

Thinking of That Than Which Nothing Greater can be Thought

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And what is *that*, this something than which nothing greater can be thought? Why it is God of course.

'Now we believe that thou art a being than which nothing greater can be thought' (Anselm). Here is the stuff of philosophy, or at least of a certain sort of philosophy. Here are thoughts and things and relations between them, and God also. Anselm tied them together in such a complicated knot that thinkers have had difficulty untying them ever since. But perhaps Anselm's knot is like the knot of the conjuror, a sleight of hand, and all one needs to do is to pull the rope taut and the knot will disappear?

Brian Davies ('*Quod Vere Sit Deus: Why Anselm Thought that God Truly Exists*', *New Blackfriars*, 72 (1991), 212—221) has also suggested that Anselm's knot is often misunderstood, that, for example, Kant untied Descartes' and not Anselm's knot. But Davies still thinks Anselm's knot a good one. When properly understood (tied) it works. Whether Davies has really untied and retied (understood and explained) Anselm's knot or a similar but different one, just like Gaunilo, Descartes and Kant before him, is not here important. What matters is that Davies has an argument for God's existence and that he thinks it is a good one. Here it is:

- (1) God is something than which nothing greater can be thought;
- (2) something than which nothing greater can be thought exists in the mind;
- (3) something existing only in the mind cannot be something than which nothing greater can be thought;
- (4) something which can be thought not to be is not something than which nothing greater can be thought;
- (5) 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 (pp. 219—20).

The crucial parts of the knot would seem to be (3) and (4): that than which nothing greater can be thought cannot be thought not to be if it is indeed that than which nothing greater can be thought. Another way of putting this is to say that if that than which nothing greater can be thought is in the mind then it is in reality also, since being in reality is greater than being in the mind only. Either it is in the mind and in reality also or it is nowhere. But it is in the mind so it is in reality.

However, it is here that one can introduce the objection that Davies discusses: (01) 'it is false that there is in the mind something than which nothing greater can be thought' (p. 220). Davies thinks this objection mistaken; he expands it as follows: (02) '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' (p. 220). I want to suggest that this and the former statement of the objection are poor approximations to a real objection, and that the crucial part of Davies' knot is the second.

That Davies' statements of the objection are poor approximations is suggested by his response to them. For he does little more than restate his previous argument. The thought of something than which nothing greater can be thought cannot be of something existing only in the mind if it can be thought that there is something greater than something existing only in the mind, and it can be thought that there is something greater than something existing only in the mind, so the thought of something than which nothing greater can be thought cannot be of something existing only in the mind. It must be of something existing in reality also.

In order to make good my suggestion that there is a real objection to Davies' argument I need to unpick certain parts of the knot he has tied, tease apart 'thoughts' and 'things' and the relations between them, as also the figures of 'mind' and 'reality' as receptacles in which thoughts and things are placed. Of course, we often say that thoughts are in the mind and that things come to mind (we have thoughts of certain things), and we have things at the backs of our minds (not so certain and definite thoughts), and so on. But we don't think that thoughts are really things in the way that tables and chairs are things, or that these thoughts/things are really to be found in some other thing, the mind. So when we have some-*thing* in mind (some thought/thing in the mind), we simply have a thought (though perhaps there is nothing very simple about 'having a thought').

Davies seems to say that this is what Anselm means also. 'In speaking of something existing "in the mind" he (Anselm) evidently means "existing as thought about or understood"' (p. 214). But Davies argues that for Anselm 'existing as thought about or understood' means *really* existing (in the mind): 'to say that God exists in the mind is to concede that God somehow exists' (p. 214). For Davies Anselm's argument moves not from the concept of God to God as real, but from God in the mind to God outside the mind. In support of his reading Davies quotes from Anselm's *Reply to Gaunilo*: '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' (p. 221). It doesn't seem to me that this supports Davies' reading. True

things exist in reality as well as in the mind; unreal things exist only in the mind. Their 'existence' in the mind is figurative. That is why they are said to exist in 'some way or other'. But whatever the truth of this, I shall take 'existing in the mind' as a figure of speech.

Thoughts are not really things, but there are things as well as thoughts, and one can have thoughts about things and thoughts about thoughts, when thoughts are like things (grammatically): thoughts/things. Thoughts and things are alike in that one can describe them. They have content. One can describe a chair or table just as one can say what one is thinking about. Of course thoughts are sometimes fuzzy and it's difficult to say what one is thinking of, just as vision is sometimes cloudy and it's difficult to describe what one is seeing. But some thoughts and things are different.

It is hard to describe a taste or smell, and it is impossible to tell someone that one is thinking of that than which nothing greater can be thought without simply saying it or the person first having heard or read 'that than which nothing greater can be thought'. Leaving aside the question of translation between languages, any equivalence (e.g. 'God', 'Supreme Being', the 'Absolute', the 'One') has to be defined.

That than which nothing greater can be thought is not a description but a purely formal notion. It does not have any content; or it has only that odd sort of content pertaining to formal notions. However Davies points out that Anselm in his reply to Guanilo argued that one can think of that than which nothing greater can be thought as a 'real object', one can give it some content. Davies writes: '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' (p. 219). But I do not think that this counts against my suggestion that that than which nothing greater can be thought is neither name nor description but a purely formal notion ruling out certain possibilities (e.g. that God is a finite object).

If we leave to one side the question of the context in which 'better' has force (a context in which a certain sort of neoplatonic/philosophical conception of the Good has force), these deductions may be considered unobjectionable for they remain purely formal deductions from or within the idea of that than which nothing greater can be thought. It seems to me that Gaunilo was correct and we can no more get a purchase on the notion of that than which nothing greater can be thought than we can upon that which is without beginning, end or movement. The purely negative force of ascribing beginninglessness, endlessness and motionlessness to that than which nothing greater can be thought is evident in the fifth part of Davies' Anselmian argument (see (5) above). Anything that has beginning, end or movement is not and cannot be that

than which nothing greater can be thought (in short, no-*thing* can be that than which nothing greater can be thought).

My suggestion is further strengthened by Davies' argument that such ideas as changelessness can be as well thought, understood and used as those of the ineffable and the inconceivable. For such ideas are also purely formal. When used in their most rigorous sense one cannot conceive the inconceivable or experience the ineffable or think of *that* than which nothing greater can be thought, though one can think of the 'inconceivable', the 'ineffable', of 'that than which nothing greater can be thought' (*that* than which nothing greater can be thought cannot be thought but the *thought* of 'that than which nothing greater can be thought' can be thought). But if this is correct, then *that* than which nothing greater can be thought cannot be thought and cannot be in the mind.

The above deductions (by the rule of 'greater than' within a neoplatonic context) of certain delimitations from or within the purely formal notion of 'that than which nothing greater can be thought' may suggest others, in particular the idea of necessary existence. That which exists necessarily is greater than that which exists contingently. Thus the idea of God's existence is ingredient within the idea of God, and the fool is foolish in having no use for this idea, in lacking, as Norman Malcolm put it, an inclination to partake in a religious form of life ('Anselm's Ontological Arguments' (1960), reprinted in *Religion and Understanding*, edited by D.Z. Phillips (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967), pp. 43—61). But such deductions are arguable. May one not say that that which is beyond all existence, necessary or contingent, is greater (in a sense that must be left undetermined) than that which exists, whether of itself or of another? Must one not say that that which cannot be thought is greater than that which can be thought, greater than that which can be comprehended in thought, greater than that which is this side of human thought because within its reach? Thus a certain rendering of Anselmian logic works against the very thing it is supposed to secure.

Let us return to Davies' approximations to the real objection. It is of course false that 'there is in the mind something than which nothing greater can be thought' (p. 220). For there are only thoughts in the mind and we suppose that the something in question is 'greater' than a thought (exists in reality also as true things are). But, as I have tried to suggest above, it is also false that one can think of something than which nothing greater can be thought, though one can think of 'something than which nothing greater can be thought'. Davies' second approximation ((02) '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'), does not make sense, or is at least unclear. But it can be rewritten so that it is clear and does make sense: (03) 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 this rewritten statement of Davies' approximation to the real objection is too weak. It can be made stronger: (04) While one can think of 'that than which nothing greater can be thought', the thing of which this is a thought is not in any mind (for the reasons given above).

Here then is the real objection to Davies' argument: (05) While one can think of 'that than which nothing greater can be thought', *that* than which nothing greater can be thought cannot be thought. God cannot be thought. God cannot be in any mind.

Davies' rendering of Anselm's knot can be presented as follows: Either that than which nothing greater can be thought is in the mind and in reality also or it is nowhere. But it is in the mind so it is in reality. But Gaunilo was correct; it is not and cannot be in the mind. One cannot think of that than which nothing greater can be thought as a real object known either generically or specifically or have it in one's mind, one cannot know the thing itself nor can one form an idea of it from other things similar to it. Either that than which nothing greater can be thought is in the mind and in reality also or it is nowhere. But it is not in the mind so it is not in reality; it is nowhere. (It must be remembered however that for the believer God's reality is more real than the reality of the world, ultimately the only real reality. But precisely, because God's reality, this reality is a figure of speech.)

Here, one may object that people have thoughts about God all the time. And this is true. But the thoughts they have are always about 'God', thoughts about thoughts about God. One can think/talk about God formally, but this is really thinking/talking about thinking/talking about God, and one can think/talk about God in figures or pictures, but this is really thinking/talking about figures and pictures (of God). This is why the question of which figures and pictures is so important, why the question of images is vital, and why there is a commandment about it. Part of the religious life is learning not to mistake image for reality, of learning to make do with less and less in hope of one day passing beyond (the *via negativa*).

It is a different matter when one praises God and prays to God, takes pleasure and joy in God and confides in God. Then one thinks/talks *to* God and not *about* God. One lives *towards* God. It is the difference between talking to someone and talking about them; between addressing and describing. No one can describe God, only what God is like. (Christians might say: God is like a Christ-like person.) It is the difference between loving and not loving someone, between being with and ignoring someone. (Love is a formal notion; with St Paul one can only say what it is like, not what it is.)

Anselm's argument is like the conjuror's knot. Pull on the rope and it disappears. But the rope remains. It is Anselm's prayer. And the knot? It is the relation between talking to God and talking about God. And the point of the latter is to delimit the proper practice of the former.