

Thinking the Unthinkable: Anselm's *Excitatio Mentis*

©2002 James S. Cutsinger

Lecture delivered at Thomas Aquinas College

20 April 2001

“I was standing today in the dark toolshed.” So begins one of C. S. Lewis’s most important essays. “The sun was shining outside,” he continues,

and through the crack at the top of the door there came a sunbeam. From where I stood that beam of light, with the specks of dust floating in it, was the most striking thing in the place. Everything else was almost pitch-black. I was seeing the beam, not seeing things by it. Then I moved, so that the beam fell on my eyes. Instantly, the whole previous picture vanished. I saw no toolshed, and (above all) no beam. Instead I saw, framed in the irregular cranny at the top of the door, green leaves moving on the branches of a tree outside and beyond that, 90 odd million miles away, the sun. Looking *along* the beam and looking *at* the beam are very different experiences.¹

Lewis goes on to observe that this difference applies to much more than just sunlight, and in doing so he calls our attention to three things which look very different depending on how you approach them. Love, mathematics, and faith can each be considered either from the outside or from the inside, that is either by looking just *at* them or by entering into their beams and thus looking *along* them. The difference, as Lewis points out, is profound. “A young man meets a girl. The whole world looks different when he sees her. Her voice reminds him of something he has been trying to remember all his life, and ten minutes casual chat with her is more precious than all the favors that all other women in the world could grant.” But then along comes a psychologist, who describes the experience from the outside. “For him,” Lewis writes, “it is all an affair of the young man’s genes and a recognized biological stimulus.” Or take mathematics. “The mathematician sits thinking, and to him it seems that he is contemplating timeless and spaceless truths.” But the brain surgeon, “if he could look inside the mathematician’s head, would find nothing timeless and spaceless there—only tiny movements in the grey matter.” Or

yet again, how about the Christian who is approaching the Eucharist? To that person it is Christ Himself he receives and in whom he is blessed to participate. Meanwhile, however, all that the historian of religions can see is some bread and some wine, and a ritual of the type so-and-so.

I begin with these observations from Lewis because it seems to me that the distinction he draws is crucial to our understanding the argument which I have been asked to discuss with you this evening, St Anselm's ontological proof in the *Proslogion* for the existence of God. It has been my conviction for many years that in order to feel the complete force of this proof, and in order to get at least a glimpse of how the saint himself understood it to work, we must be very careful to approach it as lovers do love, or as mathematicians do numbers, or as Christians do the sacrament, and not in the purely external manner of psychologists, surgeons, and historians. And what this means is that we must place ourselves in a position where we can look *along* the argument, and not simply *at* it. To be more precise, we must take the proof's definition of God, as That-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought, turn that definition as it were on its end, and then sight along its full length in the direction of God Himself. What this might mean I do not expect will be clear to you here at the outset, and indeed it may not be clear when I finish. Anselm's argument is one of the subtlest, most enigmatic, and most discussed in the entire history of Christian thought, and I do not imagine for a moment that a few comments from me will suffice to solve every problem. And besides, even if we *could* clear up every difficulty and reach a consensus as to just what he means, that would be only the start. The best we can hope for tonight is to place ourselves at the correct angle of vision. But if you really want to see the Sun through the cranny at the top of Anselm's door, you will have to do the looking yourself.

As I am sure you can tell, I myself am convinced that the argument works, and in fact I *have* been ever since first encountering it as junior in college. I could not have told you *why* I thought this, and I know that at the time the proof had not yet worked its magic on me. And yet it seemed to me most unlikely even then—to quote Arthur McGill, one of my doctoral mentors at Harvard—that “a man of [Anselm's] obvious intellectual capacity and dialectical skill could search for an argument with intense effort over a long period of time and then produce only a pure paralogism, which he would mistakenly find so compelling for his purposes that he would see it as a gift from God Himself”.²

For those of you who have not yet read the *Proslogion*, McGill is referring to what Anselm himself tells us about the proof in the Preface to his book. The saint explains that he had

long been searching for “one single argument” that would “suffice to prove that God really exists”. But he goes on to admit that “as long and as diligently” as he strove to find such a proof, it nonetheless “eluded [his] acutest thinking completely”. Frustrated, he endeavored to put aside his earlier hopes, lest these continuing efforts obstruct his prayers and prevent him from working on other ideas. Nevertheless the more he tried to ignore it, the more the idea of finding the proof forced itself on his mind, until “one day”, he writes, “when I was quite worn out with resisting its importunacy, there came to me, in the very conflict of my thoughts, what I had despaired of finding”.³ Anselm’s biographer, his fellow monk Eadmer, adds the further detail that it was in the midst of the nightly office of Matins, sometime between midnight and roughly two in the morning, that Anselm finally found what he had been looking for. “Suddenly,” Eadmer writes, “during the night vigil, the grace of God illuminated his heart and the matter became clear to his understanding, and immense joy and jubilation filled his whole being.”⁴ By the way, this same biographer informs us that he once chanced upon St Anselm praying in his cell, completely engulfed in a ball of fire, and in what is doubtless one of the greatest understatements of all time, Eadmer simply comments that he was very surprised by this, for it was not the usual hour for prayer!

Now all of this seems to me most significant. It cannot mean nothing that a first-rate mind is interrupted in the middle of its prayers by an idea which its own thinking had been unable to reach. It cannot mean nothing that this mind is the mind of a saint, who regarded the idea as a revelation from God Himself, and who wrote the *Proslogion* precisely in order to communicate the wonder of this initial experience, judging that “what had given me such joy to discover would afford pleasure, if it were written down, to anyone who might read it”.⁵ Nor can it mean nothing that the argument comes in the context of prayer, a prayer, beginning in Chapter 1 of the book, in which God is asked to teach the “heart” where and how it might seek Him, and in which we readers are exhorted to “enter into the inner chamber of [the] soul”, to “escape for a little while from the tumult of [our] thoughts”, and to submit to an *excitatio mentis*, a rousing of our minds, which we are promised will lead by God’s grace to a “vision” of “inaccessible Light”.⁶ Whatever else it might be, this is simply *not* what we usually mean by a proof. You may pray for Divine guidance when doing your assignments in Euclid, but the propositions themselves are not prayers.

Before going any further, a short summary of Anselm's argument is clearly in order. I should say that when I speak of his argument, what I have in mind primarily is the single paragraph which constitutes the *Proslogion's* second chapter, and which I have copied and put before you this evening. There are those who say that Chapter 2 is only part of the proof, and that the full argument extends to Chapter 4. Others again insist that there are actually two different proofs, one in Chapter 2, which seeks to demonstrate "That God Truly Exists", and a second in Chapter 3, which attempts to show "That God Cannot Be Thought Not To Exist". While there is much to be said for these interpretations, in order to make my task somewhat easier I propose to concentrate our attention almost entirely upon the second chapter, with just a few glances at other parts of the *Proslogion* and at Anselm's later *Reply* to Gaunilo. I believe that everything essential to the argument can be found in just this one paragraph, though obviously it makes good sense to bring in other comments of the author when they can help to shed light on his meaning.

The argument proceeds through eight basic steps.

1. God is *that-than-which-nothing-greater can-be-thought*.
2. That-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought *can be thought*.
3. Whatever can be thought exists in the mind.
4. Whatever exists in the mind either exists in the mind alone or exists also in reality.
5. To exist in reality is *greater* than to exist in the mind alone.
6. That-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought *cannot* exist in the mind alone.
7. That-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought must exist *in reality*.
8. Therefore *God* must exist.

If you have never before encountered this argument, it may be especially difficult at first hearing to grasp what has happened in the crucial sixth step, which says that That-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought cannot exist in the mind alone. As it turns out, this step is actually the conclusion of a further argument, embedded within the larger proof and taking the form of a *reductio ad absurdum*. Suppose (this is how the *reductio* works) that That-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought exists in the mind alone—that God, in other words, is precisely what the atheist says, a figment of man's imagination. But if this were true, then any existing thing would be greater than That-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought since, as step five indicates, it is greater to exist in reality than to exist in the mind alone. It would therefore

follow—to pick just one example in order to drive the point home—that your favorite TAC tutor, who exists in reality, must be greater than God. But this is clearly absurd. While wishing to take nothing away from the high quality of your faculty, something has obviously gone wrong in this sequence! That-than-which-*nothing-greater-can-be-thought* cannot be something than which a greater *can* be thought, for this is a contradiction in terms. To put matters right, you have only two choices: either to deny the claim that existence in reality is greater than existence in the mind alone, or to admit that the initial supposal was mistaken, and thus to agree with St Anselm that That-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought *cannot* exist in the mind alone, but must exist instead in reality.

These are the bare bones of the proof. As perhaps you can guess, two steps have been especially controversial among interpreters of the argument and have been much discussed by various critics of the *Proslogion*: the already-emphasized fifth, that it is greater to exist in reality than to exist in the mind alone; but also the second, that That-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought can actually be thought. As it turns out, these two points are very closely related, and I shall be attempting to explain and defend them as I go along. But having mentioned the critics, I think it wise to turn at once to the objections put forward by the three best known opponents of the proof: a monk named Gaunilo, a contemporary of Anselm's, who composed a short reply to the argument *On Behalf of the Fool*; St Thomas Aquinas, who (as many of you doubtless know) criticizes the proof in several places, including the *Summa Theologiae*, Part I, Question 2, Article 1, the *Summa contra Gentiles*, Book I, Chapters 10 and 11, and the treatise *De Veritate*, Question 10, Article 12; and the philosopher Kant, who in his *Critique of Pure Reason* discussed what he called “The Impossibility of an Ontological Proof of the Existence of God”. As it happens, each of these authors is responsible for certain misinterpretations of the proof, misinterpretations which on the strength of their authority have persisted to this day. It is therefore important, as I undertake to explain to you how the proof is meant to work, to set aside several of the more common criticisms as to how it fails.

The monk Gaunilo errs in two ways. Those of you who have read his short response *On Behalf of the Fool* may remember that his first mistake consists in misreading Anselm's definition of God. Where the *Proslogion* speaks of God as an *aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari potest*, that is, Something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought, Gaunilo took the liberty of substituting his own very different expression, namely, *aliquid omnibus maius*, that is,

“Something-which-is-greater-than-everything”.⁷ But these two formulas are by no means the same, and St Anselm was obliged to underscore the distinction in his *Reply* to Gaunilo. “You often reiterate,” he writes

that I say that That-which-is-greater-than-everything exists in the mind, and that if it *is* in the mind, it exists *also* in reality. . . . However, nowhere in all that I have said will you find such an argument. For That-which-is-greater-than-everything and That-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought are not equivalent for the purpose of proving the real existence of the thing spoken of.⁸

The problem, as I hope you can see, is that in Gaunilo’s formula, unlike Anselm’s, God is described in relation to other existent things, and this results in a certain demotion of God, who (for all we know from this substitute formula) is simply at the top of a pyramid of contingent entities. Something which is merely greater than all other things could without contradiction be itself a contingent thing, differing from the others only in degree. After all, even the atheist will agree that something exists which is greater than everything else—perhaps some vast interstellar object, or the largest galaxy, or the physical universe as a whole. Please notice too that Gaunilo’s substitution assumes that God is a member of the set of actual entities, and thus it begs the question of whether God really exists. Ironically, this is precisely what many critics have charged St Anselm with doing, though in fact, in *his* definition, God is described strictly in terms of what is conceivable, and therefore logically possible, not in terms of what is already agreed to be actual. Now of course, once we have proven that That-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought *does* exist, we can see that it must also be That-which-is-greater-than-everything. Anselm himself insists upon this point in Chapter 14. But our recognition of the equivalence results from a further deduction, and is not a part of his initial proof.

Gaunilo’s second, and more famous, mistake consists in comparing God to a “Lost Island”, a paradisaal isle, “blessed with all manner of priceless riches and delights in abundance”. Now, says Gaunilo, such an island can most certainly be entertained in our thought, and thus it exists in the mind. But it does not follow, just because we can imagine such a place, that it must exist in reality. “If someone wishes thus to persuade me that this island really exists beyond doubt,” writes the objecting monk, “I should either think that he was joking, or I should find it hard to decide which of us I ought to judge the bigger fool.”⁹ You can see how he wants to apply this to God. Just because we can think about Something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-

thought, it does not follow (says Gaunilo) that it must exist in reality. Well as it turns out, this was a classic case of putting your foot in your mouth. It is hard to know whether our saint was amused or irritated by his fellow monk's objection, but his *Reply* on this point has an unexpected edge. "I truly promise," Anselm wrote back, "that if anyone should discover for me something existing either in reality or in the mind alone *except That-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought* to which the logic of my argument would apply, then I shall find that Lost Island and give it, never more to be lost, to that person!"¹⁰

His point, of course, is that no specific entity, however grandly imagined, can take the place of God in his formula. To give Gaunilo as much credit as possible, perhaps what he had in mind was an "island than which there is *no greater island*", but this is obviously something very different from the definition in step one of the argument, for there the subject is compared to everything possible and not to a predicate of the same genus. And besides, if this *is* Gaunilo's meaning, it tells us nothing that we did not know already, since at any given moment there must obviously be some island somewhere whose greatness in size, or lushness, or treasure, or some similar measure exceeds that of all other islands. On the other hand, if what Gaunilo really intended to say is that some island might exist which is greater than *everything else of whatever kind*, then his objection descends from being merely fatuous to being truly reprehensible. Here I shall leave it to St Bonaventure, a fellow defender of Anselm, to provide the necessary rebuttal:

Against the objection of an island than which nothing better or greater can be conceived, we must say that there is no similarity [between this subject and this predicate]. For when I say "a *being* than which nothing greater can be conceived", there is no contradiction between the subject and the predicate, so that this being can be conceived in a rational way. But when I say "an *island* than which nothing greater can be conceived", there *is* a contradiction between the subject and the predicate. For "island" refers to a defective being, while the predicate designates the most perfect of beings. Therefore since there is a direct contradiction here, this island is conceived *irrationally*, and in thinking it the mind is divided against itself. It is no wonder, therefore, that we cannot infer that this island exists in reality. It is otherwise, however, in the case of "God", since this is not in contradiction to the predicate.¹¹

Turning now to the other critics, St Thomas and Kant, we find that each of them presents two major objections, one of which he shares with the other. For the sake of brevity, I would like to take first their common criticism, which can easily be shown to be quite wide of the mark. I should perhaps mention, however—in their defense—that it is very doubtful whether Aquinas or Kant ever actually read the *Proslogion*. As you may remember, what Kant attempts to refute is (in his words) “the famous ontological argument of Descartes”—Kant, by the way, was the first person to use the word *ontological* in naming the proof—though in fact what he ends up talking about is yet another version of the proof put forward by “the celebrated Leibniz”, for whom the argument was of a purely analytical character.¹² St Thomas, by contrast, does mention Anselm by name, in his work *On the Truth*, but his source was probably a miscellany of isolated quotations from various works, including the *Proslogion*, compiled sometime in the 12th century in support of the idea that the existence of God need not be proven. For this is what Thomas believes that Anselm was saying, and why he includes mention of his definition when answering the question, in the *Summa Theologiae*, whether the existence of God is self-evident.

In any case, St Thomas and Kant are alike in criticizing the argument, or what they assume is the argument, for attempting to draw an inference concerning the *existence* of God from an *idea* of God. Let us grant, says Aquinas, that “everyone understands that by this word ‘God’ is signified Something than which nothing greater can be thought. Nevertheless, it does not therefore follow that he understands that what the word signifies exists actually, but only that it exists mentally.”¹³ As you can easily see from these words, St Thomas is under the impression that the proof aims to go directly from concept to fact, and hence from the purely mental existence of step three to the real existence of step eight. But this is obviously to ignore the intervening four points in my summary, and this is why I think it very doubtful that the Angelic Doctor ever laid eyes on the *Proslogion*. How otherwise could the man who thanked God for being able to understand every page he ever read have made so serious a mistake?

Kant registers the same basic complaint. He, too, is concerned that the argument obliges us to move directly, and analytically, from a notion in the mind to an existent being in the world. “It is evident,” he writes, “that the concept of an absolutely necessary being is a concept of pure reason, that is, a mere idea the objective reality of which is very far from being proved by the fact that reason requires it.”¹⁴ Once again, however, there is no indication that what Kant has in mind has any relation to Anselm. For one thing, as we have seen, Anselm does *not* define God as

necessary being; he will later deduce that He must in fact *be* necessary, but as with Gaunilo's formula—"That-which-is-greater-than-everything"—this fact about God plays no role in the argument of *Proslogion* 2. Furthermore, Anselm never says in his proof that God is a concept whose existence is required by the reason. I always tell my students, the best way to summarize the Critical Philosophy is to say that Nobody Can Know What Kant Can't, and here as so often the philosopher from Königsberg seems to have been projecting something of himself upon others, in this case his whole notion of "regulative ideas".

Neither St Thomas nor Kant is prepared to rest his case, however. Each has a second objection, and their additional criticisms, though I believe that they too can be answered, are considerably more pertinent to Anselm's actual argument. In fact, they cut to the very heart of his proof, helping to expose its true inner workings and revealing paradoxically its exceptional strength.

Allow me to take their objections in reverse chronological order, looking with you first at Kant. I fear that I must quote him at some length, for as you know a German philosopher requires much more space than a medieval saint to make his points! Kant writes as follows:

"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. . . . The proposition "God is omnipotent" contains two concepts, each of which has its object—God and omnipotence. The small word "is" adds no new predicate, but only serves to posit the predicate *in its relation* to the subject. If, now, we take the subject (God) with all its predicates (among which is omnipotence), and say "God is", or "There is a God", we attach no new predicate to the concept of God. . . . Nothing can have been added to the concept, which expresses merely what is possible, by my thinking its object (through the expression "it is") as given absolutely.

Kant then proceeds to a well-known and often repeated analogy: "A hundred real dollars do not contain the least coin more than a hundred possible dollars. For as the latter signify the concept, and the former the object and the positing of the object, should the former contain more than the latter, my concept would not, in that case, express the whole object, and would therefore not be an adequate concept of it." Hence, he concludes, "By whatever and by however many predicates we may think a thing . . . we do not make the least addition to the thing when we further declare that this thing *is*."¹⁵

Alright, there are a lot of words in that passage, but what exactly is the point, and how (if at all) is it relevant to Anselm's argument? The relevance as I see it is this. Granted that Kant did not himself have any firsthand acquaintance with Anselm, it seems to me that his observations are nonetheless valuable in forcing us to consider, more carefully than we might perhaps otherwise, the extremely important question of what constitutes *greatness* in the ontological proof. God has been defined as That-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought, but how are we to interpret this "greater", and how does it function in the proof? Kant has his own view of the matter. He supposes (I believe falsely) that the argument cheats in asking us to think about the predicate *is* as if it added something real to a subject, so that, in the statement "X is", X is to be regarded as somehow greater than the idea of X on its own. Now admittedly, whether or not Kant himself ever read the *Proslogion*, this is a legitimate reading of the argument, and a not uncommon one among the critics. But it is by no means the only possibility, nor grammatically the best. As I see it, Kant and those who follow him have been tripped up by a certain ambiguity in Anselm's syntax. If you would like to look with me, the ambiguity comes in line 17 of the Latin text of Chapter 2, and it is centered on the pronoun *quod*.

According to Anselm, even if That-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought exists in the mind alone, nevertheless *potest cogitari esse et in re, quod maius est*—even if That-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought exists in the mind alone, "it can be thought to exist in reality also, *which* is greater". Now as anyone can see, if one of your tutors had been grading Anselm's paper, using some version of Crossett's famous *Breviary*, he would have placed a small "r" next to the line containing *quod*, indicating very rightly an ambiguity of reference, for as matters stand, the antecedent of the pronoun is not terribly clear. It could in fact be either one of two things. Those who wish to use Kant against Anselm have taken "which" to refer to the entire preceding clause, *potest cogitari esse et in re*—"is able to be thought to exist in reality also"—and the sentence has been construed to mean that the thought that a thing exists in reality is greater than the bare notion of the thing. Thus we are asked to compare two concepts: the concept, let us say, of *what* a unicorn is with the concept *that* a unicorn is. But here is where Kant's objection comes in, that existence adds nothing new to the concept of something. I am not sure myself what sense it makes (if any) to describe a given thought as greater *qua* thought than some other thought, but even if this does have a meaning, Kant is surely right: the greatness of a concept in no way permits us to take the further step of concluding that the thing in question

exists in reality. Perhaps there *are* unicorns, but the fact that we can *think* it so does not *make* it so.

But notice please that another interpretation is possible, one which in fact is more reasonable from the point of view of good grammar. Let us assume instead that the antecedent of *quod* is the shorter and more proximate phrase *esse et in re*, or perhaps even just the single noun *re*, which comes just before *quod*. If this is how you read the passage, then what Anselm is saying is that existence in reality—*esse in re*—is greater than existence in the mind alone—*in solo intellectu*. Thus what is *maius*, or greater, is not simply some thought in relation to another thought, but objective reality in relation to our subjective notions. Given this interpretation, you are no longer comparing two things inside your head, but instead what is confined to that head with what is not, and you are being asked to admit that what you merely think to be so is less than what is independent of whether you think it or not.

Here a further choice presents itself. On the one hand, the passage may be read as saying that it is greater for *a given thing* to exist in reality than for *that same thing* to exist in the mind alone. There is certainly no grammatical reason to think that this is not the sense intended. If it is, then what we are being asked to compare are, for example, real trees with imagined trees, or real bicycles with imagined bicycles, and we are meant to agree that the real versions are greater than their merely fancied counterparts. This way of looking at the matter works fairly well with physical objects like the ones I have mentioned, but not so well perhaps when you consider things like love, or music, or what we might call facts of mind. It is not so evident, for example, that being depressed in reality is greater than simply thinking you are depressed. But I do not wish for us to get bogged down in such questions, for there is another, more straightforward way to interpret the antecedent of *quod*, and it is the way I believe which St Anselm intended.

When the proof says that existence *in re* is greater than existence solely *in intellectu*, it makes much better sense to assume that the reality referred to is reality as such, and not the existence of some particular thing, whether a tree or a mood. The point, in other words, is that it is greater for *anything* to exist in reality than for *anything* to exist solely in the mind. As you will remember, this was precisely how I formulated step five in my summary. To exist in reality, I said, is greater than to exist in the mind alone. If however I am correct in this reading, then Kant's concerns—that the argument is smuggling existence into the concept of something, or supposing that a concept *qua* concept is greater insofar as it includes the idea of existence—are

in no way germane. On the contrary, Anselm's teaching is that all real things *as a class* are greater than all merely imaginary or mental things *as a class*, and it follows (if this is true) that in comparing any particular *real* thing with any particular *mental* thing the real thing must always be the greater. The tiniest mote of dust in the air, floating in the beam of sunlight in C. S. Lewis's toolshed, is therefore greater than the most magnificent of imagined palaces.

Now unless I am very mistaken about what goes on in this college, most of you in this room will readily assent to this claim. If nothing else, a traditional Catholic education will have taught you that something which is objectively real, and thus independent of the human mind, is necessarily greater than something produced by that mind alone. If I were speaking to subjective idealists, or a group of solipsists—can there really be a *group* of solipsists?—or to some similar audience (call them what you will) who doubt whether anything exists beyond man's consciousness and whether, on the off chance it does, it deserves the precedence, then my approach would need to be very different. Here, however, I shall assume that we need not waste our time on so fundamental a principle. Of course, even though a person may accede to this principle, it does not follow that he will have grasped its full meaning, nor *a fortiori* that he will have discerned its implications for the ontological argument. Let me therefore try to state what I believe two of those implications to be.

In affirming that real existence is greater than imaginary existence, we are affirming in the first place that existence itself is a matter of degrees. To use the language of the western tradition, we are attesting to the truth of a Great Chain of Being, and we are saying that certain links in that Chain have more existence or a greater reality than others. That this is St Anselm's own meaning, and that it is in precisely this hierarchical way that he envisions the universe, is clear from what he tells us elsewhere, in a treatise called the *Monologion*:

If we think of some substance that is alive and sentient and rational to be deprived of its reason, then of its sentience, then of its life, and finally of the bare existence that remains, who would not understand that the substance that is destroyed, little by little, is gradually brought to less and less existence, and ultimately to nonexistence? If what is removed, however, respectively reduces a being to less and less existence, when added to it, in relevant order, it leads to greater and greater existence.¹⁶

Notice please that Anselm's question is purely rhetorical: "Who would *not* understand," he asks, that a man is more real than a horse, and that a horse is more real than a rose, and that a rose is more real than a rock?—for this of course is precisely the series traced by the several deprivations he mentions, first reason, then sentience, then life. He cannot imagine that anyone would be unable to see this. I suspect that for many, however, the question is anything but rhetorical. Most of us are probably like Hamlet, assuming that "to be or not to be" *is* the question, and hence behaving as though things either exist or not, with no blurring between. However many great books you have read, the modern world has exacted a considerable toll on your thinking, and though you may readily admit that a man and a horse differ in size, and anatomy, and intelligence, and biochemistry, and genetic information, it is probably much harder to see how the man is more *real*. And yet see this we must if we are to have any hope of following St Anselm's lead and understanding his proof.

There is something else, however, which we must also see. It too follows from the fifth step of the argument, and yet it is something you may find even harder to accept. If it is greater to exist in reality than to exist only in the mind, then existence (we have said) must be a thing of degrees. But this understanding of ontological greatness carries with it a further crucial implication. When we say that existence *in re* is greater than existence *in intellectu*, what we are saying is that the existence of something in the mind, even if it exists nowhere else, is nonetheless itself a genuine mode of existence. In comparing existence in reality with an existence just in the mind, Anselm is not comparing things which *do* exist with things which *do not*, because in fact he *could not*. For two things, or two classes of things, are comparable, and may be connected grammatically by the comparative form of an adjective—in this case by the word *maius* or "greater"—only if they are alike in at least one respect, and being and nonbeing are alike in no respect. Comparing them is therefore like asking the question, Which is more refreshing to drink after a long Summer hike: ice cold water bubbling forth from a mountain spring, or—the Pythagorean Theorem? Mathematical theorems may be refreshing in a metaphorical sense, but their refreshment is *not* to be imbibed in the manner of liquids, and so the question is nonsense. The comparison which is at stake in step five of the proof, the truth of which we very wisely accept in choosing not to be a solipsists, must (like all comparisons) have to do with degrees of a common being, and hence the only way that existence in reality can be greater than an existence which is just in the mind is if that existence in the mind is *not nothing*.

But can you see where this leads? If what exists in our minds is not nothing, then we are obliged to admit that ideas themselves have some kind of ontological stature, and that even in its most shadowy moments, our thinking participates in what is truly real. This of course is the teaching of Plato, propounded most famously in the Divided Line of the *Republic*, Book VI. In his view, as I believe most of you know, the Great Chain of Being is also a Great Chain of Knowing, including among the links near its bottom, not only the empirical world and our corresponding beliefs, but even our merest fancies and musings—unicorns and tooth-fairies and all the other shadows which are cast by the shadows of shadows. This too is a teaching which St Anselm simply takes for granted. He knows very well that thoughts and things thought are two sides of one coin, being fashioned from a single substance, and that even things which exist just in the mind—the things which fall short of an objective or independent existence—nonetheless have a certain degree of reality. He also knows, I should add, that in order to know what is higher in reality, a man must know *with* what is higher in himself. But I ask you, Is this not also a very strange teaching? Most of us labor under the debilitating effects of a very different philosophy, and here again it may take a special effort of attention and imagination if we are to take this view seriously. For us, things in the mind may be true or false, coherent or incoherent, adequate or inadequate to the reality around us. But that they can actually *participate* in that reality, being themselves either more or less real—this will sound a very odd doctrine. What could it mean, and what might it have to do with Anselm’s argument?

Before trying to answer these questions—or, rather, before pointing us in a direction where the answer may lie—I think it best if we return to the critics. In order to advance, let us first go back.

As you will recall, the first criticism I discussed was one which is shared by Aquinas and Kant, both of whom fault the ontological argument for its alleged attempt to extract real existence directly from the definition of God. As I hope to have shown, however, our saintly defendant was nowhere near the scene of this particular crime. I then went on to examine a further objection of Kant’s having to do with the problem of adding existence to concepts, and this in turn led us to a discussion of the pronoun *quod* and its likely antecedents. My view (as I have explained) is that the pronoun refers to real existence, and not just to a concept of “is-ness”. But if this is true, then we are brought face to face with two flummoxing facts: that some things have a greater existence than others, and that ideas are in some fashion real. I would add, in

anticipation of our discussion to come, that these two facts are very closely related. For to understand the true meaning of ontological greatness is to understand as well how something *within* your mind can at the same time be *beyond* your mind. If we are to make any sense of this relationship, however, we would do well to pause and consider one final criticism, a criticism which obliges us to look more closely than we have so far at the second step of the proof.

As you will remember, the second step says that That-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought *can be thought*. It is possible, in other words, for us to think about something in such a way as to realize that we can think of nothing greater. But St Thomas disputes this claim, and his criticism runs in part as follows:

No difficulty 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.¹⁷

A number of things are going on in these two short sentences. As you may know, in its original context in the *Summa contra Gentiles*, the passage is part of a larger discussion having to do with self-evidence, with Aquinas once again insisting that our capacity to think of God does not imply that God must exist. For our purposes at the moment, however, I would like to isolate a different point. It is a relatively simple one, but it is expressed in a somewhat convoluted way, so let me try to paraphrase.

According to Thomas, “something greater can be thought than anything given in reality or in the intellect”. What he means, if I understand him correctly, is that it is always possible to think of something greater than any given thing. This, he believes, is a fundamental fact about our human powers of knowing, a fact which is clear to everyone—which (in his words) poses no “difficulty”—*except* for the person who supposes (wrongly) that there *is* something thinkable than which a greater cannot be thought. But no, says Aquinas, human thought is such that there can always be some greater thought. You can see this clearly with numbers. No matter how huge the number we may have in mind, we can always add 1 to it. And so it is with any other idea. No matter how seemingly perfect or unsurpassably vast or mind-numbingly grand a given concept may be, my intelligence is so made that I am able to imagine something even more perfect, or vast, or grand. But if this is true, then it is *not* possible to think of something than which nothing greater can be thought—something so great that it is without a superior. And yet of course this is

precisely what St Anselm has asserted in his proof. He has told us that That-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought *can be thought*, and thus must exist at least in our mind.

As I hope you can see, this is by far the most serious objection we have yet encountered. For if Aquinas is right, then the ontological argument actually fails before it ever begins. If it is the case that the only things I can think about are in their very nature surpassable, then Anselm is asking me to do the impossible, to think of something which cannot be thought of. He wants me to hold in focus something which cannot be focused on, to have a definite conception of something which is not at all definite. The very formula itself—the phrase “That-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought”—is therefore fundamentally incoherent and unintelligible, and if that is so, then clearly everything else in *Proslogion 2* is irrelevant. As it turns out, the monk Gaunilo was very much on St Thomas’s side on this issue, and I would like to look with you once again at his apology *On Behalf of the Fool*. In his case, of course, we have the benefit of St Anselm’s *Reply*, and perhaps on this basis we can guess what the author of the *Proslogion* must have said when Aquinas finally joined him in heaven!

According to Gaunilo, a firm distinction should be drawn between the definition *per se* of the argument and what it is that the definition purports to refer to. He has no quarrel with those who suppose that the former *can* be thought. After all, each of the individual words in the formula is a meaningful Latin (or English) word, and the grammar of the phrase is such that we can hold all these words together in our minds. In this sense we can understand what the *Proslogion* is talking about, and in this sense Anselm is justified in his claim in Chapter 2 that when the Fool hears the words “That-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought”, even he “understands what he hears, and what he understands is in his mind”. But let us go no further, warns Gaunilo. For it is something quite different if we claim that the Fool, or for that matter anyone else, has in mind some definite meaning or specific point of reference when he is thinking this formula. In fact he does not, and *cannot*. For when one is thinking truly of something, Gaunilo writes, “one thinks not so much the word itself, which is indeed a real thing (that is to say, the sound of the letters or syllables), as of the meaning of the word which is heard.” But Anselm’s definition of God cannot be approached this way. “It is not thought of in the way of one who knows what is meant by that expression—thought of, that is, in terms of the thing [which is signified].” And so we end up spinning round and round in a vicious mental circle, trying to think about this peculiar *aliquid* “in the way of one who does not really know

this object but thinks of it in terms of an affection of his mind produced by hearing the spoken words, and tries to imagine what the words he has heard might mean.” In promulgating his formula, St Anselm has thus tricked us into assuming that we really know what he is talking about, whereas in fact That-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought “cannot even be thought in the true and real sense”.¹⁸

Now I realize that this is somewhat different from the complaint of Aquinas, and yet behind these two objections, one finds much the same understanding of what it means to entertain an idea. Neither of Anselm’s critics seems able to imagine how we might think about something in any other way than as a particular *datum* of consciousness. You can see very clearly that this is the reason for Gaunilo’s rejection of the proof. Ask me to think of a man, he writes, and I am able to do it, even if I do not know whether that man exists, for “I could nevertheless think about him in his very reality as a man by means of that specific or generic notion by which I know what a man is or men are.” With God, though, we are faced with a totally different situation. “Neither do I know the reality itself,” he tells Anselm, “nor can I form an idea from some other things like it since, as you say yourself, it is such that nothing *could* be like it.”¹⁹ You can see how he is looking at this question. In Gaunilo’s view, the only way for me to think about something is if that something is a member of a set of similar entities, surrounded as it were on both sides by other conceptual objects which define its specific place in my mind. And in the passage I quoted, St Thomas seems to be following suit. I am not proposing, of course, that his entire epistemology is reducible to just these few lines. Nonetheless, in saying that That-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought *cannot* be thought since for every thought there must always be a greater, Aquinas too seems to be picturing our powers of thinking and knowing as if they were limited in some way to things which can be grasped and conceptually packaged, and as if each and every new thought we might have must take a form analogous to that of the previous thoughts which it supplements, entering into a series or set which at no point can be capped by some greatest thought.

But is this *really* the only way we can think? St Anselm thinks not, and his *Reply* to Gaunilo is most instructive and well worth quoting at length. “You say,” he writes, that upon hearing of “That-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought” you cannot think of it as a real object known either generically or specifically or have it in your mind, on the grounds that you neither know the thing itself nor can you

form an idea of it from other things similar to it. But obviously this is not so. For since everything that is less good is similar insofar as it is good to that which is more good, it is evident to every rational mind that, mounting from the less good to the more good we can from those things than which something greater *can* be thought conjecture a great deal about That-than-which-a-greater-*cannot*-be-thought. Who, for example, cannot think of this (even if he does not believe that what he thinks of actually exists), namely, that if something that has a beginning and end is good, that which, although it has had a beginning, does *not*, however, have an end, is much better? And just as this latter is better than the former, so also that which has *neither* beginning *nor* end is better again than this, even if it passes always from the past through the present to the future. Again, whether something of this kind actually exists or not, that which does *not* lack anything at all, *nor* is forced to change or move, is very much better still. Cannot this be thought? Or can we think of something greater than this? Or is not this precisely to form an idea of That-than-which-a-greater-*cannot*-be-thought from those things than which a greater *can* be thought? There is, then, a way by which one can form an idea of That-than-which-a-greater-*cannot*-be-thought.²⁰

As you can readily see from the words I have stressed in this passage, the “way” of which St Anselm is speaking is the way of negation, the *via negativa*. Beginning with some contingent and therefore deficient thing, our minds can ascend, through a series of denials, to something which is no sense contingent, but instead absolute. Moving up the Great Chain of Being and Knowing, our awareness passes from the mortal to the immortal to the aeviternal and thence finally to what is truly eternal.

We need to be very careful here, though. For despite his confidence in our ability to think our way to God in this fashion, Anselm actually agrees with Gaunilo and Thomas that, in another very important respect, the *aliquid* of his formula *is* unthinkable. It all depends on what you mean by thinking. On the one hand, it is certainly possible for the human mind to understand the meaning of That-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought by contrast with the other, contingent things which it knows on lower planes of existence. With all due respect to the Fool and his monastic advocate, the definition of the proof is in this sense perfectly intelligible. Not only can I think the meaning of the words when I hear them, but I can also think about the thing

which they mean, and this I am able to do by looking along the trajectory established by the relative greatness of the things which I apprehend in the world around me—things, presumably, like men and horses. On the other hand, even though in this sense we *can* think about God, this is obviously not the same as supposing that That-than-which-nothing-great-can-be-thought can be thought about directly as it is in itself. God is simply not the sort of thing that could ever become a discrete object of consciousness, and St Anselm is perfectly aware of this fact.

His awareness comes through in a variety ways, beginning with the formula itself for God. As you may have noticed if you have read the *Proslogion* in Latin, Anselm's definition is not cast in stone but takes a number of forms. Indeed, if you examine Chapter 2 alone, you will find that there are six different versions of the formula packed into the short space of its twenty-one lines, including *aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari potest*, *id quo maius cogitari nequit*, and *aliquid quo maius cogitari non valet*. In order to simplify things, I have kept to a single English phrase throughout my talk, but the Latin is considerably more fluid and flexible, and this in itself helps to show that whatever else it might be, Anselm's understanding of God does not take the shape of a mental *datum*, nor is it something that one could capture in the net of a single, definite concept. You will also note that in each of its versions, the definition always includes a negation, whether in the form of a noun (as with *nihil*), or a prefix to a verbal root (as in the syllable *ne-* in *nequit*), or an adverb (namely, *non*). This also serves to show that we are dealing with a level of existence which must be approached indirectly and apophatically, one which is never such as to stand immediately before human consciousness as a something "right there".

But these are by no means the only indications of St Anselm's meaning. Quite apart from the definition, he provides us with several additional signals as to the uniqueness of the being to which it refers, and he repeatedly stresses that a truly adequate thought about God is one which comes marked by the recognition that God is strictly unthinkable. As I approach my conclusion, I shall mention just three examples. The first can be found at the very beginning of the *Proslogion*, in the *excitatio mentis* of Chapter 1, where in quoting St Paul, the author explicitly tells us that God "dwell[s] in 'light inaccessible'". From the very start of the book we are thus placed on our guard against all pretension and false expectation. Let no one dare to suppose, Anselm seems to be warning, that the argument which is soon to follow will simply serve God up for the asking. Proof or no proof, the divine light is going to dazzle our minds and overwhelm

even our highest thoughts, and the “insignificant man”—the *homuncio*—who is addressed in the opening line of this opening chapter might as well resign himself to this fact right away.²¹

A second indication of God’s mind-exploding greatness comes in the *Reply* to Gaunilo, shortly after the long passage I quoted just a few moments ago. Having explained the sense in which we *can* think about That-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought, Anselm is quick to insist that the formula is no more than a pointer, and that what it is intended to point *to* is the existence of something which is nonetheless not fixed or fully specified *by* the formula. “Just as nothing prevents one from saying ‘ineffable,’” he writes,

although one cannot specify what is said to be ineffable; and just as one can think of the inconceivable—although one cannot think of what ‘inconceivable’ applies to—so also, when ‘That-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought’ is spoken of, there is no doubt at all that what is heard can be thought of and understood *even if the thing itself cannot be thought of and understood*.²²

Once again (you see) Anselm makes it crystal clear that even though we *can* think about God, we should not imagine that our minds could ever grasp or surround Him.

This does *not* mean, however, that we should think any less well of those minds, nor that we should suppose their powers to be limited to a purely discursive or computational mode of operation. A number of interpreters have concluded from these first two examples and other passages like them that there are really two Anselms, one a rationalist and the other a believer and mystic, and that the argument—or *apparent* argument—of Chapter 2 is simply the pretext for an exhortation to faith or a purely devotional ascent. This might be a legitimate reading of the book if, for Anselm, thinking and unthinking were discrete operations, and if the saint had discovered God to be *unthinkable* only at the point where his *thinking* left off. But this is to ignore a third, and most emphatic, indication of the author’s true intentions, which can be found in a pair of back-to-back chapters in the *Proslogion*, revealingly entitled “How and Why God is Both Seen and Not Seen by Those Seeking Him” and “How He is Greater than Can be Thought”.

The first is Chapter 14. Here Anselm returns to the image of light from Chapter 1, “that light”—he now describes it—“from which shines every truth that gives light to the understanding”, but which at the same time “is more than can be understood by any creature”. God, it seems, is thus like the sun, by whose brightness we are enabled to see, but which cannot be seen for its brightness. This of course is the very same Sun which has so illumined the author

that even if he no longer wished to believe in God, he tells us, his mind would be unable to withhold its assent. Addressing God in Chapter 4 he had written,

I give thanks, good Lord, I give thanks to You, since what I believed before through Your free gift I now so understand through your illumination that, if I did not want to *believe* that You existed, I should nevertheless be unable not to *understand* it.²³

Now, however, in Chapter 14, despite the earlier success of the proof and its gift of undeniable certitude, Anselm is still left wondering, “Why, O Lord God, does my soul not *experience* You if it has found You,”²⁴ and pondering this paradox, he proceeds, in Chapter 15, with what is surely one of the most important paragraphs in the entire book. “Therefore, Lord,” he continues—this, he now sees, is the only conclusion which makes any sense—

not only are You That-than-which-a-greater-*cannot*-be-thought, but You are also something greater than *can* be thought. For since it is possible to think that there *is* such a one, then, if You are *not* this same being, something greater than You *could* be thought—which *cannot* be.²⁵

I realize that this is a very difficult formulation to take in at first hearing. I hope you can see, however, that these densely packed sentences take us well beyond my other two examples. One might have come away from them supposing that God is to be thought, and not thought, at two different moments, or at two different points along the line of our relationship to Him. But here, on the contrary, Anselm makes it very clear that our awareness of the fact that God is *beyond* our thinking is an awareness which emerges from *within* that thinking itself, even as our thinking continues to probe the higher reaches of the divine definition. For in order truly to think about God as Something-than-which-nothing-greater-*can*-be-thought, God must be thought to be such that He *cannot* be thought, since anything *less* great than so unthinkable a Being would be something less great than we can actually *think*. Let me repeat that for emphasis: *In order truly to think about God as Something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought, God must be thought to be such that He cannot be thought, since anything less great than so unthinkable a Being would be something less great than we can actually think.*

Gaunilo and Aquinas, and other critics who have followed their lead on this point, are right in one sense, but they are very wrong in another. They are right that when the mind is confronted by the thought of any given thing, it is always possible to imagine something greater,

and in this sense it is true that That-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought is *not* something you can really think about. In another respect, however, they are wrong. They are wrong in supposing that our minds are limited to a consideration of “given” entities, and they are therefore wrong in suggesting that every thought we may have is surpassable. On the contrary, it is possible for us think about something which is not, and cannot, be given to us as a specific object of consciousness—something, in other words, which we can never look *at*. And this we can do by thinking our way *along* the trajectory described by the scale of ontological greatness. Kant complained that the existence of God cannot be proven by inserting “being” into a prior thought about God, but he too was thinking in a very different way from our saint. That-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought is not a special *datum* of thought, but a *provocation* to thought. Rather than inserting God into the mind, the author of the *Proslogion* is endeavoring to draw that mind out of itself, teasing it into passing beyond its fancies and beliefs, up and out and along a corridor of genuine insights, upon no one of which it lingers, following instead their invitation to an always keener but never exhaustive vision. It is precisely this drawing, this teasing, this passing, and this following, and hence this indescribable vision, which the ontological proof is designed to make possible.

But of course, as all good Thomists know, possibility and actuality are not the same. If we wish to realize this profound possibility for ourselves, and to share in St Anselm’s joyful Matins discovery, we cannot expect him to do our work for us. We shall have to make the effort to see for ourselves what he saw. And as I have suggested throughout my lecture, this means that we must place ourselves first in the proper position for looking. The aim of my observations has been the modest one of clearing our path of certain obstacles so as to assist in this placement, and my concern this evening has simply been to coax you to take my hand and follow me through the darkness of the toolshed. Now, with the sunbeam nearly full on our faces, we must open our eyes. Can we do that, though? Is there any hope of entering (as Anselm asks) into the inner chamber of our souls, there to be roused by the riddling words of his argument? Can we keep firmly in place the crucial distinction he makes between Something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be thought and a something which is merely greater than everything? Can we remember that God is different in kind from an island? Are we able to understand why there are eight steps in his argument, and not just two, a definition and a conclusion? Are we clear about the difference between thinking thoughts that are simply greater *as* thoughts, and thinking thoughts about a

greater *reality*? Is it possible for us to get just a glimpse at least of how a thought itself can be real? Is there any chance of our seeing how God is both seen and not seen by those who are seeking Him, or of understanding how we can prove something without knowing quite what it is that we are proving? Can we, in short, look along something without looking at it so as to think the unthinkable?

I am prepared to try if you are.

¹ C. S. Lewis, "Meditation in a Toolshed," *God in the Dock: Essays in Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1970), 212-215.

² Arthur C. McGill, "Recent Discussions of Anselm's Argument" in *The Many-Faced Argument: Recent Studies on the Ontological Argument for the Existence of God*, ed. John Hick and Arthur C. McGill (New York: Macmillan, 1967).

³ Anselm, *Proslogion*, trans. M. J. Charlesworth (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 103.

⁴ Eadmer, *The Life of St Anselm*, ed. and trans. R. W. Southern (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 29-30.

⁵ *Proslogion*, 103.

⁶ *Proslogion*, 111, 113.

⁷ Gaunilo, "A Reply on Behalf of the Fool", in Charlesworth, 160-61.

⁸ Anselm, "The Author's Reply to Gaunilo", in Charlesworth, 179.

⁹ "On Behalf of the Fool", 163, 165.

¹⁰ "Reply to Gaunilo", 175.

¹¹ Bonaventure, *On the Mystery of the Trinity*, Q. 1, a. 1 (quoted in Hick and McGill, p. 24, n. 12).

¹² Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St Martin's Press, 1965), 507.

¹³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Pt. 1, Q. 2, a. 1.

¹⁴ *Critique of Pure Reason*, 500.

¹⁵ *Critique of Pure Reason*, 504-505.

¹⁶ Anselm, *Monologion*, Ch. 31.

¹⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, Bk. 1, Ch. 11.

¹⁸ "On Behalf of the Fool", 161, 163.

¹⁹ "On Behalf of the Fool", 161.

²⁰ "Reply to Gaunilo", 187.

²¹ *Proslogion*, 111.

²² “Reply to Gaunilo”, 189.

²³ *Proslogion*, 121.

²⁴ *Proslogion*, 135.

²⁵ *Proslogion*, 137.