Anselm’s *Proslogion*  
(An “Untimely Review,” forthcoming in *Topoi*)

Up to this point, Anselm has been known for two quite different kinds of work: his devotional writings, which aim to move and inspire the reader and are marked by an ornate style that relies heavily on alliteration and antitheses and suchlike ornaments, and his *Monologion*, a work of what has come to be known as analytic theology, written in straightforward, unadorned, philosophical prose that aspires only to clarity and precision. In his new work, *Proslogion*, Anselm attempts to combine the two styles and the two aspirations. The experiment is not a success.

Anselm’s preface states a perfectly straightforward agenda: the new work will reach all, or at least a good many, of the conclusions already defended in the *Monologion*, but by means of a “single argument” as opposed to the “chaining together of many arguments” found in the earlier work. So one is surprised to turn to the first chapter and find, not an argument, but something called “A rousing of the mind to the contemplation of God.” I shall come back to this peculiarity later; for now let us move ahead to the second chapter. One assumes from the chapter title—“That God truly exists”—that this chapter will contain “the single argument,” at least to the extent that that argument is used to prove the existence of God. (Given the agenda announced in the preface, we expect that the same argument in some guise or other will also be used to establish other conclusions; and indeed that is what happens.) But what exactly is the argument? Here we come up against the central, and fatal, problem with *Proslogion*: it is not at all clear what the argument is supposed to be, and (this is my diagnosis) it is precisely Anselm’s desire for stylistic grace, his attempt to do analytic theology in the style of a devotional writer, that is responsible.

Arguing for this diagnosis requires a somewhat roundabout tour through this
puzzling work. To begin with, I shall quote the argument in its entirety:

Therefore, Lord, you who grant understanding to faith, grant that, insofar as you know it is useful for me, I may understand that you exist as we believe you exist, and that you are what we believe you to be. Now we believe that you are something than which nothing greater can be thought. So can it be that no such nature exists, since “The fool has said in his heart, ‘There is no God’”? But when this same fool hears me say “something than which nothing greater can be thought,” he surely understands what he hears; and what he understands exists in his understanding, even if he does not understand that it exists. For it is one thing for an object to exist in the understanding and quite another to understand that the object exists. When a painter, for example, thinks out in advance what he is going to paint, he has it in his understanding, but he does not yet understand that it exists, since he has not yet painted it. But once he has painted it, he both has it in his understanding and understands that it exists because he has now painted it. So even the fool must admit that something than which nothing greater can be thought exists at least in his understanding, since he understands this when he hears it, and whatever is understood exists in the understanding. And surely that than which a greater cannot be thought cannot exist only in the understanding. For if it exists only in the understanding, it can be thought to exist in reality as well, which is greater. So if that than which a greater cannot be thought exists only in the understanding, then the very thing than which a greater cannot be thought is something than which a greater can be thought. But that is clearly impossible. Therefore, there is no doubt that something than which a greater cannot be thought exists both in the understanding and in reality.

“What he understands exists in his understanding, even if he does not understand that it exists”: precisely the sort of construction Anselm loves to use in his prayers. But what does it mean? The most natural way to take it—I should say the all-but-irresistible reading—is that Anselm has a doctrine of two kinds of existence: existence in the mind and existence in reality. And he must further think that it is the very same thing that has, or can have, both modes of existence: it is the very same painting that first has existence in the mind and then has existence in reality as well. For perhaps the one thing that is clear about this argument is that it is intended as a *reductio ad impossibile*. The impossibility is supposed to be this: if that than which a greater cannot be thought
(hereafter TTWAGCBT) has existence-in-the-mind but not existence-in-reality, then TTWACGCBT exists (because existence-in-the-mind is existence) but isn’t TTWAGCBT (because it lacks existence-in-reality, and what lacks existence-in-reality is less great than what has it).

If this is the right way to read the argument, there are at least three obvious points of attack: the doctrine of two modes of existence, the claim that one and the same thing has both modes, and the assumption that existence-in-reality is a great-making property (or, of course, as Kant has taught us to think about this matter, a property at all). But is that the right way to read the argument? Here things get really tricky, because Anselm has published his work along with a rejoinder—what looks, in fact, like a very astute and very critical referee’s report—by an otherwise unpublished philosopher named Gaunilo, followed by Anselm’s response to Gaunilo’s criticisms. But Anselm doesn’t tell us what he means for us to make of this exchange. The arguments he gives in the reply look rather different from the argument of the second chapter of Proslogion, and Gaunilo’s apparently most telling criticism seems to go entirely unanswered. Has Anselm abandoned his original argument and replaced it without acknowledging it, or are the arguments of the reply simply restatements of the Proslogion argument cleared of the rhetorical fog that misled Gaunilo?

Gaunilo attacks the Proslogion argument on all three points I have suggested. His most arresting criticism, however, is not so much an attack on one premise or presupposition of the argument as a parody of the argument as a whole. Exactly the same sort of argument, Gaunilo says, could be used to prove the existence of an unsurpassably great island. For I understand this “Lost Island.” It therefore exists in my understanding. And it would be contradictory for the Lost Island to have existence-in-the-mind but not existence-in-reality, because existence-in-reality is a great-making property, and the Lost Island (by definition) lacks no great-making
properties that an island can have. Therefore, the Lost Island exists in reality. That conclusion, of course, is absurd; so, Gaunilo says, we have to reject the form of argument that produces such an absurdity.

One looks in vain for Anselm’s explanation of why the parody argument doesn’t work for the Lost Island but his own argument does work for TTWAGCBT. He asserts—twice—that the parody fails, but he doesn’t say why. Nor does he defend the three questionable premises identified by Gaunilo, all of which play the same role in the parody that they do in the original argument. Indeed, Anselm actually denies that he ever claimed that existence-in-reality is a great-making property. But his denial of this point is much like his assertion that the parody fails; it is offered cursorily and without explanation.

What are we to make of Anselm’s apparent failure to respond to Gaunilo’s criticisms? It was Anselm’s decision to publish the exchange with Gaunilo along with Proslogion, so I think we can rule out the idea that Anselm had no response to Gaunilo’s criticisms but decided to draw them to everyone’s attention anyway; such a bizarre piece of philosophical performance art is hard to imagine. If we suppose instead that Anselm and Gaunilo are talking past each other, however, we can begin to make sense of what is going on here. And there is in fact ample evidence in Anselm’s reply that he does not understand Gaunilo’s criticisms—and that the misunderstanding is rooted in the fact that Anselm understood the Proslogion argument in a radically different way from Gaunilo. Perhaps the clearest piece of evidence occurs precisely where Anselm denies that Gaunilo’s parody works: “So you see how right you were to compare me to that stupid man who was willing to affirm the existence of the Lost Island solely because the island would be understood if someone described it.” Anselm seems to think that Gaunilo is objecting to the bare inference “it is understood; therefore, it exists,” whereas Gaunilo reads Anselm as making that inference only with the
assistance of the three questionable premises identified earlier.

Yet given that Anselm does misunderstand Gaunilo in this way, his strategy in the reply—initially baffling, to be sure—makes perfect sense. Anselm thinks his primary task is to defend this claim: “If TTWAGCBT can be thought, it exists in reality.” He does this by pointing out features of TTWAGCBT that cannot belong to a merely possible being. (He takes “TTWAGCBT can be thought” to entail “TTWAGCBT is possible”—more on this below.) Some of these arguments are rather grossly fallacious. For example: if TTWAGCBT exists at all, it exists without a beginning; if TTWAGCBT does not exist, it cannot exist, because in order to exist it would have to begin to exist; TTWAGCBT can exist; therefore, TTWAGCBT exists (and has no beginning). This is rather like arguing that I cannot have a merely possible younger brother because my mother is now past her child-bearing years. The best of Anselm’s seven (!) versions of this strategy picks out necessary existence as the relevant feature:

Now whatever can be thought not to exist, if it does exist, is not that than which a greater cannot be thought. And if it does not exist, it would not be that than which a greater cannot be thought even if it were to exist. But it makes no sense to say that that than which a greater cannot be thought, if it exists, is not that than which a greater cannot be thought, and that if it [does not exist but] were to exist, it would not be that than which a greater cannot be thought.

This is clearly a somewhat clumsily expressed version of the modal ontological argument we know from Alvin Plantinga’s *Nature of Necessity* and subsequent literature, and it recalls the argument of chapter 3 of the *Proslogion*. Perhaps, then, the “single argument” is spread across chapters 2 and 3, though it must be admitted that one would not be likely to read it that way without the advantage (if we may call it that) of Anselm’s reply to Gaunilo.

Now as is well-known, the crucial weakness of modal ontological arguments is that there seems to be no way to establish the claim that a perfect being is possible: in
Anselm’s language, the claim that TTWAGCBT can be thought. To his credit, in replying to Gaunilo’s criticisms Anselm does attempt to establish this claim, which he had apparently taken for granted in Proslogion. We first need to get clear on what Anselm means by ‘think’ in this context; unfortunately, he does not tell us. He seems to presuppose his account of thinking in the Monologion—so much for the idea that the Proslogion offers us a stand-alone “single argument”—according to which thinking a thing is having that thing before one’s mind. On this account, one can think something that does not exist, even something that never will exist—I am now thinking my merely possible younger brother—but one cannot think something that is impossible. Impossible “objects” are the Oakland of intentionality: there is no “there” there for the mind to be directed toward. That is why Anselm takes “TTWAGCBT can be thought” to entail “TTWAGCBT is possible.”

But how does one go about getting TTWAGCBT before one’s mind? By engaging in precisely the sort of analytic argumentation Anselm offers in the Monologion—once again, so much for the idea that the Proslogion offers us a stand-alone “single argument.” For example:

For since every lesser good, insofar as it is good, is similar to a greater good, it is clear to every reasonable mind that by raising our thoughts from lesser goods to greater goods, we can certainly form an idea of that than which a greater cannot be thought. Who, for example, is unable to think (even if does not believe that what he thinks exists in reality) that if something that has a beginning and end is good, then something that has a beginning but never ceases to exist is much better? And that just as the latter is better than the former, so something that has neither beginning nor end is better still?

So there is actually a good deal of preliminary work that goes into “thinking” TTWAGCBT; it is not a simple matter of entertaining a verbal formula and doing logical moves with it, as one might have thought from reading the Proslogion by itself. Yet however thoroughly one carries out this preliminary work, is there ever any guarantee
that the object one takes oneself to be conceiving is indeed a possible object? I can’t see how there is. Anselm may show us how to “form an idea” of TTWAGCBT, but he has not shown us that we can genuinely think—in his sense of the word—TTWAGCBT. His version of the modal ontological argument therefore founders precisely where other versions do.

To return to a question I left dangling earlier: are the arguments of Anselm’s reply the same as the argument of the Proslogion? Despite appearances, it is at least clear that Anselm thinks so. Yes, it appears that Anselm affirms in the Proslogion, but denies in his reply, the doctrine of two modes of existence. But this turns out to be an artifact of his fondness for contrastive chiasm, which is all over the prayers:

They chose you that they might condemn the Savior, he that he might save the condemned; they that they might bring death to the living, he to bring life to the dead. (Prayer to the Holy Cross)

How graciously will he who is now exalted cherish the lowly, who when he had been brought low thus succored the proud? (Prayer to St Stephen)

And so we get “What he understands exists in his understanding, even if he does not understand that it exists,” a stylish but misleading way of expressing the familiar fact that we can think of things without believing that they exist, thus securing Anselm against charges that the whole argument begins by begging the question.

And yes, it appears that Anselm affirms in the Proslogion, but denies in his reply, the idea that existence-in-reality is great-making feature. But this turns out to be a problem of compressed language in the former—“it can also exist in reality as well, which is greater”—that is unpacked in the latter: “For if it exists only in the understanding, can it not be thought to exist in reality as well? And if it can, does not the one who thinks it, think something greater than that thing is if it exists only in the understanding?” That thing is greater, not because it has the great-making property of
existence-in-reality, but because it has various great-making features—such as (implausibly) beginninglessness or (far more plausibly) necessary existence—that cannot belong to a merely possible being.

I have now concluded my case for the claim that Anselm’s attempt to write analytic theology in the style of a devotional writer left his “single argument” hopelessly unclear. What he intended to argue is set out more clearly, and in something much closer to his usual analytic style, in his reply to Gaunilo. Why did he not simply rewrite the Proslogion wholesale in light of Gaunilo’s comments, rather than publishing the original version plus the exchange with Gaunilo? (Isn’t that what referee’s reports are for?) True, we would have lost the memorable and ingenious Lost Island parody, but since that’s a parody of an argument Anselm never intended to give in the first place, a clear statement of the Proslogion argument would have more than offset that loss.

Perhaps—and here I enter the realm of the sheerest speculation—the reason Anselm decided not to rewrite the original was that Gaunilo’s comments had exposed ways in which the claim to have provided a “single argument” could not be sustained. As I have already noted, Gaunilo forces him to clarify what it means to think an object in general and God in particular, which Anselm does by “chaining together” arguments from the Monologion. Gaunilo also forces him to unpack the inference from “TTWAGCBT can be thought” to “TTWAGCBT exists,” and again Anselm does this by “chaining together” arguments, though in this case arguments that had not appeared in the earlier work. Anselm’s philosophical aims would have been much better served by all this “chaining together” of arguments, but he would have sacrificed something to which I suspect he is very attached: the devotional power of a single concept that can unify, inspire, and extend all one’s thinking about God. It was the “rousing of the mind to the contemplation of God” that he was really after all along.
I am not really qualified to comment on Anselm’s merits as a devotional writer. I find his style unpleasantly mannered and baroque, but clearly he has a following. As a work of analytic theology his Monologion showed real promise. Let him continue to be a devotional writer, if that is what he likes; let him continue to produce analytic theology, if that is what he likes. Let him even do both, if he wishes. Just not at the same time.