well than to exist in the mind alone, and if it exists only in the mind, then what exists in reality as well will be greater, and thus that which is greater than all else will be less than something else and not greater than all else, which is nonsense. Thus what is greater than all else must necessarily exist, not only in the mind (which has already been acknowledge to be the case), in reality as well, or else it could not be greater than all else.

But perhaps the fool could reply that this thing is said to exist in my mind only in the sense that I understand what is said. For could I not say that all sorts of false and completely nonexistent things exist in my mind since when someone speaks of them I understand what is said? Unless perhaps what is being said here is that one entertains this particular thing in the mind in a completely different way than one thinks of false or doubtful things, and thus what is being said is that having heard this particular thing I do not merely think it but understand it, for I cannot think of this thing in any other way except by understanding it, and that means understanding with certainty that it actually exists. But if this is true, then in the first place there will be no difference between first entertaining that thing in the mind and then understanding that it exists. Imagine the case of that picture which is first in the painter's mind, then exists in reality. It seems unthinkable that, once such an object was spoken of the words heard, the object could not be thought not to exist in the same way God can be thought not to exist. For if God cannot be thought not to exist, then what is the point of launching this whole argument against someone who might deny that something of such a nature actually exists? And in the second place, this basic notion - that God is such that, as soon as he is thought of, he must be perceived by the mind as unquestionably existing - this notion, I say, must be proved to me by some unquestionable argument, but not by the one offered here, namely that this must be in my understanding because I understand what I'm hearing. For as far as I am concerned one might say the same thing about other things that are certain or even false, things about which I might be deceived (as I believe I often am).

Thus the example of the painter who already has in his mind the picture he is about to produce cannot be made to support this argument. For that picture, before it comes into being, exists in the art of the painter, and such a thing existing in the art of some painter is nothing other than a certain part of his understanding; for as Saint Augustine says, "If a craftsman is going to make a box, he first has it in his art. The box he actually produces is not life, but that in his art is life, because the artisan's soul, in which all such things exist before they are brought forth, is alive. And how are these things alive in the living soul of the artisan unless because are nothing other than the knowledge or understanding of the soul itself? But leaving aside those things which are known to belong to the nature of the mind itself, in the case of those things which are perceived as true by the mind through hearing or thought, in this case there is a difference between the thing itself and the mind which grasps it. Thus even if it should be true that there is something greater than which cannot be thought, this thing, whether heard or understood, would not be like the as-yet-unmade picture in the painter's mind.

Moreover, there is the point already suggested earlier, namely that when hear of something greater than all other things which can be thought of - and that something can

be nothing other than God himself - I can no more entertain a thought of this being in terms of species or genera familiar to me than I can entertain such a thought of God himself, and for this reason I am able to think he does not exist. For I have not known the thing itself and I cannot form a similitude of it from other things. For if I hear about some man completely unknown to me, whom I do not even know exists, I could at least think about him through that specific and generic knowledge by which I know what a man is or what men are like Yet it could be true that, because the speaker was lying, the man I thought about actually did not exist at all, even though I had thought of him as an existing thing, my idea of him being based, not on knowledge of this particular man, but on knowledge of man in general. But when I hear someone say "God" or "something greater than everything else" I cannot think of it as I thought of that nonexistent man, for I was able to think of the latter in terms of some truly existing thing known to me, while in the former case I can think only of the bare words, and on this basis alone one can seldom or never gain any true knowledge. For when one thinks in this way, one thinks not so much of the word itself - which, insofar as it is the sound of letters or syllables is itself a real thing, but of what is signified by the sound heard. But a phrase like "that which is greater than everything else" is not thought of as one thinks about words when one knows what they mean. It is not thought of, that is, as one thinks about something he knows is true either in reality or in thought alone. It is thought of, instead, as one does when he does not really know what the words mean, but thinks of it only in terms of an affection produced by the words within his soul, yet tries to imagine what the words mean. On this basis, though, it would be amazing if he was ever able to penetrate to the truth of the thing. It is in this way and only in this way that this being is in my mind when I hear and understand someone saying there is something greater than everything else that can be thought of. So much for the claim that the supreme nature already exists in my mind.

Nevertheless, that this being must exist not only in my mind but in reality as well is proved to me by the following argument: If it did not, then whatever did exist in reality would be greater, and thus the thing which has already been proved to exist in my mind will not be greater than everything else. If it is said that this being, which cannot be conceived of in terms of any existing thing, exists in the mind, I do not deny that it exists in mine. But through this alone it can hardly be said to attain existence in reality. I will not concede that much to it unless convinced by some indubitable argument. For whoever says that it must exist because otherwise that which is greater than all other beings will not be greater than all other beings, that person isn't paying careful enough attention to what he says. For I do not yet grant, in fact I deny it or at least question it, that the thing existing in my mind is greater than any real thing. Nor do I concede that it exists in any way except this: the sort of existence (if you can call it such) a thing has when the mind attempts to form some image of a thing unknown to it on the basis of nothing more than some words the person has heard. How then is it demonstrated to me that the thing exists in reality merely because it is said to be greater than everything else? For I continue to deny and doubt that this is established, since I continue to question whether this greater thing is in my mind or thought even in the way that many doubtful or unreal things are. It would first have to be proved to me that this greater thing really exists somewhere. Only then will we be able to infer from the fact that is greater than everything else that it also subsists in itself.

For example, they say there is in the ocean somewhere an island which, due to the difficulty (or rather the impossibility) of finding what does not actually exist, is called "the lost island." And they say that this island has all manner of riches and delights, even more of them than the Isles of the Blest, and having no owner or inhabitant it is superior in the abundance of its riches to all other lands which are inhabited by men. If someone should tell me that such is the case, I will find it easy to understand what he says, since there is nothing difficult about it. But suppose he then adds, as if he were stating a logical

consequence, "Well then, you can no longer doubt that this island more excellent than all other lands really exists somewhere, since you do not doubt that it is in your mind; and since it is more excellent to exist not only in the mind but in reality as well, this island must necessarily exist, because if it didn't, any other island really existing would be more excellent than it, and thus that island now thought of by you as more excellent will not be such." If, I say, someone tries to convince me though this argument that the island really exists and there should be no more doubt about it, I will either think he is joking or I will have a hard time deciding who is the bigger fool, me if I believe him or him if he thinks he has proved its existence without having first convinced me that this excellence is something undoubtedly existing in reality and not just something false or uncertain existing in my mind.

In the meantime, this is how the fool answers. If it is asserted in the first place that this being is so great that its nonbeing is logically inconceivable (this in turn being proved by nothing except that otherwise it would not be greater than all other beings), then the fool can answer, "When did I say that such a being, namely one greater than all others, actually exists, thus allowing you to proceed from there to argue that it so really exists that its very nonexistence is inconceivable?" It should first be proved conclusively that some being superior to (that is, greater and better than) all others exists, so that on this basis we can go on to prove the attributes such a greater and better being must possess. When, however, it is said that this highest being cannot be thought of as not existing, perhaps it would have been better to say that its nonbeing or the possibility of its nonbeing is unintelligible. For strictly speaking false things are unintelligible even though they can be thought of in the same way the fool thought God did not exist. I am absolutely certain that I exist, although I nevertheless know that my nonexistence is possible. And I understand without doubting it that the highest thing there is, namely God, exists and cannot not exist. I do not know, however, whether I can think of myself as nonexistant when I know for certain that I exist. If it turns out that I can do so in this case, why should I not be able to do the same concerning other things I know with equal certainty? If I cannot, though, the impossibility of doing so will not be something peculiar to thinking about God.

The other parts of that book are argued with such veracity, brilliance and splendor, and filled with such value, such an intimate fragrance of devout and holy feeling, that they should in no way be condemned because of those things which, at the beginning"it also prove that he exists are rightly intuited but less firmly argued. Rather those things should be argued more robustly and the entire work thus received with great respect and praise.

ANSELM'S REPLY TO GAUNILO

Since whoever wrote this reply to me is not the fool against whom I wrote in my treatise but instead one who, though speaking on behalf of the fool, is a catholic Christian and no fool himself, I can speak to him as a catholic Christian.

You say - whoever you are who claim that the fool can say these things - that something greater than which cannot be thought of is in the mind only as something that cannot be thought of in terms of some [existent thing known to us]. And you say that one can no more argue, "since a being greater than which cannot be thought of exists in my mind it must also exist in reality," than one can argue, "the lost island certainly exists in reality because when it is described in words the hearer has no doubt that it exists in his mind." I say in reply that if "a being greater than which cannot be thought of" is neither understood nor thought of, nor is it in our understanding or our thought, then God either is not that greater than which cannot be thought of or he is not understood or thought of, nor is he in the understanding or mind. In proving that this is false I appeal to your faith and

conscience. Therefore "a being greater than which cannot be thought of" is really understood and thought of and it really is in our understanding and thought. And that is why the arguments by which you attempt to prove the contrary either are not true or what you think follows from them does not follow from them at all.

Moreover, you imagine that although "a being greater than which cannot be thought of" is understood, it does not follow that it exists in our understanding nor does it follow that, since it is in our understanding, it must exist in reality. I myself say with certainty that if such a being can even be thought of as existing, it must necessarily exist. For "a being greater than which cannot be thought of" cannot be thought of except as having no beginning; but whatever can be thought of as existing yet does not actually exist can be thought of as having a beginning. Therefore "a being greater than which cannot be thought of" cannot be thought of yet not actually exist. Therefore, if it can be thought of, it necessarily exists.

Furthermore, if it can be thought of at all, it must necessarily exist. For no one who denies or doubts the existence of "a being greater than which cannot be thought of" denies or doubts that, if it did exist, it would be impossible for it not to exist either in reality or in the mind. Otherwise it would not be "a being greater than which cannot be thought of." But whatever can be thought of yet does not actually exist, could, if it did come to exist, not existence again in reality and in the mind. That is why, if it can even be thought of, "a being greater than which cannot be thought of" cannot be nonexistent.

But let us suppose that it does not exist (if it is even possible to suppose as much). Whatever can be thought of yet does not exist, even if it should come into existence, would not be "a being greater than which cannot be thought of." Thus "a being greater than which cannot be thought of" would not be "a being greater than which cannot be thought of," which is absurd. Thus if "a being greater than which cannot be thought of" can even be thought of, it is false to say that it does not exist; and it is even more false if such can be understood and exist in the understanding.

I will go even farther. Without doubt whatever does not exist somewhere or at some time, even if it does exist somewhere or at some time, can be thought of as capable of as existing never and nowhere, just as it does not exist somewhere or at some time. For what did not exist yesterday and exists today can be thought of as never existing, just as it is thought of as not having existed yesterday. And what does not exist here but does exist somewhere else can be thought of as not existing anywhere. And it is the same with something some parts of which are absent at times. If that is the case, then all of its parts and thus the thing in its entirety can be thought of as existing never and nowhere. For if it is said that time always exists and the world is everywhere, it is nevertheless true that time as a whole does not exist forever, nor does the entire world exist everywhere. And if individual parts of time exist when other parts do not, they can be thought of as never existing at all. And just as particular parts of the world do not exist where other parts do, so they can be thought of as never existing at all, anywhere. And what is composed of parts can be broken up in the mind and be nonexistent. Thus whatever does not exist as a whole sometime or somewhere can be thought of as not existing, even if it actually exists at the moment. But "a being greater than which cannot be thought of," if it exists, cannot be thought of as not existing. Otherwise it is not "a being greater than which cannot be thought of," which is absurd. Thus it cannot fail to exist in its totality always and everywhere.

Do you not believe that the being of which these things are understood can be thought about or understood or be in the thought or understanding to some extent? For if he is not, then we cannot understand these things about him. If you say that he is not

understood or in the understanding because he is not fully understood, say as well that one who cannot look directly at the sun does not see the light of day, which is nothing other than the light of the sun. Certainly "a being greater than which cannot be thought of" is understood and exists in the understanding at least to the extent that these statements about it are understood.

Anselm continues as some length, but much of what he says seems repetitive. He does eventually note one important difference in the way he and Gaunilo have been phrasing the matter.

You often picture me as offering this argument: Because what is greater than all other things exists in the understanding, it must also exist in reality or else the being which is greater than all others would not be such. Never in my entire treatise do I say this. For there is a big difference between saying "greater than all other things" and "a being greater than which cannot be thought of." If someone says "a being greater than which cannot be thought of" is not something actually existing or is something which could possibly not exist or something which cannot even be understood, such assertions are easily refuted. For what does not exist is capable of not existing, and what is capable of not existing can be thought of as not existing. But whatever can be thought of as not existing, if it does actually exist, is not "a being greater than which cannot be thought of."

Anselm goes on to present his standard argument that the nonexistence of such a being is inconceivable. Then he adds a key observation.

It is not, it seems, so easy to prove the same thing of "that which is greater than all other things," for it is not all that obvious that something which can be thought of as not existing is not nevertheless greater than all things which actually exist.

Translation by David Burr [olivi@mail.vt.edu]. See his home page. He indicated that the translations are available for educational use. He intends to expand the number of translations, so keep a note of his home page.

Paul Halsall Jan 1996

halsall@murray.fordham.edu