

# Anselm and the Apophatic: “Something Greater than Can Be Thought”

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## Abstract

Anselm’s ontological proof, which sets out to show that God must exist and which depends upon the premise that human beings can conceptualize God, seems antithetical to the apophatic tradition, but Anselm’s work in general and his proof in particular are, nonetheless, exemplars of apophasis. The proof shows the atheist’s position to be untenable, while also revealing the ambiguities of the believer’s claim. In proving the necessary existence of God, Anselm destroys all idols and with them, all human conceptions of divinity, for whatever conception can be achieved always stands vulnerable to being overcome. Thus, Anselm is left to conclude that God is in fact “something greater than can be thought.” Anselm shows that language can never offer a final and complete formulation for God, and he does so through his own name for God (“something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought”), a name that remains brilliantly open and which is ingenious, not for what it affirms about God, but rather for what it denies.

## Keywords

Anselm of Canterbury, Apophasis, Ontological proof, Atheist/theist, God/necessary existence

Anselm is best known as the author of the ontological proof for the existence of God. Of all of Anselm’s writing, it is often just the proof, about a page from the beginning of the *Proslogion*, that makes it into theology textbooks. Anselm’s goal of proving that God must exist seems to be far from the apophatic tradition. Many Neoplatonic apophatic thinkers deny existence to the One, because, they argue, predicating existence of it makes the One something complex (the One and its being). Anselm’s conclusion clearly violates this tradition. Further still from the apophatic tradition, Anselm evidently bases his proof on the premise that human beings can conceptualize God. Before God’s existence in reality is affirmed, it is asserted that God has existence in the human mind. This premise and Anselm’s

argument itself are the antithesis of this tradition as well, for all apophatic thinkers deny the ability of human beings to speak about or know God fully. Despite Anselm's apparently cataphatic positions, Anselm and even the ontological proof itself are, nonetheless, a part of the apophatic tradition. In proving the necessary existence of God, Anselm destroys all idols and with them, all human conceptions of divinity, for whatever conception can be achieved always stands vulnerable to being overcome. Anselm shows that language can never offer a final and complete formulation for God, and he does so through his own name for God, a name that remains brilliantly open and which is ingenious, not for what it is able to affirm about God, but rather for what it is able to deny.

### *Monologion*

The *Monologion* is Anselm's first attempt to put into a treatise his thoughts on the divine essence. In the Prologue, he begins: "Some of my brethren have often and earnestly asked me to write down, as a kind of model meditation, some of the things I have said, in everyday language, on the subject of meditating upon the essence of the divine."<sup>1</sup> Though speculating about the essence of God, Anselm does not see his writings as presenting any definitive truth. They are to serve as a model that other monks might follow in their own meditations as they too seek after the God they love and long to know. Anselm begins the first chapter of the *Monologion* with the conviction that is at the heart of his name for God in the *Proslogion*: "Of all things that exist, there is one nature that is supreme."<sup>2</sup> From this simple premise, Anselm goes on to say a great deal about the divine essence. In keeping with the Neoplatonic tradition, however, he first affirms that the supreme nature is simple: "[W]hatever is predicated of the supreme substance with respect to essence is one single thing. And just so, therefore, whatever the supreme substance is, it is with respect to essence, in one and the same way and respect." This argument already makes the ordinary way of speaking impossible, negating all but essential predicates. Anselm explains: "Nothing, then, that is predicated truly of its essence is to be taken as a predicate of quality, or quantity, but of what it is."<sup>3</sup>

In a move reminiscent of the great cornerstone of Neoplatonism, the *Parmenides*, Anselm demonstrates that this divine One must be

<sup>1</sup> Anselm, *Monologion*, trans. Simon Harrison, in Brian Davies and G. R. Evans, ed., *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), prologue.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 17.

in every place and time and in no place or time.<sup>4</sup> Having reached the limits of thought, he seems to cry out, “Contradictory language — but ineluctable logic!” Anselm believes the logical difficulty arises because the laws of space and time that govern human thought and language do not apply to the divine: “What, therefore, no time or place defines, space and time do not confine.” Anselm struggles to work through the contradiction, placing the blame on the limits of ordinary language. When place and time are predicated of the supreme essence, “this is language we use of things which have their being in time and space. We use this language because it is ordinary language. Its significance, however, is different in each case. This is because what the language is about is different in each case.” Language describes different things with the same words, thus creating the illusion of sameness.

When time and place are predicated of temporal and spatial natures, they signify that these things are present in and contained by the times and places named. Anselm suggests that when used to describe the supreme essence, they only signify that it is present in, but not that it is contained by the place and time named. While the divine substance “may still be said to be in each and every place and time *in its own way*,” Anselm, like other apophatic thinkers, believes negative descriptions are more accurate: “If we speak properly, on the other hand, we say that it is in no place or time.”<sup>5</sup> Gregory Schufreider explains Anselm’s strategy: “Just as the *via negativa* needs the ‘divine name’ that does not apply — so that it can rise above it by means of negation in its elevation to that which is beyond all names and the distinctions upon which they depend — Anselm works from distinctions that he ultimately aims to defeat, depends upon differences he violates, and works off of contrasts he will finally want to repress.”<sup>6</sup>

Though Anselm speculates about the supreme substance in the early chapters of the *Monologion*, he later calls the word “substance” into question. Anselm argues that all substances have “accidents and distinguishing features,” but because the supreme nature is simple and unchanging, it lacks these features of substances. “Substance” may be used to refer to the supreme, but when it is, it always signifies something different from its usual meaning: “Thus, while the same name (substance) may sometimes be shared by both, what it

<sup>4</sup> See *ibid.*, chapters 20 and 21 respectively. The argument in these chapters is here being compared to the general form of the *Parmenides*, Deductions 1 and 2, in which numerous contradictory conclusions are reached. However, these specific arguments can also be found there (see 138a, 141a, 151a, and 155d).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 22, emphasis mine.

<sup>6</sup> Gregory Schufreider, *Confessions of a Rational Mystic: Anselm’s Early Writings* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1994), p. 84.

signifies must be understood in different ways.”<sup>7</sup> There are two types of substances: universal and individual. Unlike universal substances, the supreme nature cannot “be divided into several substances,” and unlike individual substances, the supreme nature cannot “be lumped together with other things in virtue of any shared essence.” And yet, Anselm maintains that “if any term is worth using at all, we may be allowed the term substance,” because the supreme does exist and “we do *usually* call the essence of anything a substance.”<sup>8</sup> Anselm allows the word “substance” to be used, but with an understanding that it is being used in a special way. Language cannot capture the supreme; it can only make comparisons.

Language categorizes and identifies, but the divine belongs to no category and is identical with nothing. Language, therefore, cannot but fail to describe that which “exists in its own wonderfully unique and uniquely wonderful way.” Anselm argues that in some sense, this divine spirit is “the only thing that exists.” It is after all, the only thing that exists “without qualification, absolutely and perfectly.”<sup>9</sup> As for other things, they are not what they were or what they will be. What they were and what they will be do not now exist at all. In this argument, it seems Anselm is reversing the common perspective of apophasis, a move Katherin A. Rogers describes as “a clear corollary of the *via negativa*.”<sup>10</sup> Usually, the apophatic points to the failure of language to describe the One or God. Here, it is shown, that if language is understood to accurately depict God, it then fails to describe anything else. The problem with language is not simply that it cannot attain to the divine heights. Rather, the fundamental problem is its inability to negotiate the absolute difference between creatures and the divine.

In this way, Anselm takes a position strikingly similar to one held by Plotinus, though in a sense they are diametrically opposed. Their opposition is obvious: the latter denies being to the One; the former seems to deny being to everything else. Yet despite this difference, both denials are motivated, in part, by the same insight: God or the One does not exist in the same way that any creature exists. If the word “exist” is used to describe creatures, it cannot apply accurately to the One. If it is used to describe God, then it must not apply accurately to creatures. Anselm arrives at a similar conclusion when he says that “the parent-child relationship must apply to nothing so much as to the supreme spirit and its Word.”<sup>11</sup> The analogy fails,

<sup>7</sup> Anselm, *Monologion*, chap. 26.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 27, emphasis mine.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 28.

<sup>10</sup> Katherin A. Rogers, *The Neoplatonic Metaphysics and Epistemology of Anselm of Canterbury* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1997), p. 221.

<sup>11</sup> Anselm, *Monologion*, chap. 40.

not because the supreme spirit and its Word are not truly parent and child, but rather because, *if they are*, then all earthly relationships fail to meet this standard of parent and child.

Anselm explains this difficulty in language by analyzing the supreme's Word and human language as well as their respective relationships with creation. He first describes a correlation theory of truth and language: "All words of this kind, the kind we use to say things in our mind (i.e. to think), are likenesses and images of the things that they are the words of. And the degree of truth of every likeness and image depends on the degree of its imitation of its object." The Word's relation to reality stands very differently: "[I]t is not the Word (and the Word of the supreme truth is the supreme truth) that suffers increase or decrease in accordance with the degree of its similarity to creation, but the other way round." Thus, while human language is but an imitation of the reality it seeks to describe, reality is itself an imitation of the Word. While the Word is "true and simple essence," created matter is "not simple and absolute essence, but a pale imitation of it."<sup>12</sup> Human language is then an imitation of an imitation of the divine essence, which it cannot hope to express. The same can be said of human knowledge: "Our knowledge falls a long way short of created substances (by the gap between their essence and likeness), and they, in turn, fall so short of, and are so much less authentic than the saying and knowing of the supreme spirit."<sup>13</sup>

Humans cannot comprehend the essences of creation, much less the essence of the supreme creator, nor can they understand the true relation between the Word and creation. Of this relation, humans can only know that they do not know: "Human knowledge cannot comprehend the way in which the spirit says and knows what it creates. This fact, at least, is now clearly comprehensible."<sup>14</sup> Concerning the supreme, Anselm reaches a rather negative conclusion: "I reach the conclusion, then, that what these two things — the supreme spirit and its Word — are, is inexpressible."<sup>15</sup> He also finds understanding lacking as it seeks to grasp how the Trinity speaks but one word. Anselm, who tries to explain everything, advocates restraint before such a mystery: "This seems to me to be a sublime mystery, which stretches well beyond the horizon of human understanding. Therefore one ought, I think, to restrain the ambition to explain." Anselm, nonetheless, insists that the inadequacy of the understanding "does nothing to undermine" the certainty of the propositions he cannot explain.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 31.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 36.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 38.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 64

Anselm must then try to explain how something about which human beings are certain can be said to be ineffable. Rogers dismisses much of what Anselm says here so that he might conform to her definition of Neoplatonism, by which analogy seems to be forbidden in exclusive favor of a theory of participation in which terms have the same meaning when applied to God or human beings.<sup>17</sup> Anselm himself returns to an idea previously discussed in order to emphasize this problem of certainty regarding what is ineffable: “[T]he supreme essence is above and beyond all other natures. Thus when we talk about it, the words may be common to both, but not their meanings.” Words for describing creatures cannot appropriately describe their creator, but this linguistic problem is not limited to describing God. Anselm finds this problematic manner of speaking everywhere: “We do often speak of lots of things without expressing them properly, i.e. in the way proper to the way they are. What we do, when we cannot, or will not, utter something properly, is to signify it by means of something else — a riddle for example.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, Anselm can argue that his conclusions regarding the supreme nature are true without denying the supreme’s ineffability.

Words do not define the supreme, but direct the listener’s attention: “The names, then, that are apparently predicable of the supreme nature, merely gesture towards it rather than pinpoint it. They signify via some sort of similarity, not through what is proper.” It is ineffable because nothing that is said of it succeeds in laying it bare, but its ineffability does not mean that everything said of it is precisely false either. Anselm writes, “Conclusion: the supreme nature is ineffable, because it simply cannot be made known as it is by means of words. But a claim about the supreme nature, if one can be made that is dictated by reason and is stated indirectly — in a riddle, as it were — is not false.”<sup>19</sup> Were all human statements clearly and directly false, something more would be known about the supreme essence through the negation of the false statements. As it is, human language can speak of the divine, but of course, always only within its own limitations, as if by way of riddles.

### *Proslogion*

Anselm is not the first theologian to offer a version of the ontological proof for the existence of God. Almost seven centuries before Anselm wrote the *Proslogion*, Augustine wrote his *Confessions*, in which he speaks to God: “[S]o I confessed that whatever you are, you are

<sup>17</sup> Rogers, pp. 209–12.

<sup>18</sup> Anselm, *Monologion*, chap. 65.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

incorruptible. Nor could there have been or be any soul capable of conceiving that which is better than you, who are the supreme and highest good. Since it is most true and certain that the incorruptible is superior to the corruptible, as I had already concluded, had it been the case that you are not incorruptible I could in thought have attained something better than my God.”<sup>20</sup> Anselm’s proof mirrors Augustine’s in many ways. Both unfold their arguments within prayers. Both begin with virtually the same two premises: that God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived, and that incorruptibility (or necessary existence) is greater than corruptibility (actual contingent existence or non-existence). Both utilize the argument that if one were to think of God as corruptible, one could then imagine something greater. Though Augustine does not spell out the absurdity of such a proposition, both go on to conclude that God does in fact exist and does so necessarily.

If these proofs are so similar, it seems curious that Anselm is known as the proof’s author. Augustine, after all, is the earlier thinker. Augustine is also better known and more revered, an assessment Anselm at least would not have cared to dispute, for he “called himself *Augustinus minor* and saw Augustine, as much as he saw anyone, as his master.”<sup>21</sup> So why is Anselm’s argument remembered rather than Augustine’s? Perhaps the “fool” whom Anselm depicts in his *Proslogion* deserves a bit of the credit. Of course, Augustine was not short of “fools” himself, and he devoted many of his numerous volumes to disputations against Manichees, Donatists, Arians, and Pelagians. But none of these “says in his heart, / ‘There is no God.’”<sup>22</sup> Anselm’s fool does say so, and it is, in part, by showing his fool’s folly that Anselm exceeds Augustine, for while neither “proof” may be ultimately convincing, Anselm is able to point out certain problems which arise in the thinking and speaking of God and the perils inherent in daring to say that God does not exist. Anselm also exceeds his master by the name he gives to God. This name silences the fool, and though naming God seems to be surpassed as the height of cataphasis only by attempting to prove God’s existence, the name Anselm employs in his proof soon silences the believer as well.

### A Confession of Ignorance and a Foolish Claim to Knowledge

In the Preface to the *Proslogion*, Anselm says that after publishing the *Monologion*, composed of many arguments, he wondered if he

<sup>20</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 114; 7.4.6.

<sup>21</sup> Sister Benedicta Ward, *Anselm of Canterbury: A Monastic Scholar* (Fairacres: SLG Press, 1973), p. 18.

<sup>22</sup> Psalm 14.1.



could not find a single argument that alone could prove that God exists and that God is the supreme good in need of no other being. He begins this “argument” with a prayer, and indeed the entire *Proslogion* is, in a sense, an extended prayer. Many commentators have pointed out this important feature of the work. Karl Barth says Anselm “shows that the whole theological inquiry is intended to be understood as undertaken and carried through in prayer. In prayer and surely that means — by presupposing in the most positive manner conceivable the object of the inquiry, [God’s] Presence and [God’s] Authority for the course and the success of the inquiry concerning [God].”<sup>23</sup> Although Barth defends rather than dismisses the proof, he does point out what appears to be an obvious and fatal flaw in the design of the *Proslogion*: if one is seeking to prove God’s existence, one might well pray for help and guidance before proceeding, but surely including that prayer in the text of the proof is a mistake. A prayer assumes what is supposed to be proved. Such a situation would indeed make for a circular argument if the prayer functioned as a premise in the argument. It does not, though it does play an important role.

The prayer is an acknowledgment of Anselm’s dependence on God. It is a confession of his fallen state: “Alas the common grief of mankind, alas the universal lamentation of the children of Adam! He groaned with fullness; we sigh with hunger. He was prosperous; we go begging. He in his happiness had possessions and in his misery abandoned them; we in our unhappiness go without and miserably do we yearn and, alas, we remain empty.” But because human beings remain empty, they can imagine something that would fulfill and can therefore conceive of God. Thus Anselm prays; thus he comes to God “as one famished.” This opening prayer is above all a humble confession of ignorance and an urgent petition for understanding. He says, “Never have I seen You, Lord my God, I do not know Your face.” He admits he does not know how to seek this God who is everywhere and nowhere, who dwells in light inaccessible. He sums up his plight and the plight of humanity: “In fine, I was made in order to see You, and I have not yet accomplished what I was made for.” He knows he cannot find God or even seek God without God’s help: “Teach me to seek You, and Reveal Yourself to me as I seek, because I can neither seek You if You do not teach me how, nor find You unless You reveal Yourself.” He acknowledges before the proof begins that he does not even try to comprehend God in full: “I do not try, Lord, to attain Your lofty heights, because my understanding is in

<sup>23</sup> Karl Barth, *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum*, ed. Dikran Y. Hadidian, Pittsburgh Reprint Series 2, (London: SCM Press, 1960; Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1975), pp. 150–51.



no way equal to it.”<sup>24</sup> Though he will set out to demonstrate God’s existence with reason, he begins his work in prayer and apophasis.

Anselm concludes his prayer with a famous phrase that seems to signal an admission of defeat before his attempt at proving God’s existence has even begun: “For I do not seek to understand so that I may believe; but I believe so that I may understand. For I believe this also, that ‘unless I believe, I shall not understand’ [Isa. 7: 9].”<sup>25</sup> Henri Bouillard says that Anselm could not have made it any clearer that “this proof presupposes faith and proceeds from it. The notion of God, its starting point and the very center of its argument, comes from faith.”<sup>26</sup> If this is the case, how will the atheist understand Anselm’s proof? The proof cannot provide the atheist with understanding unless it first provides him<sup>27</sup> with faith.

Perhaps, but while this predicament may make proving God’s existence to the atheist impossible, it may provide the means whereby the atheist is proved deserving of the designation “fool.” Such a proof may seem a bit unkind, but the fool cannot be parted from his folly until he first becomes aware of it. Barth says that the fool confronts Anselm “as living confutation of his proof: he can think of God as not existing.” Because Anselm knows God, he cannot deny God’s existence, but because the atheist does not know God, he can deny God’s existence. In doing so, it is clear “that he does not know him whose Existence he denies. And it is not his denial, but his not knowing, that constitutes his folly.”<sup>28</sup> Perhaps Barth is right, for perhaps the only thing that distinguishes Anselm from the fool is simply the gift of faith that Anselm has received from God. But would this lack of grace constitute foolishness? If what is meant here is that all human beings are foolish but for the grace of God, the answer may be “yes,” but it seems that what makes the fool’s position untenable, what makes him seem foolish, is neither his denial nor his not knowing, but rather *his denial of what he does not know*.

The fool then says in his heart, “There is no ‘God’ — a word I do not understand and which signifies nothing to me.” For the sake of argument here, two “fools” have been chosen from the countless who have thought themselves successful in disputing Anselm’s proof. In his article, “Why the Atheist is Not a Fool,” Clark B. Johnson

<sup>24</sup> Anselm, *Proslogion*, trans. M. J. Charlesworth, in Brian Davies and G. R. Evans, ed., *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), chap. 1.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Henri Bouillard, *The Knowledge of God*, trans. Samuel D. Femiano (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), p. 72.

<sup>27</sup> I have chosen to use masculine pronouns throughout for consistency with Anselm, as the character of the “fool” in *Proslogion* is male. I hope no one will object that the Fool is here thought of as a man.

<sup>28</sup> Barth, pp. 165–68.

argues that for the atheist, the concept of God is like the concept of colors for the person born blind. This analysis is certainly correct insofar as no one would say the blind person is a fool for lacking the concept of color and for acknowledging this lack. Rather, such a stance seems modest and wise. If, however, based on this absence of the concept, the blind person says that there are no such things as colors, it seems clear that this person is most certainly not wise or modest. Just such a statement is what makes the atheist foolish — not the acknowledgment that he lacks a concept of God, but the subsequent denial of God's existence. Johnson does not address this point. Though Johnson says that the "atheist at least recognizes the nature of his disbelief,"<sup>29</sup> this is precisely what the atheist has not done in Johnson's example, for the atheist disbelieves that of which he does not even have a concept.

The second "fool," George H. Smith, correctly points out that the atheist need not offer proof, for "[p]roof is applicable only in the case of a positive belief." Though Smith seems to see in this situation a great boon for the atheist's position, it is, in fact, this very situation that may turn him into the fool. Anselm is more than happy to take on the burden of proof, for along with it comes the right to set the parameters of the debate. Specifically, it allows him to decide what the word "God" should mean. In discussing a type of, what he calls, "critical atheism" which makes assertions such as "God does not exist," Smith says that these "assertions are usually made after a particular concept of god, such as the God of Christianity, is judged to be absurd or contradictory."<sup>30</sup> Jasper Hopkins states the case more simply: "[T]he atheist must conceive of God in order to deny His existence."<sup>31</sup> In a discussion about God between a theist and an atheist, therefore, it would seem to be the place of the theist to say which god is under discussion.

### The Name of God

Anselm says that the God under discussion in the *Proslogion* is "something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought."<sup>32</sup> The atheist cannot respond by saying, "No, that is not what God is!" What he can say is that Anselm's words are simply meaningless to him. Charles Hartshorne has this in mind when he says of Anselm's

<sup>29</sup> Clark B. Johnson, "Why the Atheist is Not a Fool," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 4 (1973), pp. 55–58.

<sup>30</sup> George H. Smith, *Atheism: The Case Against God* (Buffalo: Prometheus, 1979), pp. 16–17.

<sup>31</sup> Jasper Hopkins, *A Companion to the Study of St. Anselm* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1972), p. 71.

<sup>32</sup> Anselm, *Proslogion*, chap. 2.

proof, "Atheism is no longer a valid issue; but positivism certainly is."<sup>33</sup> Anselm does not acknowledge the positivist dodge for he says that "when this same Fool hears what I am speaking about... he understands what he hears, and what he understands is in his mind, even if he does not understand that it actually exists."<sup>34</sup> If, however, despite Anselm's insistence, the fool cannot grasp it, the conversation would seem to be over before it has begun. If so, surely the atheist can no longer say that God does not exist. He might amend his previous statement to "I do not know what God is," just as the blind person admits not knowing what colors are, thereby admitting that he is not in a position to judge. If, however, he is willing to acknowledge that he at least understands the words Anselm is using to define God, then the conversation can continue. Barth sums up Anselm's strategy: "Anselm wants to prove the existence of God. He proves it by assuming a Name of God the meaning of which implies that the statement 'God exists' is necessary."<sup>35</sup>

Many critics of the proof would disagree. They are quite willing to grant the "Name of God," but still deny the existence of the God named. Regardless, this point does raise an interesting question: can the theist abuse the power, granted by the atheist, of defining which God is under discussion? What if the theist defines God as "that which exists, not only in thought, but also in reality, and not only in contingency, but also in necessity"? Perhaps for the sake of addressing his opponent directly, the theist might add, "and the existence of which can only be denied by a fool." Has the theist succeeded in placing the atheist in an impossible position (and in proving him to be a fool)? The beginning of this "proof" seems much less convincing than Anselm's; is that merely due to its lack of subtlety? It is certainly true that this proof is circular (as J. J. C. Smart charges Anselm's proof with being<sup>36</sup>) in that it has defined as existing that of which it seeks to prove the existence. But it sounds as though Barth is accusing Anselm of much the same sort of thing, and in fact, in some sense, if Anselm's proof is successful, the proof has proved itself to be circular, because the whole point is to show that by knowing *what* God is, we know *that* God is. Whether a dirty trick or not, Anselm's proof has put the atheist in a tight spot and perhaps led the atheist to wish that the theist did not have the right to define the terms.

Unless the atheist refuses to continue by insisting that he does not understand Anselm's name for God, the argument between them might proceed. The "Fool" could begin by denying God's existence,

<sup>33</sup> Charles Hartshorne, *Anselm's Discovery: A Re-examination of the Ontological Proof for God's Existence* (La Salle: Open Court, 1991), p. 52.

<sup>34</sup> Anselm, *Proslogion*, chap. 2.

<sup>35</sup> Barth, p. 73.

<sup>36</sup> J. J. C. Smart, *Atheism and Theism* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996), p. 38.

but when asked what God he has in mind, the “Fool” would either be unable to answer or else name a God that Anselm would fail to recognize as God. Anselm would then name his God, and if the atheist denied its existence, Anselm would point out that his God must at least exist in the atheist’s mind for him to deny it. Obviously, then it follows that either it exists only in his mind or it exists in his mind and in reality. Presumably, the atheist would agree. Anselm would then add that it is better to exist than not to exist and that if the atheist imagines that something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought exists only in his mind, he could imagine something greater, that is, that same something but existing in his mind and in reality. So then the atheist would be thinking of something greater than something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought. But clearly that is absurd, so in order for him to have a true conception of God as something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought, he must think of God as existing not only in his mind, but also in reality.

In this conversation, Anselm need not prove God’s existence, but instead the impossibility of the atheist’s denial of God. The success of the discussion depends upon the atheist’s willingness to concede the definition of God. If he does not concede the definition, he is more or less forfeiting the argument, because to refuse to accept Anselm’s conception of God is to make denying God’s existence impossible. The atheist could still deny the existence of some gods, but not Anselm’s God. This version also bypasses at least one important objection to the proof in *Proslogion*. A. Boyce Gibson points out, as do many others, that Anselm’s proof moves from thought to reality, but merely in thought: “[T]he argument is only pushed one stage further back along an infinite regress of receding concepts. The breakthrough from concept to reality is a breakthrough in concept only.”<sup>37</sup> The argument between Anselm and the atheist rehearsed above is not subject to this criticism, because it is not concerned with reality so much as the concept of reality in the atheist’s imagination. Regardless of whether or not God really exists, to think of God requires that one think of God as existing. It seems that the only place besides the definition of God that the atheist might object to Anselm’s argument (as presented here) would be in regard to the notion that existence is inherently better than non-existence. George H. Smith makes a similar point: “[T]he Ontological Argument is based on antiquated notions like ‘degrees of perfection’ and ‘the most real being’ that are foreign to our ways of thinking.”<sup>38</sup> Though degrees of perfection may be somewhat archaic, the notion that existence is superior to non-existence does not seem to be all that antiquated. A god that does not even exist is a very feeble god indeed.

<sup>37</sup> A. Boyce Gibson, *Theism and Empiricism* (London: SCM Press, 1970), p. 124.

<sup>38</sup> George H. Smith, *Why Atheism?* (Amherst: Prometheus, 2000), p. 154.

“I Am that I Am” (Ex. 3:14): The God that Must Exist

Furthermore, Anselm is not content with the argument as it stands after Chapter 2 of the *Proslogion*, and in Chapter 3, Anselm attempts to show that while it is not *necessarily better to exist* than not to exist, it is *better to exist necessarily* than not to exist (or to exist contingently, for that matter). He writes: “For 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. Something-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought exists so truly then, that it cannot be even thought not to exist.”<sup>39</sup>

God does not just exist as a being among beings, but exists necessarily. Many twentieth century commentators see in this passage a second proof, distinct and indeed more convincing than the one put forward in chapter 2. Ermanno Bencivenga, on the other hand, correctly suggests that this passage is instead an elaboration or clarification of a key point in that chapter.<sup>40</sup> It does not aim to prove God’s existence again, but explains what kind of existence God has and why this kind of existence is appropriate to God.

Because of this important clarification, Anselm’s argument stands untouched by many of the criticisms leveled against it. Cornelio Fabro presents one of the most common: “If in a judgment I deny the predicate while maintaining the subject, then there does arise a contradiction; therefore, I say that this predicate necessarily pertains to this subject. But if I deny the subject together with the predicate, then in such an event there arises no contradiction at all; *there is in fact nothing left that could be contradicted.*”<sup>41</sup> Fabro goes on to give the example of a triangle and its three angles. One cannot deny that the triangle has three angles, but if one denies the triangle, the angles can also be denied. This analysis is most convincing in the case of triangles and would be equally convincing for any other polygon or most anything else for that matter. It does not work, however, in the case of God. The reason that God is a unique case to be distinguished from triangles and heptagons is that God’s essence is not to have three angles or seven angles, but rather to exist. With this in mind, Fabro’s argument would run: one cannot deny that God has existence, but if one denies God, God’s existence can also be denied. This version of

<sup>39</sup> Anselm, *Proslogion*, chap. 3.

<sup>40</sup> Ermanno Bencivenga, *Logic and Other Nonsense: The Case of Anselm and His God* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 113, note 1.

<sup>41</sup> Cornelio Fabro, *God in Exile: Modern Atheism*, trans. Arthur Gibson (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1968), p. 60.

the argument is not quite as clear as was the one applied to triangles, for the distinction between denying God and denying God's existence is uncertain. When existence is itself the essential predicate, the case is quite different than that of a triangle and its three angles.

Of course this exception would apply to all things that possess existence as a necessary predicate. Thus Gaunilo, the proof's first critic, thought he had defeated the proof by "proving" the existence of a perfect Lost Island in place of Anselm's God to show the absurdity of Anselm's proof. In his reply, Anselm writes, "I truly promise that if someone should discover something existing either in reality or in the mind alone — except that-*than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought*' — to which the logic of my argument would apply, then I shall find the Lost Island and give it, never more to be lost, to that person."<sup>42</sup> There are certainly islands that exist, but a person would not know how to fathom an island that exists necessarily, for an island is a contingent thing. God is not a being like others, and Anselm's argument works for God alone. Michael Wyschogrod makes the difference clear by first saying that "all things that are, are subsumed under being." He then adds: "It is the insight of the ontological proof for the existence of God that this is not so for God. It is not the concept of being that implies the concept of God but the concept of God that implies the concept of being."<sup>43</sup> Even if one remains unconvinced that God exists necessarily, one surely does not imagine anything else to do so. To speak of an island or anything else as necessarily existing is to speak of a round square.

To speak of triangles or lost islands is to prove that one has missed the point of Anselm's argument. There is something special about this concept God, something that makes it hard to discuss and impossible to deny. Johnson, however, insists on talking about triangles: "[I]t is certainly not self-evident that the statement ['there is no God'] is self-contradictory, at least not in the way that 'A triangle is not an enclosed three-sided plane figure' is self-evidently self-contradictory (given, of course our usual understanding of the word 'triangle')."<sup>44</sup> The parenthetical note that Johnson tacks on to the end highlights an important problem with his argument. Given Anselm's definition of the word "God," the two statements that Johnson discusses are, both self-evidently self-contradictory once the words being discussed are understood. And just as the fool can, nonetheless, say that God does not exist, so too can one who knows nothing of geometry say that

<sup>42</sup> Anselm, "Reply to Gaunilo," trans. M. J. Charlesworth, in Brian Davies and G. R. Evans, ed., *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), chap. 3.

<sup>43</sup> Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith: Judaism as Corporeal Election* (New York: Seabury, 1983), p. 151.

<sup>44</sup> Johnson, p. 53.

a triangle is not an enclosed three-sided plane figure if he wishes to speak about matters he does not comprehend. Again, it must be emphasized that *not knowing* what a triangle is does not make anyone a fool, for that is due to a lack of exposure to certain information or perhaps to a poor memory. What is foolish is to say that a triangle is not a three-sided figure when one does not know what a triangle is. Of course, to say that a triangle is not a three-sided figure after one has been told and now understands the meaning of the word “triangle” is also foolish. Therefore, for anyone *to claim* that a triangle is not a three-sided figure is foolish. The case is the same with God, so perhaps, in this way, there is some merit in talking about triangles after all.

### “All Men are Liars” (Ps. 116: 11): What Anselm and the Fool Have in Common

The difficulties that arise in speaking of God point to another important feature of Anselm’s proof. They demonstrate what the believer and the atheist have in common. In a chapter that concludes with a section entitled “The Anselmic Principle,” Edward Farley writes, “The more a thinker tries to render this situation ordinary, the less the thinker has to do with God. Neither the would-be-believer who would explicate God nor the would-be-disbeliever who would establish the vacuity of all God language escapes this situation.”<sup>45</sup> Neither clever phrases nor comparisons to triangles bespeak God. Because God cannot be adequately represented, Anselm, like all believers, must finally deny the God he names, and therefore is not unlike the atheist. The atheist, on the other hand, must wait on the theist to say what God is. The atheist must have this God in mind, and so is not unlike the believer. The atheist must know what it is that is being denied, and the believer must deny that what is being affirmed is truly and completely God. The atheist is in a difficult position, however, because to have this God in mind is to have an existing God in mind. As Anselm has argued, God and existence are necessarily linked.

While the ontological proof seems designed to convert or confound the “Fool,” the theist is not immune to the problem that plagues the atheist. When the atheist denies God, he is not truly denying God but something else; likewise the believer affirms something that is never God. After proving that God exists necessarily and is omnipotent, merciful, just, limitless and eternal, Anselm asks, “Why, O Lord God, does my soul not experience You if it has found You?”<sup>46</sup> Despite

<sup>45</sup> Edward Farley, *Divine Empathy: A Theology of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), p. 53.

<sup>46</sup> Anselm, *Proslogion*, chap. 14.



all that he has proved, Anselm still recognizes that he has not reached God. As Farley explains, “all positive belief has a twofold atheistic character. First, its attempt to symbolically specify God . . . displaces other ‘Gods.’ . . . Second, positive belief as a failed specification (because of the nonpresentational God) critically rejects and qualifies its own symbolics and issues in a neverending dialectic.”<sup>47</sup> The first atheistic aspect can be seen in Anselm’s designation of God as “something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought.” By his designation, Anselm has displaced countless gods from Baal to Zeus, from mammon to Marx, as well as countless conceptions of God held by Christians, such as King, Shepherd, Father, and Judge. Anselm is then, in this first sense, an atheist.

Anselm exemplifies the second atheistic aspect of positive belief when he confesses that his name for and thoughts about God are inadequate: “You are also something greater than can be thought.”<sup>48</sup> After proving God’s existence as “something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought,” Anselm must confess that this something is not God either, for God far exceeds thought. God dwells in “inaccessible light.”<sup>49</sup> This confession makes the fool seem less foolish, for if he dares to deny that which he does not understand, Anselm is affirming that which he does not understand. Whether or not Anselm’s understanding is closer to the truth, believers and atheists are all fools of varying degrees. André Hayen describes this fraternity of fools: “In the still impure serenity of their faith, in the still imperfect ardor of their love, in the humble and eager straining of their hope, Anselm and all the monks at Bec still share in the sin, the obscurity and the unbelief where the fool flounders.”<sup>50</sup> Despite Anselm’s belief and understanding, he, like all believers, cannot dismiss atheism once and for all. He does not stop at tearing down all the idols of lesser gods, but even tears down the very idol he has created.

Neither atheists nor believers need berate themselves for being fools. Atheists must simply learn to be like believers, recognizing that they cannot deny that which they cannot comprehend. Believers too must praise that which they cannot understand, and they must become wary of saying they know God. Instead, they must learn to be like atheists and practice saying to themselves, “That God of yours does not exist.” Neither group can ever rest in thoughtless denials or glib affirmations, but together they can learn to worship the God

<sup>47</sup> Edward Farley, *Divine Empathy*, p. 58.

<sup>48</sup> Anselm, *Proslogion*, chap. 15.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 16.

<sup>50</sup> André Hayen, “The Role of the Fool in St. Anselm and the Necessarily Apostolic Character of True Christian Reflection,” trans. Arthur C. McGill, in John Hick and Arthur C. McGill, ed., *The Many-Faced Argument: Recent Studies on the Ontological Argument for the Existence of God* (New York: MacMillan, 1967), p. 172.

that breaks the hold of idolatry and strive to think “something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought.” Through this name, Anselm has made both affirmations and denials concerning God problematic, if not impossible. Throughout the *Monologion* and *Proslogion*, he meditates on the God after whom he endlessly seeks, but when faced with contradictions, he is forced to speak in riddles, and when finally faced with something greater than can be thought, he is forced to fall silent.

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