1   Anselm

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Anselm's *Proslogion* II presents the original and classic version of the Ontological Argument, which has inspired many others yet still remains the most intriguing and ingenious. It forms the first part of an extended meditation based on Anselm's understanding of God as 'that than which nothing greater can be thought', and the role of this first part is to prove that God – so understood – truly exists. *Proslogion* III then builds on this by arguing that God – again as understood by Anselm's formula – cannot even be thought not to exist, and this has been taken by some philosophers (starting with Charles Hartshorne and Norman Malcolm) as inspiration for modal forms of Ontological Argument whose logic is quite different.[1] Here, however, I shall focus only on the argument of *Proslogion* II, though what I say about Anselm's formula and its troublesome ambiguities would potentially have negative implications for his later arguments also. Space precludes discussion of all the relevant interpretative issues even in respect of this initial argument, and my emphasis will be primarily philosophical: exploring how far it can provide a basis for a *successful* Ontological Argument, whether or not the version that results is entirely faithful to Anselm's own thought.[2]

Anselm's reasoning takes the form of a *reductio ad absurdum*, in which 'the Fool' of Psalms 14 and 53 – who 'says in his heart "there is no god"' – is shown to contradict himself. Addressing God, Anselm expresses his belief 'that You are something than which nothing greater can be thought', but then immediately

1 For a detailed analysis concluding that *Proslogion* III does not itself aim to present an independent argument for the existence of that-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought, see Smith (2014: ch. 4).

2 Again for reasons of space, I shall not here give many references to older secondary sources, except where these are likely to be of continuing relevance. In an earlier paper (Millican 2004: 442–5), I gave a catalogue of nine standard objections to Anselm's argument, noting influential presentations of these in the literature.

raises the question prompted by the Fool's denial: 'can it be that a thing of such a nature does not exist?' The subsequent *reductio* proceeds as follows:[3]

> (A)   But surely, when this same Fool hears what I am speaking about, namely, 'something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought', he understands what he hears, and what he understands is in his mind, even if he does not understand that it actually exists . . . Even the Fool, 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. And surely that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought cannot exist in the mind alone. For if it exists solely in the mind, it can be thought to exist in reality also, which is greater. If then that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought exists in the mind alone, this same that-than-which-a-greater-*cannot*-be-thought is that-than-which-a-greater-*can*-be-thought. But this is obviously impossible. Therefore there is absolutely no doubt that something-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought exists both in the mind and in reality.

Let us now go through this argument stage by stage, interpreting Anselm's words as clearly and charitably as we can in contemporary terms, and identifying relevant problems and issues. For convenience, I shall abbreviate 'than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought' (and also the harmless variant 'than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought') as 'TWNG'.[4]

1 'Something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought exists in the mind'

The first two sentences in passage (A) are clearly aimed at demonstrating that something-TWNG 'exists in the mind', on the basis that the Fool

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[3] This text is taken from the translation of Charlesworth (Anselm 1077/8: 87–8), differing from Charlesworth (1965) only in dropping the word 'even' after 'solely in the mind'. In Millican (2004: 439), I emended the fourth sentence in a way that Anscombe (1993) advocates and the Latin permits, to read 'For if it exists solely in the mind, something that is greater can be thought to exist in reality also.' (Duns Scotus also apparently preferred this interpretation; see the quotation in note 29 below.) But I have dropped the emendation here in recognition of the fact that a sentence in Anselm's *Reply to Gaunilo* II – 'For if it exists even in the mind alone, cannot it be thought to exist also in reality?' (p. 114) – can only properly be interpreted as involving *the same thing* existing also in reality. For more on this issue, see note 30 below.

[4] Here I have deliberately avoided subsuming the initial 'something-' or 'that-' within the abbreviation, since the variation between these two options may have logical significance (see Section 2.3 below). Keeping the acronym to four letters also makes it easy to pronounce, either to oneself or others, as 'twing'.

understands the formula and 'whatever is understood is in the mind'. Questions have been raised here both about the meaning of the formula itself, and about this potentially problematic notion of *existence in the mind*.

1.1 What Is 'Greatness'?

Anselm does not explicitly define what 'greater' means, though he goes on to argue that supreme greatness involves both *real existence* and possession of an impressive catalogue of divine qualities – 'whatever it is better to be than not to be' – which we can here simplify to *omnipotence*, *omniscience* and *perfect goodness* (henceforth '*omniperfection*').[5] Thus it seems to follow that, in general, x can be greater than y by having more impressive *power*, *knowledge* and *goodness*, and/or by having a higher degree of existence (e.g., in reality as opposed to the mind alone). For now, let us put aside the tricky question of how x and y are to be compared if these criteria pull in different directions (for example, if x is more powerful than y but less knowledgeable; or if x is omniperfect but in the mind only, while y is imperfect but exists in reality also). Perhaps Anselm might reasonably consider that such details can be ignored, for however they work out, it seems already to be clear that the ultimate limit of greatness – than which nothing greater can be thought – will be reached only by a really existing omniperfect being, i.e., God.[6]

1.2 What Is 'Existence in the Mind'?

The interpretation of existence 'in the mind' is constrained by Anselm's clear statement that 'whatever is understood is in the mind'. The level of 'understanding' required here indeed seems to be fairly minimal, since it is achieved by the Fool in so far as he merely 'understands what he hears'. Moreover in the text which has been elided from passage (A) above, Anselm tells us that a painter who 'plans beforehand what he is going to execute' has the envisaged picture 'in his mind'. So this form of 'existence' clearly

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[5] The formula 'whatever it is better to be than not to be' is at *Proslogion* V and the relevant qualities include 'just, truthful, happy' (V), 'perceptive, omnipotent, merciful, impassible' (VI), 'living, wise, good, blessed' (XI), 'limitless and eternal' (XIII), existing 'everywhere and always' (XIV), without parts (XVIII) and 'outside all time' (XIX).

[6] Anselm's later argument in *Proslogion* III purports to show that even this level of greatness can be exceeded where the omniperfect being also has the property of *necessarily existing*, but we can ignore this here.

cannot require either deep understanding or full determinacy: it seems to be enough to be thinking of the relevant thing in the sense of having in mind an identifying concept of it.

We must avoid some well-known mistakes if this way of speaking is to escape absurdity or devastating parody (in the tradition of Gaunilo and Gassendi). First, if I think of a winged zebra, and thus a winged zebra 'exists in my mind', this cannot be taken to imply that a winged zebra *really is* somewhere – namely, in my mind – and that therefore a winged zebra *really exists*. If this were all that real existence required, then the real existence of God would be far too insubstantial to give any religious reassurance: Zeus, Vishnu, Thor, the Flying Spaghetti Monster – and even the immortal invisible rabbit that I have just invented on the spur of the moment – would all have real existence too. Secondly, if a winged zebra 'exists in my mind', this cannot be taken to imply that there is some specific winged zebra there, a zebra that has, for example, a particular number of stripes or a particular weight. For mere understanding of the phrase 'winged zebra' – which on Anselm's account suffices for mental existence – clearly implies no such detailed particularity.[7]

These points strongly suggest that talk of 'existence in the mind' is at best misleading in apparently conflating *my thinking of an X* with *there being an X of which I am thinking*. Obviously I can think of a unicorn without there being any *real* unicorn of which I am thinking; but this need not mean that instead there must be some *unicorn-in-my-mind* to which I bear that relation. The fallacy here becomes more obvious with other intentional attitudes: when I go searching for *a picture that will look good above my fireplace*, this does not mean that there must be (either in reality or my mind) some *specific* picture that I am looking for. Thinking relationally about some individual – whether real or mental – should not be taken as a model for all of our thinking, and if there is a risk of confusion or fallacy from talk reflecting that model, then we would be well advised to find some other way of expressing our reasonings about the Anselmian formula. We shall be returning to this issue very shortly (in Section 2.1 below).

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[7] Moreover we are clearly unable to imagine any concrete entity (such as an animal) in all its detail. A real zebra must have a host of specific properties (including a particular weight, height, number of stripes, ancestry, genetic make-up, behavioural history, etc.). A merely imagined zebra can have at most a small proportion of these specific properties.

2 'That-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought cannot exist in the mind alone'

The third sentence of passage (A) brings two new features into the argument. First, Anselm's terminology changes from *something*-TWNG to *that*-TWNG. Secondly, he now speaks of this as existing *beyond* 'the mind alone', which the following sentence then clarifies as meaning that it also exists 'in reality'. Let us deal first with the latter, since it relates closely to points just made.

2.1 Existence in the Mind and in Reality

Much of Anselm's argument seems to hinge on the idea that the same thing can potentially exist both in the mind and in reality, which – in the light of Section 1.2 above – is looking somewhat problematic. Quite apart from the issues specific to existence in the mind that we have already discussed, there are also potentially serious problems involving *identity* and *inconsistent predication*. To illustrate the former, and elaborating on Anselm's own example, suppose that a painter plans a painting of Canterbury Cathedral, perhaps with a view to presenting this to the Archbishop, and first executes his plan by producing the mediocre *PaintingA*, but then has another go and does better with *PaintingB*. Both of the real paintings match the initial plan, and on completing each of them, the painter could truthfully reply 'Yes' when asked 'Is that the painting you were planning to paint for the Archbishop?'. But they are clearly distinct from each other, so we cannot without contradiction say that they are both *one and the same thing* as the painting that was originally 'in the mind' of the painter (since identity is transitive: if x is identical with y, and y with z, then it follows that x is identical with z). Any would-be vindication of Anselm's argument that depends on a claim of literal identity between *that-TWNG* as it 'exists in the mind' and God as existing in reality must first do serious work to explain how such a theoretical framework can avoid absurdity. This sort of point is particularly significant given that Anselm's argument proceeds indirectly, by *reductio ad absurdum*. For if the argument is situated within a theoretical framework that is itself inconsistent, then the derivation of a contradiction from the Fool's initial atheist assumption cannot legitimately be presumed to refute that assumption: responsibility for the contradiction might lie within the framework itself.

Turning next to problems of predication (and leaving aside for the moment some further issues to be discussed in Section 3.1 below), suppose I return home to find my house burgled, having just seen a dark-haired man drive

away. Is the *dark-haired burglar* in my mind identical to the light-haired man who actually burgled me? If so, then that individual combines being *really* light-haired with being *thought* dark-haired, so we must distinguish between real- and thought-predicates to avoid immediate contradiction. If, on the other hand, the men are not identical, then suppose I later think simply about *the burglar* (e.g., when reflecting on the theft rather than the car driver): that description *does* match to reality – i.e., to the light-haired man who actually committed the crime – so apparently there must now be two distinct burglars in my mind, one of whom is also real. If we then imagine a more complex scenario, with many predicates in play, it looks as though we could have an indefinite number of burglars in mind, some matching reality and some not. Making good sense of this might perhaps be possible, but it is far from obvious that contradiction is avoidable, and the onus is clearly on the proponent of such a theory to demonstrate its plausibility, before attempting to persuade us that a successful Ontological Argument can be built on it.

   None of this is intended to cast doubt on the natural idea that our thought often concerns real, objective things; nor on the appropriateness of describing such things as being 'in our mind' in a non-literal sense, most obviously when our thoughts are caused by conscious *perceptions* of them. In such cases, indeed, it is tempting to say that those perceptions are *essentially* of the objects concerned (so that perceptions caused by different objects, even if qualitatively similar, would count as numerically different perceptions).[8] Even then, however, it is highly problematic to *identify* external and internal 'objects' (because, for example, we can have multiple distinct perceptions of a single external object, without realizing that we are doing so). And anyway this sort of option is available only if we are prepared to presuppose that *there is some corresponding object*, which in the case of the Ontological Argument would obviously beg the question. Some commentators, encouraged by the prayer-like language with which *Proslogion* II begins, have suggested that it

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[8] This point about individuation does not imply that we grasp some essence of the object in perceiving it; nor does it require any commitment to such essences. Anselm himself seems to believe in individual essences that exist prior to God actualizing them (e.g., *Monologion* IX–X), but his Ontological Argument is unlikely now to gain plausibility from being tied to such a framework, which raises plenty of problems of its own. One obvious issue would be the need to distinguish between genuine essences that are considered suitable for grounding an Ontological Argument, and arbitrary descriptions that lead to parodies. Special pleading in favour of God (e.g., Anselm's claim in *Monologion* XVII that God's properties all cohere in a uniquely simple essence, or Descartes's claim that 'necessary existence . . . forms a part of [God's] essence as it does of no other thing', *Replies* 5 (Descartes (1641: 263)) is a common recourse, but gratuitous unless independently justified: it is up to any would-be Ontological Argument to *prove* that God has a special status, and this cannot properly be taken for granted (cf. Millican (2004: 449n.22)).

should be interpreted as unfolding the implications of a direct revelation of God's nature as *that-TWNG*, but then it ceases to be an Ontological Argument as generally understood.[9] This also seems hard to square with Anselm's language, which explicitly specifies God's nature using a description that he takes to be understood by the sceptical Fool without presupposing any such revelation.

2.2 Concepts and Appropriate Charity

The problems raised in Sections 1.2 and 2.1 above give ample reason to avoid analysing Anselm's reasoning in the naive terms that his own text suggests, involving things that literally 'exist in the mind' and can also – equally literally and without affecting their identity – 'exist in reality'. For if his argument's plausibility turns out to depend crucially on the peculiarities of this framework and the conflations it embodies, then so far from supporting the argument, this will simply confirm suspicions that the framework it builds on is dubious, sanctioning inferences that cannot be verified by other means. To accept an argument that can work *only* within such a problematic framework would be taking philosophical charity too far.

To be fair to Anselm, however, we should avoid being overcritical of his language where it can be interpreted in ways that avoid any serious error or conflation. In most cases this is entirely possible, by understanding 'existence in the mind' in terms of *concept possession*, 'existence in reality' in terms of *concept instantiation*, and *greatness* as a property of concepts.[10] We also have to allow – somewhat in tension with the sensibilities that contemporary philosophers have inherited from Kant and Frege – that a concept's greatness can depend on whether it is actually instantiated (or in Anselmian language 'exists in reality'). This then makes it possible to accept Anselm's account of both the painter and the Fool in appropriate terms. The painter, having completed the anticipated picture, 'both has it in his mind and understands that it exists because he has now made it': the painted picture

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[9] For more on non-standard interpretations, see the references in Millican (2004: 440n.5).

[10] In Millican (2004), I preferred the word 'nature' (following the terminology of both Anselm and Descartes) to 'concept', so as to have a technical term that could serve as the basis for a 'theory of natures' designed to maximize the prospects for a valid Anselmian argument. Using a special term also avoided the relatively stark mismatch between Anselm's own language – talking of things that exist both in the mind and in reality – and our modern talk of 'concepts', which seem unambiguously mental. But such choices of theoretical terminology make no difference to the main logical points that follow, as long as appropriate distinctions are respected to avoid absurdities of the kinds already discussed.

is not literally *the very same thing* as the concept of the picture, but is an *instantiation* of it. In the same way, *that-TWNG* 'exists in the Fool's mind' in so far as the Fool possesses that concept, and it can also 'exist in reality' if the concept is instantiated by something real that answers to Anselm's formula.

2.3 'Something' and 'That'

Anselm's switching between *something*-TWNG and *that*-TWNG might be merely harmless 'elegant variation' in wording. It has also been interpreted in a more problematic way, as deviously introducing the unjustified assumption that *there is* some such particular being, with 'that-TWNG' purporting to pick it out. More sympathetically, Anselm's switching terminology has been compared to the use of 'existential elimination' within natural deduction, whereby an existentially quantified variable is replaced with an 'arbitrary name'.[11] On this account, having established that *some* X exists within the mind, Anselm is now referring to *that* X – the very one that is within the mind. Though ingenious, however, this last reading is philosophically problematic given what we have said earlier. For Anselm has not established that some X – i.e., *some particular thing that is an X* – exists within the mind.[12] The most he has any right to claim is that the mind has grasped *the concept of X*, which is a quite different matter. So if this reading faithfully reflects Anselm's thinking, then it would appear to betray a temptation towards the incoherent views dismissed in Sections 1.2 and 2.1 above. The most philosophically charitable approach, therefore, is to adopt the simple 'elegant variation' hypothesis or – almost equivalently – to take 'that-TWNG' to be referring back to the already-identified *concept* 'something-TWNG'. Either way, we should understand these two phrases as intended to refer to the very same mental concept.

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[11] As in Campbell (1976: 31–4). Suppose, for example, that I am reasoning from the premises $\exists xFx$ and $\forall x(Fx \rightarrow Gx)$ to the conclusion $\exists xGx$. The first step is to use an arbitrary name, say 'a', for some individual that has the property F, as implied by the first premise. Then from Fa the second premise can be used to deduce Ga, and from this $\exists xGx$ follows.

[12] Theists might be tempted to resist the idea that God is 'a particular thing', and argue that the logic goes differently in His case. But no such special pleading is apparent in Anselm's text, which treats the establishment of God's existence in the mind as a straightforward instance of a general truth, applicable to anything we understand or envisage.

3 'For if it exists solely in the mind, it can be thought to exist in reality also, which is greater. If then that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought exists in the mind alone, This same that-than-which-a-greater-*cannot*-be-thought is that-than-which-a-greater-*can*-be-thought. But this is obviously impossible. Therefore there is absolutely no doubt that something-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought exists both in the mind and in reality.'

These final sentences of passage (A), in which the Fool is convicted of contradiction and thus supposedly refuted, are especially confusing. We start with the supposition of the concept *that-TWNG* being *uninstantiated*, and are then told that if this supposition were true, it would be possible to think of this same concept's being *instantiated*, and thus being greater than it is. Hence the uninstantiated *that-TWNG* would turn out to be that-than-which-a-greater-*can*-be-thought, a result that looks 'obviously impossible', and thus completes the *reductio* of the Fool's atheism.

3.1 A Crucial Ambiguity: Characterization versus Description

Let us start with the second sentence, which in Charlesworth's translation appears to state that, if uninstantiated, *that-TWNG* would be *that-than-which-a-greater-can-be-thought*: one concept would, apparently, become a different concept entirely. This seems an absurd claim, and therefore philosophical charity should lead us to prefer Logan's translation, according to which *that-TWNG* is threatened not with turning into another concept, but rather (without losing its identity) becoming *something than which a greater can be thought*, on the straightforward ground that if it is uninstantiated, then its greatness would be capable of being exceeded.[13]

This issue illustrates how talking of a concept as *something than which no greater can be thought* can be interpreted in two quite different ways, as referring to either:

(i) that specific concept whose content is: *something-than-which-no-greater-can-be-thought*; or

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[13] 'If therefore that than which a greater cannot be thought is in the understanding alone, that same thing than which a greater cannot be thought is [something] than which a greater can be thought' (Logan (2009: 33)).

(ii) whichever concept can be correctly described as being *a concept than which no greater can be thought*.

In the former case, Anselm's formula acts as a *content specification* or *characterization* of the concept in question. In the latter case, the formula acts as a *description* of the concept in question. And when we consider the possibility that *something-TWNG* might be exceeded in greatness and would thus turn out to be *something than which a greater can be thought*, we are mixing together the language of characterization (i.e., identifying the concept in terms of its content as *something-TWNG*) with the language of description (i.e., saying that the concept thus identified is less than supremely great).

Mixing our language in this way need not be philosophically objectionable, but it does require great care if we are to avoid fallacy. Some concepts possess the very properties that characterize them: for example, the concept *widely shared* is itself a widely shared concept, the concept *abstract* is itself abstract, and the concept *sophisticated* is itself sophisticated. But on the other hand, the concept *rare* is not a rare concept, the concept *surprising* is not surprising, and the concept *non-existent* is not non-existent. So we need sharply to distinguish between two quite different kinds of property that can be associated with a concept. On the one hand, the *internal* or *characteristic* properties of a concept define *which concept it is, in terms of its content*: for example, the concept of an omniperfect being, or of an equilateral triangle, or of a winged zebra. On the other hand, the *external, descriptive* properties of a concept do not determine its *identity*: they are typically properties that the concept has in virtue of its relations with other things, for example, that it is present in the Fool's mind, or widely shared, or instantiated in reality.[14] The latter properties can thus be used to identify the concept *descriptively* (e.g., 'the concept that was in my mind just a moment ago', 'the most impressive concept I have thought about this week'), but they do so without specifying its conceptual content. Concepts can also, of course, be referred to using mixtures of internal and external properties (e.g., 'the last geometric concept I thought of').

Given this background, it is crucial to recognize that we have no reason to assume in general that the *characterizing descriptions* of a concept – those that specify its conceptual content – should also correctly *describe* the concept

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[14] To avoid absurd consequences, Meinongian theories of objects standardly draw a related distinction between *nuclear* and *extranuclear* properties, whereby the former characterize the nature of an 'entity', and the latter such things as its ontological or modal status (e.g., existent, fictional, mythical, possible or impossible) and whether it is an object of intentional attitudes (e.g., believed or worshipped). See, for example, Parsons (1980: 22–6) and Jacquette (1994: 236–7).

itself; indeed they will do so only in very special cases. And hence if Anselm's argument is found to trade implicitly on such an assumption, it is to that extent fallacious. If, for example, we allow ourselves to conflate characterizing and external descriptions, then we might quickly conclude that the Fool contradicts himself, in having within his mind the incoherent concept of *a-not-really-existing-being-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought*. *But* this would be quite unjustified, for as Mackie points out (1982: 52), the rational Fool has in his mind the concept whose characteristic content is *a-being-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought*, but he simply denies that it is instantiated (i.e., that anything in reality matches up to that concept). If we thus carefully separate *characterizing* from *external* properties of the key concept, we can see very clearly that the Fool is quite innocent of any such crude contradiction.

3.2 The Aquinas Rebuttal

Thomas Aquinas rejected Anselm's argument, and although his objection to it is notoriously unclear, his words suggest that he might have noticed exactly the fallacy just mentioned. For he states that the following combination of claims leaves the atheist with 'no difficulty':[15]

 (i) That which is indicated by the name *God* – i.e., *that-TWNG* – exists only in the intellect and not in reality.
(ii) Something greater can be thought than anything given in reality or in the intellect.

The consistency of this pair of claims would seem to imply that the concept *that-TWNG* can exist in the mind and yet be exceeded in greatness. And this is indeed possible, if the concept's own *surpassable* greatness is taken to be an *external* property of the concept, distinct from the property of being *unsurpassably* great which provides the concept's *content* (and which therefore must be true of anything that falls under it). Hence Aquinas is apparently correct in denying that the atheist can be convicted of self-contradiction, in which case Anselm's *reductio* argument fails.

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[15] 'Now, from the fact that that which is indicated by the name *God* is conceived by the mind, it does not follow that God exists save only in the intellect. Hence, that than which a greater cannot be thought will likewise not have to exist save only in the intellect ... No difficulty, consequently, befalls anyone who posits that God does not exist. For that something greater can be thought than anything given in reality or in the intellect is a difficulty only to him who admits that there is something than which a greater cannot be thought in reality' (Aquinas (1975: 82)).

The point here is subtle, and easily overlooked by those attracted to the Ontological Argument. Lynne Rudder Baker and Gareth Matthews (2010: 47–8), for example, slide seamlessly – and apparently without noticing that a significant move has been made – from 'That than which nothing greater can be conceived is an object that exists in . . . the atheist's understanding' to 'Let S be the object that exists in the . . . atheist's understanding and that is such that nothing greater can be conceived.' The rational atheist may accept *that-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-conceived* as a *characterization* of an object of his thought, but he should then absolutely deny the supposed implication that this object is *such that* – i.e., *correctly described* as being such that – nothing greater can be conceived.[16] In the same way, *that-than-which-nothing-more-surprising-can-be-conceived* is currently an object of my thought in the sense that I am pondering the concept thus characterized. But it is not itself particularly surprising, and I can easily conceive of things that have been or would be more surprising.

3.3 Kant and Descartes

Kant's famous dictum – often cited in the form 'existence is not a predicate' – occurs within a discussion in his *Critique of Pure Reason* which is in parts confusing and perhaps confused. But the key point is made in terms which resonate clearly with the discussion above:

> 'Being' 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 . . . If . . . we . . . say 'God is', we attach no new predicate to the concept of God, but only posit the subject in itself with all its predicates, and indeed posit it as being an *object* that stands in relation to my *concept* . . . Whatever, therefore, and however much, our concept of an object may contain, we must go outside it, if we are to ascribe existence to the object. (Kant (1781: 504–6))

Kant can naturally be read here as intending to say that *existence* is to be understood, not as a *characterizing* property of a concept – i.e., one that defines it or determines its content – but rather as an *external* property which applies if the concept is *instantiated* (that is, if some real object 'stands in relation' to it). This seems both sensible and persuasive, explaining why Kant's diagnosis has

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[16] In this paragraph, I use the term 'conceived' rather than 'thought', to follow Baker and Matthews.

been so influential, though as we shall see, there are further twists to be negotiated before we can consider Anselm's argument as refuted.

Kant's own primary target was not Anselm's argument but the far simpler Cartesian variant (which had been further elaborated by Spinoza and Leibniz). And Descartes does straightforwardly treat *existence* as a characterizing property of his idea of God, thus putting it alongside omnipotence, omniscience and perfect goodness as one of the definitive divine perfections:

> the idea of God [is that of] a supremely perfect being . . . Hence it is . . . a contradiction to think of God (that is, a supremely perfect being) lacking existence (that is, lacking a perfection) . . .' (Meditation 5, CSM ii 45–6)

Kant overstates his case, however, in implying that it is always and obviously a logical crime to treat 'real existence' as a characterizing property. In thinking of famous monarchs, we might wish to distinguish between those that we know to be fictional (e.g., Tolkien's Aragorn), and those that we consider as real historical figures (e.g., England's Henry VIII).[17] But in context this is a nitpicking detail, because it is clearly the *external* property of real instantiation that is the central issue between the theist and the atheist: the theist believes there to be a real object 'that stands in relation' to the concept in question, while the atheist denies it.[18] This point is closely linked to a crucial difference between the *internal* and *external* properties of our concepts, namely, that the former – but not the latter – are, in general, 'up to us': we can define concepts as we choose, and include within them whatever properties we wish (e.g., we can contemplate the concept of a real historical king with the qualities of Aragorn). But having thus defined them, we cannot then choose whether or not there is a genuine reality that corresponds to them: that is a matter of fact that depends on how the world happens to be. Interpreted along these lines, Kant's critique of Descartes is right on target, but as we shall see, Anselm's argument is harder to pin down and neutralize.

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[17] Cases whose historicity is uncertain, such as the legendary King Arthur, raise further complications though without affecting the key point here.

[18] The theist and atheist can agree that the concept of Jehovah purports to be of a real god, and the concept of Zephyrus (from Terry Pratchett's *Discworld*) of a fictional god. What is at issue between them is not what is built into the theist's preferred concept of God, but whether there is a genuine external reality that corresponds to it.

4 Reconceiving Anselm's Argument

So far, we have been following mainstream philosophical tradition in treating Anselm's argument as involving a concept whose content is *something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought* (*something-TWNG*). This makes it relevantly similar to Descartes's argument, and subject to Kant's critique: *real existence* is being smuggled into the *internal* content of the concept (under the guise of 'greatness'), but for the argument to succeed, it needs to be established as an *external* property of the concept. There is, however, another way of understanding Anselm's argument – generally overlooked in critical discussions – which is quite different from the Cartesian conception and can evade Kantian objections. This involves *consistently* interpreting the Anselmian formula as an external description of the key concept, rather than as an internal specification of its content.

In Section 1.1 above, we saw that Anselm's notion of *greatness* involves some mixture of *power*, *knowledge*, *goodness* and *degree of existence*.[19] We then discovered – leading up to Section 2.2 – that his argument needs to be couched in terms of *concepts*, and later – in Sections 3.1 and 3.3 – that although *power*, *knowledge* and *goodness* can appropriately be considered as characterizing or internal properties of a concept, *real existence* (in the sense that Anselm is trying to prove against the Fool) seems clearly external.[20] Suppose, therefore, that we accordingly recognize *greatness* to be a hybrid property that depends on a combination of a concept's internal and external properties. This enables us to follow Anselm as before, accepting – exactly as stated in Section 1.1 above – that '*x* can be greater than *y* by having more impressive *power*, *knowledge* and *goodness*, and/or by having a higher degree of existence'. Let us now note explicitly, however, that since *greatness* so understood involves an external element, *it is not a property that can be settled by definition*: we may be able to define a concept as we like, but it is not then 'up to us' how *great* that concept will be, because its greatness will depend – at least in part – on the external question of whether or not it 'exists', i.e., is instantiated in reality. Indeed this feature of greatness is crucial if Anselm's argument is to have any chance of success. For the Fool can be

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[19] As before (cf. notes 5 and 6), we are here abbreviating the relevant catalogue of great-making properties to simplify discussion.

[20] Again there might be a sense in which 'real existence' can be included as an internal property of a concept, but then it ceases to be the point at issue between the theist and the atheist. See Millican (2004: 453–4) for more on this.

refuted only if the key concept's greatness implies its real instantiation, and this can be so only if its level of greatness depends on that instantiation.[21]

Now let us set out to identify which concept actually satisfies the description: *that-concept-than-which-no-greater-concept-can-be-thought* (avoiding the '*TWNG*' abbreviation to emphasize that this version of the Anselmian formula is intended to be *descriptive* of the concept in question, rather than *characterizing* it). Whichever concept this is, it presumably scores well in terms of the internal properties of *power*, *knowledge* and *goodness*, for otherwise it would surely be possible to think of a greater concept. But also, it seems plausible that this concept must be *really instantiated*, because if it were not, then again it would presumably be possible to think of a greater concept. So at last, perhaps, we have the materials for a proof that the concept which descriptively satisfies the Anselmian formula – *that-concept-than-which-no-greater-concept-can-be-thought* – both combines the godlike internal qualities of *power*, *knowledge* and *goodness*, and also is *really instantiated*. This looks like progress!

4.1 Which Is the Greatest Concept?

A problem emerges, however, if we probe more deeply into the hybrid nature of 'greatness', with its combination of internal and external properties. To focus only on the most central issue, and for the sake of simplicity, let us charitably assume that the relevant internal properties – *power*, *knowledge* and *goodness* – are mutually commensurable, so that any combination of these can be given a single greatness 'score' that enables appropriate comparisons to be made.[22] Again for simplicity, let us assume that the relevant

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[21] This simple point alone seems to be enough to wreck any prospect for Anselm's argument if *greatness* is interpreted as purely internal. Thus the approach described in this section – treating the Anselmian formula as a *description* rather than as a *characterization* of the key concept – provides, I suggest, the only chance of vindicating or salvaging anything from it. Note also that modal versions of the Ontological Argument, which are the only versions commonly considered to be valid, likewise standardly evade the Kantian objection by using an *external* definition of the relevant entity (in terms of its status across possible worlds). In thus avoiding invalidity, however, they run into the problem that if the entity is defined in such a way that its existence cannot be contingent, then claiming that it is *possible* simply begs the question against the atheist, while Humean principles (cf. note 35 below) make *impossibility* far more plausible. Such arguments are also subject to parody, since for example a *necessarily existing flying zebra* cannot be contingent (and hence, if possible, must be necessary). For a comment along these lines specifically on Plantinga's argument, see Millican (2004: 469n.44).

[22] Without this assumption, greatness comparisons between concepts could become indeterminate where, for example, concept x is characterized as involving more power than concept y, but less knowledge or goodness. In Section 1.1 we allowed Anselm to ignore the detail of how greatness is

external quality – *degree of existence* – is straightforwardly binary: either a concept is *really instantiated*, or it is (at best) *only in the mind*.[23] These two assumptions together imply (i) that among all the possible concepts that are actually instantiated, there will be some specific highest level of greatness *MaxI*; and also (ii) that among all the possible concepts that are actually uninstantiated, there will be some specific highest level of greatness *MaxU*.[24] For simplicity, let us now add a third assumption, that there is just one *instantiated* concept whose greatness reaches *MaxI*, and just one *uninstantiated* concept whose greatness reaches *MaxU* – this will allow us, in each case, to refer without ambiguity to 'the concept' which does so.[25] This gives us two possible candidates for satisfaction of our Anselmian formula: *that-concept-than-which-no-greater-concept-can-be-thought*. It seems that the successful candidate must either be the instantiated concept that achieves greatness level *MaxI*, or the uninstantiated concept that achieves greatness level *MaxU*.

The theist and atheist will disagree about the values of both *MaxI* and *MaxU*, and may also disagree about which is higher. But they can agree that the following concept – in virtue of its unsurpassable *characteristic* properties – will feature *either* as the greatest instantiated concept, *or* as the greatest uninstantiated concept:[26]

[God]: [omniperfect, creator of the universe]

The actual greatness of this concept will depend on whether or not it is instantiated; let us suppose that this value is *G* if it is instantiated, and *g* otherwise. Since instantiation is (we are assuming) the only external great-making property, *G* will be the highest level of greatness that any concept could possibly achieve (and *g* is obviously lower). As far as the theist is

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constituted, since it seemed clear that the ultimate limit of greatness will be reached only by a really existing omniperfect being. Here we continue to allow him to ignore such detail in respect of internal properties, but can no longer do so when considering the interplay between these and real instantiation.

[23] But we shall not restrict our discussion to concepts that are *actually* 'in the mind', because Anselm's 'can-be-thought' clearly suggests that the relevant domain should include all *thinkable* concepts.

[24] Note that the values of *MaxI* and *MaxU* will depend on which concepts are actually instantiated, whereas *G*, *g* and *A* (to be introduced shortly) are intended to represent specific levels of greatness.

[25] All of these assumptions are intended to be 'friendly' to Anselm's argument, by reducing complications and making it easier for the argument to work, if indeed there is *any way* that it can work. If the following discussion turned out to vindicate Anselm, then it would be appropriate to revisit the assumptions and examine whether they are actually tenable.

[26] We here adopt the convention of using square brackets to enclose both the names of concepts and their list of characteristic (i.e., defining) properties.

concerned, then, (*MaxI* = *G*) and clearly (*MaxU* < *G*); hence *that-concept-than-which-no-greater-concept-can-be-thought* is [God].

From the atheist point of view, however, things are less straightforward: all we can conclude so far is that (*MaxU* = *g*), since [God] is then the greatest *uninstantiated* concept, and we do not yet know what value *MaxI* has, nor how this compares with *g*. In order to work these things out, we need to know which concept is the greatest *instantiated* concept, and as far as the atheist is concerned, that cannot be a concept that carries any implication of divinity (for short, not a 'divine' concept). To facilitate our discussion, then, let us suppose that the concept in question is:[27]

> [Aurelius]: [absolute Emperor of the Roman Empire, wise, just, beneficent]

and that the greatness of this concept is *A*. For the atheist, therefore, (*MaxI* = *A*), and we can now ask, from his point of view: how does *A*, the greatness of the *instantiated* concept [Aurelius], compare with *g*, the greatness of the *uninstantiated* concept [God]? The latter obviously has more impressive *characteristic* properties, but might this advantage be outweighed by the difference between them in *instantiation*?

4.2 The Principle of the Superiority of Existence

Faced with exactly this sort of question, Millican (2004: 451) proposed another simplifying assumption:

> [N]othing that Anselm says makes clear what advantages in other respects, if any, are sufficient to outweigh the additional share of greatness that is conferred on a [concept] which is instantiated in reality as compared with one which is not. At this point, therefore, it will considerably streamline our discussion if we make a simplifying assumption which, though not unquestionably Anselmian, at least has the authority of having been stated by his correspondent Gaunilo without being contested by him. Namely, that among the various criteria for greatness (power, wisdom, goodness etc.), real existence 'trumps' all others, so that any [concept] which has a real archetype, however lowly its characteristic properties may be, will on

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[27] For explanation of this supposition, see Millican (2004: 456, especially n.31, and 463). As in the case of [God] – cf. note 19 above – it might be possible to define a greater concept by including further properties such as 'celebrated Stoic writer'. Such complications can be ignored here, but for discussion, see Millican (2004: §5, especially 453n.28).

that account alone be greater than any [concept], however impressively characterized, which does not.

Yujin Nagasawa (2007), in his critique of my analysis, called this assumption *The Principle of the Superiority of Existence* (PSE), disputed its faithfulness to Anselm and suggested that it unfairly weakened his Ontological Argument.

I agree that Anselm might well reject PSE,[28] but deny that the principle weakens his argument, which fails either way. If, on the one hand, PSE is *true*, then [Aurelius] is, according to the atheist, the greatest of all concepts, outscoring [God] on the basis of its instantiation, and hence ($A > g$). PSE accordingly forces the atheist to accept the instantiation of *that-concept-than-which-no-greater-concept-can-be-thought*, thus potentially yielding a valid proof of existence.[29] But this is no real concession, of course, for the concept thus vindicated will not be divine. If, on the other hand, PSE is *false*, then it might well be that ($g > A$), in which case the atheist must accept that [God] can qualify as the greatest of all concepts *even if it is not instantiated*. But this again yields no victory to the theist, for if indeed [God] can qualify as that-concept-than-which-no-greater-concept-can-be-thought even if it is not instantiated, then clearly the atheist cannot be convicted of inconsistency for denying its instantiation. Anselm cannot have it both ways against the atheist: *either* he can accept PSE and thus define 'greatness' in such a way that the greatest of all concepts *must be instantiated*; *or* he can reject PSE and define 'greatness' in such a way that the greatest of all concepts *must be [God]*. But he cannot ensure both of these simultaneously unless [God] is indeed instantiated, which is just what the atheist denies.

4.3 Supreme Greatness: Actual and Hypothetical

These conclusions are likely to be intensely frustrating to the advocate of the Ontological Argument. We have highlighted three main levels of greatness to consider:

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[28] Smith (2014: 92–3) argues persuasively that the principle is contradicted by the logic of Anselm's reasoning in V of the *Reply to Gaunilo*, and also by a sentence in VIII which he translates: 'very much better than this [something temporal without beginning or end] is that which in no way lacks anything, nor is forced to change or move – whether something of this kind actually exists or not'.

[29] John Duns Scotus adopts PSE in a discussion whose explicit aim is to *strengthen* Anselm's argument: 'The thinkable which exists in reality is greater than that which exists only in a mind. This is not to be understood to mean that one and the same item if it is thought of is a greater thinkable if it actually exists [than if it does not]; rather it means that something which exists is greater than anything which exists only in the mind' (Bosley and Tweedale (2006: 112, *Ordinatio* I, dist. 2, qu. 2.5.2). William of Ockham follows him in this also: see note 34 below.

A: the greatness of the greatest *instantiated non-divine* concept (e.g., [Aurelius]);

g: the greatness of the concept [God] when *uninstantiated*;

G: the greatness of the concept [God] when *instantiated*.

The Anselmian formula, interpreted as a *description* of the relevant concept, purports to refer to *that-concept-than-which-no-greater-concept-can-be-thought*. The atheist can be forced to accept that this formula successfully refers to a concept whose greatness reaches the level of *A* or *g*, whichever is higher (potentially depending on PSE). But this is not enough for the theist, who wants to force the atheist to accept reference to a concept that reaches the ultimate level of greatness *G*. If this could be achieved, then the atheist – in accepting reference to a concept of such immense greatness – would have to admit that this can only be an instantiated concept of an omniperfect being; hence such a being must exist.

The theist's frustration is understandable, because we are evidently able to *think about* the level of greatness *G* that would belong to the instantiated concept [God].[30] This supreme level of greatness would be unsurpassable even in thought, and is therefore *the highest level of greatness that can be thought*. Why, then, cannot the atheist be forced to accept that reference is made to this instantiated concept [God] through the formula *that-concept-than-which-no-greater-concept-can-be-thought*? The answer, of course, is that the atheist does not accept that the concept is, in fact, instantiated. So from his point of view, there is no 'instantiated concept [God]' to be referred to. He can accept that *we are able to think of the concept [God] as instantiated*, but if we do this, we are imagining it within a *different* reality, one in which God exists. Hence the atheist can only accept reference to *that-concept-whose-greatness-is-G* as succeeding *hypothetically*: as applying to

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[30] This is the point that Anselm seems to be making when he says: 'For if it [i.e., *that-TWNG*] exists solely in the mind, it can be thought to exist in reality also, which is greater.' As mentioned in note 3 above, in Millican (2004) I preferred a different translation of this sentence, namely 'For if it exists solely in the mind, something that is greater can be thought to exist in reality also.' The latter is less philosophically problematic, because it can be fulfilled – at least if PSE is assumed – by the comparison in actual greatness between [God] and [Aurelius], whereas Charlesworth's translation requires a comparison between [God]'s actual and hypothetical greatness, as discussed below. The avoidance of such complications was helpful in Millican (2004), where a major part of my aim was to show that – despite all the many 'deep' philosophical objections that have been thrown at it – Anselm's argument potentially bears a valid interpretation, albeit one that cannot refute the atheist (e.g., because it proves the instantiation of [Aurelius] rather than [God]). For an interesting discussion of the implications of various readings of the crucial sentence, see Mann (2012, especially III).

that concept which, *if it were instantiated*, would reach that ultimate level of greatness. And this is not enough for the purposes of Anselm's argument, for if the atheist is only considering [God] as reaching greatness of level *G* hypothetically, then he cannot be forced to consider [God] as genuinely instantiated *in reality*.

To put this another way, the theist is attempting to persuade the atheist that reference has been made to a concept of such unsurpassable greatness *G* that it can only be a concept of *instantiated* divinity. Obviously the atheist does not accept that any concept *actually* reaches this level of greatness, but he is persuadable that reference can be made to what the theist has in mind by reference to its *hypothetical* greatness. Thus the concept can be identified – in the thought of both the theist and the atheist – as the concept that *can be thought* to reach such a level of greatness. But having used this ploy to convince the atheist that reference to the concept in question is achievable, the theist cannot *simultaneously* claim that the achievement of reference to such a supremely great concept then inevitably implies that concept's *actual* instantiation. As before, he cannot have it both ways against the atheist: the greatness of the relevant concept can be assessed either *in reality* or *hypothetically*, but not both at the same time. If assessed in reality, the atheist will not accept that any concept at all reaches level *G* of greatness. If assessed hypothetically, the atheist may well accept that the concept [God] *can be thought* to reach such a level of greatness (by thinking of it as instantiated), but since this is only *hypothetical* greatness, he is not forced to accept that such greatness is *really* reached, and hence he cannot be forced to accept that the concept is *really* instantiated.[31]

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[31] In Millican (2004: §8) and (2007: §2), I suggest that a similar sort of dilemma can be applied against many other Ontological Arguments (including those of Descartes and Plantinga: see Millican (2004: 469–70)). The arguments in question first purport to make reference to some 'entity' (concept, essence, nature, type, or whatever) whose 'reality' (actuality, existence, instantiation, or whatever) is to be proved; they then aim to demonstrate that the entity in question cannot fail to be real. Critics of such arguments have tended to focus on challenging the theoretical framework within which they are couched (e.g., whether it is legitimate to talk of non-existent things, or to treat existence as a property). But a more straightforward attack is to accept the theoretical framework and then simply ask: 'Is it necessary, in order to qualify as the entity referred to, that the entity in question should *really* exist as described?'. If the answer is 'yes', then there will be serious questions over whether successful reference is achieved in the first place; if 'no', then the inference to reality fails. Insisting on an answer to this dilemma can inhibit the proponent of the Ontological Argument from trying to have it both ways, adopting one interpretation when arguing that reference succeeds, and another when arguing that successful reference implies real existence.

4.4 The Seductive Ambiguity of Anselm's Formula

We have now seen that proper consideration of Anselm's Ontological Argument requires clarity about two important distinctions: between *characterization* and *description* of a concept (in Section 3.1 above) and between *hypothetical* and *actual* greatness (in Section 4.3). It is easy to conflate these, since the characterizing descriptions of a concept X tell us what properties an X will have *if there is one*, while the external descriptions typically pick out the concept in terms of its *actual* properties. But they are not the same distinction, and we have seen that Anselm's argument can be framed without violating the first of them (by unambiguously interpreting his formula in terms of *external* descriptions) yet in a way that trades on a conflation between hypothetical and actual properties.

Most versions of the Ontological Argument fall foul of the first distinction, and can be disposed of relatively straightforwardly once that is recognized. Anselm's version is more tenacious, and his clever wording also makes it especially easy to overlook the second distinction, because the phrase 'can be thought' is interpretable in two quite different ways. When we survey the range of concept-greatnesses that 'can be thought' with a view to identifying the relevant maximum, we might intend to consider:

(i) *the maximum greatness of all thinkable concepts (as they stand)*;

or we might wish to cast our net wider, to:

(ii) *the maximum greatness of any thinkable concept in any thinkable scenario*.

On interpretation (i), *the greatest concept that can be thought* will be whichever concept *is in fact* the greatest, which the atheist (assuming PSE for simplicity here) will take to be [Aurelius]. On interpretation (ii) – superficially more promisingly for the theist – it will be [God], since this concept *can be thought* to be supremely great (i.e., in the thinkable scenario that theism is true). But the atheist can happily accept this too, because if [God] qualifies as *the greatest concept that can be thought* only in virtue of its *hypothetical* greatness, then he cannot be forced to infer that the concept so described must also be supremely great *in reality*. What the atheist should refuse to accept, however, is the theist's mixing of the actual and hypothetical domains, by considering:

(iii) the greatness of that thinkable concept which is (as things stand) at least as great as any concept can be thought to be.

Note the significant change here: whereas interpretations (i) and (ii) straight-forwardly select the maximum greatness from some *consistent* domain of

concepts and their degrees of greatness, interpretation (iii) purports to select – from a *restricted* domain (i.e., thinkable concepts and their *current* degree of greatness) – a concept whose greatness reaches the maximum that is achievable in a *vastly extended* domain (i.e., the degrees of greatness that any thinkable concepts can be thought to reach, in *any possible* scenario). To suppose that (iii) even succeeds in achieving reference, therefore, is to make a very substantial assumption, namely, that some concept *currently reaches* that supreme level of greatness that could only be reached by an *actually instantiated* concept of an omniperfect being. The atheist can reasonably deny this assumption, and thus insist that (iii) fails to refer: in his view, *there is no concept that great.*

This discussion shows that Anselm's key formula, *that-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought*, can be understood in at least three different ways depending on the implied scope of the phrase 'can be thought'. These different interpretations can be neatly schematized as follows:
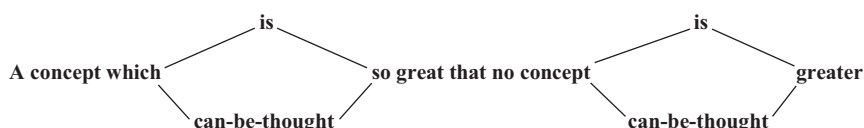
Interpretation (i) involves choosing 'is' at both selection points, thus focusing consistently on the *actual* greatness of thinkable concepts.[32] Interpretation (ii) involves choosing 'can-be-thought' at both selection points, thus focusing consistently on the wider domain of concepts' greatnesses across the entire range of thinkable scenarios. Interpretation (iii) involves selecting 'is' at the first selection point and 'can-be-thought' at the second, thus illicitly taking for granted that some concept *actually* reaches the maximal level of greatness that can be reached in any thinkable scenario. The fact that these three interpretations – of such contrasting philosophical significance – can all be represented so easily within a single structure illustrates the seductive slipperiness of Anselm's formula. If this crucial ambiguity goes unnoticed, then his argument can appear to succeed.[33]

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[32] Note that even on this reading, 'can be thought' in Anselm's formula is not redundant, since it clarifies that all thinkable concepts are being considered – we are not restricted to concepts that are *actually* thought.

[33] Logan (2009: 170, 181) argues that Anselm's formula *something-TWNG* – abbreviated to the atomic term 'X' – is intended to provide a uniquely suitable 'middle term of a syllogism that establishes the existence of God', this syllogism taking the form: 'God is X, X is F, therefore God is F.' Interpretatively this seems plausible, especially in the light of Logan's discussion of the prior logical tradition, but even if correct as an account of Anselm's own thinking, it cannot vindicate his argument. For if there is an ambiguity in the formula – which clearly there is – then it cannot

But if he is forced to disambiguate his formula, then the argument decisively fails – albeit for different reasons – under every interpretation.[34]

5 Conclusion

Anselm's Ontological Argument fails, as any such argument must, since it attempts to reach a substantial conclusion about a really existing (and not merely abstract) entity by *a priori* reasoning, starting merely from the understanding of his key formula. It would be astonishing if such an argument could genuinely work, and it is no surprise that few contemporary philosophers take this possibility seriously.[35] But nevertheless Anselm's argument itself deserves to be studied carefully, not only because of its historical influence, but also because it is so subtle and fascinating. It bears interpretation in various ways, highlighting a range of logical issues that have stimulated profound philosophical and logical developments, whether by defenders who have wished to represent it faithfully and sympathetically (e.g., within 'Meinongian' frameworks), or by sceptics who have wished to refute it decisively (e.g., Bertrand Russell).[36]

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properly be treated as an unanalysed atomic term which has the same meaning and reference throughout.

[34] William of Ockham may have been the first to detect an ambiguity in Anselm's formula: 'Something's being that than which a greater cannot be thought has two senses: In one sense it means that nothing which can be thought is in fact greater. In another sense it means that it is not possible for something to be thought which would be greater if it existed. In the first sense Anselm's argument proves its conclusion. Formulated as follows, "Nothing which does not exist in reality is in fact greater than what exists in reality; therefore, that than which a greater cannot be thought exists in reality", the inference certainly holds good, on the assumption that in existing things the series of one thing greater than another does not go to infinity. Further, if that than which a greater cannot be thought exists in reality, since everybody agrees that the greatest of the items which are thought is God, it follows that God exists in reality' (*Quodlibet* VII, qu. 15, 5.2.4, Bosley and Tweedale 2006, pp. 119–20). Ockham here clearly identifies interpretation (i), and follows Scotus (note 29 above) in accepting PSE to render it valid. His second interpretation seems most likely to be (ii), but this is less clear because he does not go on to analyse its implications within Anselm's argument.

[35] Despite recent challenges to the orthodoxy inherited from 'Hume's Fork' – the famous distinction between *relations of ideas* and *matters of fact* (Hume (1748/2007: §4.1–2)) – most would agree that *a thought cannot both possess the certainty that comes from being known* a priori *through ideas alone, while also at the same time conveying substantial factual knowledge of the empirical world*. The general failure of attempts to circumvent this – most famously by Kant in his quest for the 'synthetic *a priori*' – justifies serious scepticism about the possibility of a successful Ontological Argument. For discussion of Hume's Fork, Kant and the contemporary challenges, see Millican (2017).

[36] The reference to Russell is in recognition that the Ontological Argument seems to have had a significant impact on his thought, and thus on the development of twentieth-century logic and philosophy (see Millican (2004: §9)).

Some of the objections to Anselm's argument are common to many other variants of the Ontological Argument, and of these perhaps the most important is the one discussed in Section 3 above and anticipated by Kant. This applies to arguments (such as Descartes's) that trade on a conflation between *characterizing* and *external* descriptions, first *defining* the concept that suits them in terms of the desired characteristic properties, and then presuming – usually without observing any logical gap – that the concept itself can therefore be truly *described* as possessing the same properties. The fallacy here is subtle, and especially hard to spot if the properties in question are ones that can plausibly be applied to both concepts and objects, such as *greatness*, *perfection* or *impossibility*.[37] But we have seen that it can readily be exposed by choosing less metaphysical characterizing properties: the concept of the funniest joke imaginable is not itself a joke, nor funny; and the concept of the lowest uninteresting natural number is not itself a natural number, nor uninteresting.[38] Likewise it cannot be assumed that the concept of a being with all perfections will itself have all perfections, nor that the concept of a supremely great being will itself be supremely great. Moreover this problem cannot be evaded by refusing to distinguish between characterizing and external descriptions (for example by insisting that the relevant mental and external entities are literally one and the same and therefore share the same properties), because this will simply open the door to paradox and parody.[39]

What makes Anselm's argument especially intriguing, however, is the tenacity with which it is able to survive recognition of this Kantian distinction. For it can remain seductive even when the descriptive content of Anselm's key formula is interpreted as unambiguously *external* rather than *characterizing*. It does this by exploiting three distinctive tricks. First, the formula identifies the relevant concept as a *superlative*: take all the concepts in

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[37] The well-known Conceivability Principle – especially prominent in Hume's philosophy (see Millican (2017: §5)) – implies that a conceptual content which is self-contradictory (e.g., *round square*) is also *inconceivable*, so impossibility of instantiation goes together with impossibility of conception. In Proslogion III and IV, Anselm himself argues in this way, maintaining that God cannot even genuinely be conceived not to exist.

[38] This point is nicely made by a well-known and amusing paradox. Low natural numbers such as 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 etc. are obviously *interesting* in various ways, for example 1 is the multiplicative identity, 2 is the only even prime, 3 is equal to the sum of the numbers below it, 4 is the first composite number, 5 is the hypotenuse of the smallest Pythagorean triad, 6 is a perfect number, and so on. Carrying on in this way, we should presumably eventually encounter a number that is *not* interesting, but 'lowest uninteresting natural number' seems itself to be a very interesting property!

[39] See, for example, the problems discussed in Sections 1.2 and 2.1 above. There are several famous parodies of the Ontological Argument which purport to use similar logic to 'prove' the existence of such implausible entities as a supremely excellent island (Gaunilo), a perfect Pegasus (Gassendi) or an unsurpassably evil being. I call these 'Gaunilo *reductios*' (Millican (2004: 445)).

some domain, rank them by greatness, and take the top scorer (or a top scorer, if there is a tie). As long as the domain is non-empty, and greatness is an acceptable measure, then it looks as though this has to succeed in achieving reference. Secondly, the specified domain includes all concepts that 'can be thought', thus apparently embracing all conceivable degrees of greatness, and ensuring that the top scorer will be truly impressive. Thirdly, as we have just seen, the formula is phrased in such a way that the 'can be thought' operator may be applied with variable scope, yielding a crucial ambiguity. This permits both a *modest* interpretation which confines attention to thinkable concepts with their *actual* degrees of greatness, but also a far more *ambitious* interpretation which aims to persuade us that one of these concepts reaches the maximal degree of *thinkable* greatness. Recognizing this ambiguity is crucial, because until it has been identified and neutralized, it is impossible to pin down exactly where or how the argument fails, which could happen in one of at least three different ways: either proving the *reality* of a non-divine entity, or failing to go beyond the *thinkability* of a divine entity, or simply begging the question.

Schopenhauer (1813: ch. II, §7) aptly described the Ontological Argument as a 'charming joke' or piece of magic trickery. Through his cleverly ambiguous formula, Anselm cunningly smuggles a huge metaphysical rabbit into his hat, only to reveal it at the denouement by supposedly combining the logical force of the modest interpretation with the impressive conclusion of the ambitious interpretation. In any Ontological Argument we know that there has to be a cheat somewhere, but in Anselm's case the trick is so clever as to impress us even after we have seen how it is done.