

Quod Vere Sit Deus: **Why Anselm Thought that God Truly Exists**

Brian Davies OP

'Behold, one night during Matins, the grace of God shone in his heart and the matter became clear to his understanding, filling his whole heart with an immense joy and jubilation'.¹

I

What became clear to him? Almost all students of theology, and many students of philosophy, know that there is an argument for God's existence called 'the Ontological Argument'. Where is this argument to be found? The usual answer given is that it was first advanced by St Anselm (c. 1033—1109) in his *Proslogion*. Is the argument a good one? The usual answer is that it is not, and that Immanuel Kant (1724—1804) effectively showed why. In my opinion, however, these answers are wrong. In what follows I shall try to explain why this is so. The effort is worth while because it is important to know what Anselm did argue, and also because, as it seems to me, what he has to offer is much more cogent than what is normally attributed to him.²

II

We can begin by noting the nature of the argument attributed to Anselm by those who see him as the father of the Ontological Argument. It runs like this:

- (1) 'God' by definition is 'that than which nothing greater can be thought'.
- (2) If God did not exist he would not be 'that than which nothing greater can be thought', for it is greater to exist than not to exist.
- (3) By definition, then, 'that than which nothing greater can be thought' exists. It would be contradictory to say 'That than which nothing greater can be thought does not exist'.
- (4) God, therefore, exists.

That is a standard rendition of Anselm's position. Numerous text-books proclaim it, and almost all the undergraduates I teach presume that this is what Anselm wanted to say (not surprisingly, because numerous text-books proclaim it). In terms of his argument thus understood the existence of God follows from the concept of God on the assumption that existence is a perfection or great-making property which must be possessed by that

than which nothing greater can be thought.³ This is why Kant (whom we do not know to have read Anselm) is often held to have dealt the death-blow to the argument. According to Kant (commenting on what he calls the Ontological proof), existence is not a property which something may have or lack. '*Being*', he asserts, 'is obviously not a real predicate; that is, it is not a concept of something which could be added to the concept of a thing. It is merely the positing of a thing, or of certain determinations, as existing in themselves'.⁴ Also, says Kant, it is wrong to suppose that one can, by means of a concept, define God into existence.

If, in an identical proposition, I reject the predicate while retaining the subject, contradiction results and I therefore say that the former belongs necessarily to the latter. But if we reject subject and predicate alike, there is no contradiction, for nothing is then left that can be contradicted. To posit a triangle, and yet to reject its three angles, is self-contradictory; but there is no contradiction in rejecting the triangle together with its three angles. The same holds true of the concept of an absolutely necessary being ... If we say 'There is no God', neither the omnipotence nor any other of its predicates is given; they are one and all rejected together with the subject, and there is therefore not the least contradiction in such a judgement.⁵

III

With all of this before us, the first thing to note is that the Ontological Argument as just presented can indeed be found in a classical philosophical text to which the objections of Kant evidently apply (whether they are decisive or not). It can be found in Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy*, where we read as follows:

Since I have been accustomed to distinguish between existence and essence in everything else, I find it easy to persuade myself that existence can also be separated from the essence of God, and hence that God can be thought of as not existing. But when I concentrate more carefully, it is quite evident that existence can no more be separated from the essence of God than the fact that its three angles equal two right angles can be separated from the essence of a triangle, or than the idea of a mountain can be separated from the idea of a valley. Hence it is just as much a contradiction to think of God (that is, a supremely perfect being) lacking existence (that is, lacking a perfection), as it is to think of a mountain without a valley ... I am not free to think of God without existence (that is, a supremely perfect being without a supreme perfection) as I am free to imagine a horse with or without wings ... Now admittedly, it is not necessary that I ever light upon any thought of God; but whenever I do choose to think of the first and supreme being,

and bring forth the idea of God from the treasure house of my mind as it were, it is necessary that I attribute all perfections to him, even if I do not at that time enumerate them or attend to them individually. And this necessity plainly guarantees that, when I later realize that existence is a perfection, I am correct in inferring that the first and supreme being exists.⁶

Here Descartes is manifestly passing from a definition of God to the conclusion that God exists by means of the premise that existence is a perfection which God, by definition, must possess. He even invokes the analogy of a triangle, as Kant does.

But is this what we find in Anselm? The only way to settle the matter is to look at what Anselm says. There are three texts which need to be consulted in this connection. The first is Chapter 2 of the *Proslogion*. The second is Chapter 3 of the *Proslogion*. The third (ignored for the most part by most people writing on the Ontological Argument) is Anselm's reply to his first critic, Gaunilo of Marmoutiers (*Quid Ad Haec Respondeat Editor Ipsius Libelli*). At this stage, therefore, we need a breakdown of the contents of these texts.

IV

(A) *Proslogion 2*

The title of the chapter is '*Quod vere sit deus*' (that God truly is). The conclusion of the chapter is that God 'exists both in the mind and in reality' (*et in intellectu et in re*). Between title and conclusion comes an argument for the conclusion, so it is abundantly clear that the purpose of the chapter is to advance an argument for God existing both in the mind and in reality.⁷

We should not, however, suppose that Anselm means what most people would now mean by such a conclusion. In speaking of something existing 'in the mind' he evidently means 'existing as thought about or understood'. Most people today would tend to say that to exist in this way is not really to exist (that X as thought about is not X, and that if X is thought about it does not follow that X really exists), and in the light of that assumption, they might be tempted to think that Anselm is out to show that God really exists and does not have the status of something 'in the mind' (which does not really exist). But that would be a mistake. Anselm clearly does not see himself as moving from God's non-existence to God's real existence or from a concept to a reality. He manifestly sees himself as moving from God's existence in the mind to God's existence both in the mind and outside the mind—the assumption being that to say that God exists in the mind is to concede that God somehow exists.⁸

To begin with, says Anselm, we need to consider what God is. The answer Anselm comes up with is that God is 'something than which nothing greater can be thought' (*aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari possit*). This, he observes, is what 'we believe' God to be.⁹

But suppose someone says that there is no God. That person, says

Anselm, 'understands what he hears, and what he understands is in his mind'. From this Anselm concludes that God exists even in the mind of one denying his existence. 'Even the Fool (in *Psalms* 13 and 52), then, is forced to agree that something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought exists in the mind, since he understands this when he hears it, and whatever is understood is in the mind'.¹⁰

But does God exist in any other sense? A painter planning a picture, says Anselm, has the picture in his mind. The picture exists in the mind of the painter. But the painter does not understand it to exist outside his mind. So something can exist in the mind and outside the mind. Is this the case with God? Anselm concludes that it must be. But why?

His answer is this: '*Et certe id quo maius cogitari nequit non potest esse in solo intellectu. Si enim vel in solo intellectu est potest cogitari esse et in re quod maius est*'. What does Anselm mean here? The text can be translated in two ways (people rarely seem to see that there are possibilities here):

- (1) And for sure that than which a greater cannot be thought cannot be solely in the intellect. For if it is solely in the intellect it can be thought to be in reality, which is greater.
- (2) And for sure that than which a greater cannot be thought cannot be solely in the intellect. For if it is solely in the intellect it can be thought that there is in reality something which is greater.¹¹

If Anselm is asserting (1) he means that it is greater to be in the mind and outside the mind rather than to be simply in the mind. If he is asserting (2) he means that one can think of something outside the mind which is greater than something which is solely in the mind. Either way, however, it is clear that Anselm is arguing that God can be thought to be greater than something existing only in the mind, and that God therefore does not just exist in the mind (though he does exist in the mind). The conclusion here rests on the preliminary notion of God as that than which nothing greater can be thought.

(B) *Proslogion* 3

Proslogion 3 is evidently intended by Anselm as in some way distinct from Chapter 2 (because of the chapter division), and the difference is presumably indicated by the title of the chapter: '*Quod non possit cogitari non esse*' (that God cannot be thought not to exist). The purpose of *Proslogion* 3, then, is not to argue that God exists both in mind and outside it (the conclusion of *Proslogion* 2). It is to argue that God cannot be thought not to exist.

What is the difference between these conclusions? It can surely be brought out by example. Suppose I understand that a certain person exists. Then, so Anselm would say, the person exists in my mind. And if the person exists outside my mind, the person exists both in the mind and outside it. But such a person need not be such that he or she cannot be thought not to exist. I can perfectly well acknowledge the existence of

someone without supposing that there is no possibility of that person not existing. By the same token, Anselm seems to be assuming, even if we know that God exists both in the mind and outside it, it does not follow that there is no possibility of God not existing.¹² If we think that God is such that there is no possibility of him not existing we need to know more of him than that he exists both in the mind and outside it. The burden of *Proslogion* 3 seems to be to show that we do know this of him.¹³

How? Because, says Anselm, it can be thought that there is something which cannot be thought not to exist, and because God must be such a being if he is something than which nothing greater can be thought. Why? Because, says Anselm, something can be thought to exist which cannot be thought not to exist, and this is greater than something which can be thought not to exist.

Something can be thought to exist that cannot be thought not to exist, and this is greater than that which can be thought not to exist. hence, if that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought can be thought not to exist, then that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought is not the same as that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought, which is absurd.¹⁴

(C) *Reply to Gaunilo*

This text is very rich in arguments. The best thing is to try to isolate the main arguments and to display them clearly. The reason for trying to do so is that Anselm's reply to Gaunilo is the only thing we have from him as a response to the *Proslogion* and as an attempt on his part to explain what he thought he was arguing in that work (this is why it is odd that so many authors who propose to explain what Anselm argued in the *Proslogion* largely ignore the *Reply to Gaunilo*). It should also be noted that Anselm himself directed that the *Proslogion*, Gaunilo's reply to Anselm, and Anselm's reply to Gaunilo should all be read together.¹⁵

Argument 1

Anselm's first move is to challenge the objection that God does not exist in the mind. And, to start with, he does so fairly simply. Gaunilo is a believer (*catholicus*) and, as such, must surely accept that God is something than which nothing greater can be thought. From this, says Anselm, it follows that God is understood and thought of, at least by Gaunilo.

Argument 2

Could it, however, be said that the fact that one understands or has in mind that than which nothing greater can be thought does not entail that it exists in the mind or outside the mind? Anselm acknowledges that one might say this, as Gaunilo does. But he denies that the assertion is warranted since to think of that than which nothing greater can be thought is to think of something without a beginning and since something without a beginning cannot be thought of as not existing since something which does not exist can be thought of as being able to begin to exist.

Argument 3

Furthermore, says Anselm, something which is able to be but which does not exist could, if it existed, be able not to be either in the mind or outside it. But something able not to be either in the mind or outside it would not be something than which nothing greater could be thought.

Argument 4

At this point Anselm introduces an argument involving the notions of time and place. Suppose there is something which exists at some time and in some place, though not at all times and all places. Such a thing can be thought of as not existing at any time or at any place. Also suppose that there is something bits of which do not exist at the time and place its other parts exist (as we might say, though Anselm does not, is the case with people who develop bodily bits over time). Such a thing can also be thought of as not existing at any time or at any place. And what is composed of parts can be thought of as able to be broken up and, hence, as not existing at some time and place. But something than which nothing greater can be thought cannot be thought not to exist, if it does exist, and must exist as a whole at every time and every place.

Argument 5

If all of this makes sense, Anselm now reasons, then we cannot deny that God 'can to some extent be thought or understood, or can exist in thought or in mind'. For we are reasoning about 'that than which nothing greater can be thought', and how is this possible if that than which nothing greater can be thought is not understood or in the mind? 'Surely then 'that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought' is understood and is in the mind to the extent that we understand these things (sc. *Arguments 1–4*) about it'.

Argument 6

Here Anselm is again concerned with the suggestion that something than which nothing greater can be thought does not exist in any mind. But the precise objection he wishes to counter holds that if it is in the mind (*in intellectu*) it does not follow that it is understood (*intelligitur*). His reply (a verbal point really) is that what is in the mind is, as such, in the understanding (he is saying something like 'If it is understood then it is in the understanding'). So we need not doubt that God is in the mind and is understood.

Argument 7

Anselm's next point hinges on the suggestion that something existing only in the mind is such that something greater than it can be thought to exist. We can conceive of something existing only in the mind, he says. But we can also conceive of something greater which is not just in the mind. If God is something than which nothing greater can be thought, he therefore suggests, it cannot be that God exists only in the mind.

Argument 8

In his reply to Anselm (*Quid Ad Haec Respondeat Quidam Pro Insipiente*) Gaunilo (as all students of the Ontological Argument know) offered an argument about an island. It is a version of the 'You Can't Define Things Into Existence' argument. Here is the full text:

For example: they say that there is in the ocean somewhere an island which, because of the difficulty (or rather the impossibility) of finding that which does not exist, some have called the 'Lost Island'. And the story goes that it is blessed with all manner of priceless riches and delights in abundance, much more even than the Happy Isles, and having no owner or inhabitant, it is superior everywhere in abundance of riches to all those islands that men inhabit. Now, if anyone tells me that it is like this, I shall easily understand what is said, since nothing is difficult about it. But if he should then go on to say, as though it were a logical consequence of this: You cannot any more doubt that this island that is more excellent than all other lands exists somewhere in reality than you can doubt that it is in your mind; and since it is more excellent to exist not only in the mind alone but also in reality, therefore that it must needs be that it exists. For if it did not exist, any other land existing in reality would be more excellent than it, and so this island, already thought by you to be more excellent than others, will not be more excellent. If, I say, someone wishes thus to persuade me that this island really exists beyond all doubt, I should either think that he was joking, or I should find it hard to decide which of us I ought to judge the bigger fool.¹⁶

Anselm's eighth argument is a reply to this bit of reasoning. And its basic thrust can be summed up in the proposition 'Islands can fail to exist, but it cannot be thought that something than which nothing greater can be thought can fail to exist'. According to Anselm, Gaunilo has evidently misunderstood what Anselm's argument was about. It was not about 'that island which is greater than any other island'. It was about 'that than which nothing greater can be thought' (which is clearly not an island). We can think of something greater than any island, says Anselm. We can think of something than which nothing greater can be thought. The fact that we can do this shows that there is something which exists in the mind and outside it, something which cannot be thought not to exist. Islands are not to the point. And, so Anselm adds, only God is such that he cannot be thought not to exist. We can, of course, think of what we know to exist and think of it as not existing (we can think of ourselves as ceasing to be or as not having been born). But God is such that he can in no sense be thought not to exist since, as something than which nothing greater can be thought, he has 'neither beginning nor end nor conjunction of parts' and since he cannot be thought of 'save as a whole in every place and at every time'.

Argument 9

Might it not still be said, however, that we really cannot get a purchase on the notion of something than which nothing greater can be thought? After dealing with some matters I here omit to follow him on (since his treatment of them does not do much to clarify the nature of his overall argument), Anselm turns to this question by addressing Gaunilo as follows:

You say that upon hearing of 'that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought' you cannot think of it as a real object known either generically or specifically or have it in your mind, on the grounds that you neither know the thing itself nor can you form an idea of it from other things similar to it.

According to Anselm, however, this is false. Because we can distinguish between less good and more good, he argues, we can 'conjecture a great deal about that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought'. We can say, for example, that it lacks beginning and end, for something lacking beginning and end is better than something having beginning and end. We can also say that something lacking nothing and something which is not forced to change or move is better than something lacking something and better than something which is forced to change or move. So there is, Anselm reasons, "a way by which one can form the idea of 'that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought' ". And, so he adds, even if that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought cannot in itself (considered as an object) be thought of or understood, the words themselves do not lack content. The formula 'that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought' can be thought of and understood just as the word 'ineffable' can be thought of and understood even though one cannot understand that which is ineffable, and just as the word 'inconceivable' can be thought of and understood even though one cannot understand that which is inconceivable. In fact, so Anselm concludes, anyone denying that there is something which is that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought must understand what he is denying.

V

What now emerges from this analysis of Anselm's texts? It should, I hope, be very clear that Anselm is not arguing that God can be defined into existence. He starts with an existential premise ('Something than which nothing greater can be thought exists in the mind'), a premise for which he argues in the *Reply to Gaunilo*. Nor is he arguing that God must exist because existence is a perfection or great making property. His argument is that God exists *in re* as well as *in intellectu* since that which exists only *in intellectu* is, for various reasons, less great than something than which nothing greater can be thought. He also argues that God cannot be thought not to exist since something which can be thought not to exist is less great than something which cannot be thought not to exist. His crucial moves are:

- (i) God is something than which nothing greater can be thought;
- (ii) Something than which nothing greater can be thought exists in

- the mind;
- (iii) Something existing only in the mind cannot be something than which nothing greater can be thought;
 - (iv) Something which can be thought not to be is not something than which nothing greater can be thought;
 - (v) A thing is not something than which a greater cannot be thought if (a) it does not exist whole and entire at all times and in all places, (b) if it is movable or changeable.

This is clearly not the argument criticized by Kant and found in Descartes. If that argument is the Ontological Argument, then Anselm did not defend it and he is not its father.

But is it a good argument? Let us suppose that something than which nothing greater can be thought exists only in the mind. Let us also suppose that something greater than this can be conceived. In that case, it would seem that we are supposing what cannot be the case. For if something can be conceived which is greater than something existing only in the mind, then something than which nothing greater can be thought cannot exist only in the mind. We must therefore suppose either that something than which nothing greater can be thought does not exist in the mind or that it exists in the mind and also outside the mind. And if it is wrong to suppose that something than which nothing greater can be thought does not exist in the mind, it would seem that it exists outside the mind also.

Here, though, people are likely to object that it is false that there is in the mind something than which nothing greater can be thought. For, so one might argue, while there can be a thought of something than which nothing greater can be thought, it does not follow that the thing of which this is a thought is in any mind. But consider this thought of something than which nothing greater can be thought. Can it be a thought of something existing only in the mind? Not if it can be thought that there is something greater than something existing only in the mind. And if it can be thought that there is something greater than something existing only in the mind, then what is thought of when there is a thought of something than which nothing greater can be thought cannot just be in the mind.

If that argument works, as it seems to me to do, then Anselm's argument works. For I take it that what I have just written captures what Anselm was trying to say. If we persist in calling Anselm's argument 'the Ontological Argument', it therefore seems to me that the Ontological Argument works.¹⁷

1 Eadmer, *Vita Anselmi*, I, xix.

2 What follows owes much to some suggestions of Professor Elizabeth Anscombe. See her 'Why Anselm's Proof in the *Proslogion* is not an Ontological Argument', *The Thoreau Quarterly* 17 (1985).

3 For a recent rendition of Anselm along these lines, cf. Michael Peterson, William Hasker, Bruce Reichenbach and David Basinger, *Reason and Religious Belief: An Introduction to the Philosophy of religion* (New York and Oxford, 1991), pp. 70 ff.

4 *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York, 1958), p. 282. What

I take Kant to be driving at here is, I think, correct. In the language of Frege, '— exist(s)' is not a first level predicate. Cf. my 'Does God Create Existence?', *International Philosophical Quarterly* (June 1990).

5 *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 280.

6 René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. John Cottingham (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 46 f.

7 It is sometimes said that Anselm is not arguing for the existence of God since he already believes in God to start with and since the *Proslogion* is cast in the form of a prayer. It is true that Anselm believed in God before writing the *Proslogion*. And it is true that the *Proslogion* is cast in the form of a prayer. But it is also true that the text of the *Proslogion* shows that Anselm conceived of himself as showing that God is and that he is as we believe him to be.

8 Cf. *Reply to Gaunilo*: 'I am astonished that you urge this (objection) against me, for I was concerned to prove something which was in doubt, and for me it was sufficient that I should first show that it was understood and existed in the mind in some way or other, leaving it to be determined subsequently whether it was in the mind alone as unreal things are, or in reality also as true things are'. I quote from *St Anselm's Proslogion*, trans. M.J. Charlesworth (Oxford, 1965), p. 183.

9 Echoes of Anselm's definition can be found in St. Augustine (cf. *De Doctrina Christiana* I, vii). But the nearest verbal parallel to Anselm's formula comes in Seneca, who says that God's 'magnitude is that than which nothing greater can be thought'. Cf. *L. Annaei Senecae Naturalium Questionum libri viii*, ed. Alfred Gercke (Stuttgart, 1907), p. 5. In the *Proslogion* and elsewhere Anselm speaks not only of '*aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari possit*' but of '*id quo maius cogitari nequit/non potest/non possit*', '*aliquid quo maius cogitari non valet/potest/possit*' and '*id quo maius cogitari non potest*'. But the variations can hardly be significant.

10 Charlesworth, p. 117.

11 The text now in question is usually translated in accordance with my (1). Why so? I can only guess that it is because printed editions of Anselm's *Proslogion* place a comma between 'et in re' and 'quod maius est'. But the manuscripts of Anselm's *Proslogion* give no warrant for the notion of a comma in this place. We have to read Anselm as writing '... potest cogitari esse et in re quod maius est'.

12 Cf. R.W. Southern, *Saint Anselm: A Portrait in a Landscape* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 130: 'If this argument (sc. *Proslogion* 2) is sound, we can go a step further. The argument has forced an intelligent listener to agree that God exists both in the mind and outside the mind. But many other things exist both in the mind and outside the mind: for instance, the pen I am holding exists both in my mind and outside my mind. It exists *in re* and *in mente*; but it does not necessarily exist *in re* because it exists *in mente*'. My own analogy should not be taken to imply that Anselm would be happy with the formula 'God is a person'. Many modern philosophers of religion are happy with this formula. Anselm never employs it, and he would surely have rejected it.

13 That there are different purposes lying behind *Proslogion* 2 and *Proslogion* 3 is argued by D.P. Henry in *Medieval Logic and Metaphysics* (London, 1972), pp. 105ff.

14 Charlesworth, p. 119.

15 This information comes from Anselm's biographer Eadmer. Cf. *Vita Anselmi* I, xix. Charlesworth, pp. 163ff.

16 I am grateful to Professor Elizabeth Anscombe and Dr. G.R. Evans for comments on an earlier version of the present article.