# Proslogion

ANSELM OF CANTERBURY
1033–1109

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*Translated from the Latin with AI (Claude) and edited*

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*Proslogion* · Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109)

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# INTRODUCTION

Anselm (c. 1033–1109), an Italian monk at the abbey of Bec in Normandy and later Archbishop of Canterbury, wrote the *Proslogion* around 1077–78. He wanted, he says, a single argument that needed nothing but itself to show that God exists. Its first title was *Faith Seeking Understanding*, and it is written as a prayer.

Its second chapter contains what is now called the ontological argument. God is "something than which nothing greater can be thought." Even the fool of the Psalms, who says in his heart "there is no God," understands those words, so such a being exists at least in his understanding. But what exists in reality as well is greater than what exists only in the mind; so that than which nothing greater can be thought must exist in reality too. Philosophers have argued about it ever since.

A monk named Gaunilo, of Marmoutier, answered at once "on behalf of the fool": by the same reasoning, he said, one could prove that a perfect lost island exists. Anselm replied, and asked that both answers be copied with his book. All three are given here.

# Proslogion

*Faith seeking understanding*
*Anselm's prayer-argument that God is that than which nothing greater can be thought.*

## PREFACE

Pr.1 At the urgent request of certain brothers, I published a short work as an example of meditating on the rational basis of faith, written in the person of someone who investigates, by silently reasoning with himself, things he does not know. Considering that it was woven together from a chain of many arguments, I began to ask myself whether perhaps a single argument could be found that needed nothing but itself to prove itself, and that would suffice on its own to establish that God truly exists; that he is the supreme good, needing nothing else, whom all things need in order to exist and to be well; and whatever else we believe about the divine substance.

Pr.2 I often turned my thought to this, and eagerly. At times it seemed to me that what I was looking for could already be grasped; at times it escaped my mind's eye altogether. At last, in despair, I decided to give it up, as the search for something that could not be found. But when I wanted to shut the thought out of myself completely, so that it would not occupy my mind in vain and keep it from other things in which I could make progress, then, the more I refused it and fended it off, the more it began to press itself on me with a kind of insistence. So one day, when I was worn out from resisting its insistence so fiercely, in the very clash of my thoughts what I had despaired of offered itself, so

that I eagerly embraced the thought I had been anxiously driving away.

Pr.3 Judging, then, that what I rejoiced to have found would please some reader if it were written down, I wrote the short work that follows, on this and on certain other matters, in the person of one who is trying to raise his mind to contemplate God and who seeks to understand what he believes. I judged that neither this work nor the one I mentioned above deserved to be called a book, or to have its author's name set at its head; and yet I thought they should not be sent out without some title by which they might, in a way, invite whoever came upon them to read them. So I gave each its own title: the first was to be called *An Example of Meditation on the Rational Basis of Faith*, and the second *Faith Seeking Understanding*. But when many people had already copied both works under these titles, many urged me—above all the reverend archbishop of Lyon, Hugh by name, then serving as apostolic legate in Gaul, who commanded it by apostolic authority—to put my name to them. To make this more fitting, I named the first *Monologion*, that is, a soliloquy, and this one *Proslogion*, that is, an address.[1]

## ROUSING THE MIND TO CONTEMPLATE GOD

*Anselm urges himself to withdraw into prayer, laments the fall, and asks God to show himself.*

1.1 Come now, little man, flee your occupations for a little while; hide yourself for a moment from your turbulent thoughts. Cast off your heavy cares now, and put aside your wearying distractions. Make a little room for God, and rest a little in him. "Enter the inner room" of your mind; shut out everything except God and whatever helps you seek him, and "with the door closed"

1 Hugh of Die, archbishop of Lyon (1082–1106) and papal legate in France. The titles are Greek coinages: "speaking alone" and "speaking to."

seek him. Speak now, my whole "heart"; speak now to God: "I seek your face; your face, Lord, I long for."[2]

1.2 Come then now, Lord my God, teach my heart where and how to seek you, where and how to find you. Lord, if you are not here, where shall I seek you, absent? But if you are everywhere, why do I not see you present? Surely you dwell in "light inaccessible." And where is light inaccessible? Or how shall I approach light inaccessible? Or who will lead me and bring me into it, so that I may see you in it? And then, by what signs, under what appearance, shall I seek you? I have never seen you, Lord my God; I do not know your face. What shall he do, most high Lord, what shall this far-off exile of yours do? What shall your servant do, anxious with love for you and "cast far from your face"? He pants to see you, and your face is too far from him. He longs to approach you, and your dwelling is inaccessible.[3] He desires to find you, and does not know where you are. He strives to seek you, and does not know your face. Lord, you are my God and you are my Lord, and I have never seen you. You made me and remade me, and you have given me all my good things, and still I do not know you. In short, I was made to see you, and I have not yet done what I was made for.

1.3 O wretched lot of man, now that he has lost what he was made for! O that hard and dreadful fall! Alas, what he lost and what he found; what departed and what remained! He lost the blessedness for which he was made, and found the misery for which he was not made. That departed without which nothing is happy, and that remained which in itself is nothing but wretched. "Man ate then the bread of angels," for which he now hungers; now he eats "the bread of sorrows," which then he did not know. Alas, the common mourning of mankind, the universal lament of the children of Adam! He belched with fullness; we sigh with hunger. He had plenty; we beg. He held it happily and deserted it wretchedly; we lack it unhappily and long for it

2 Quotation marks throughout mark Anselm's borrowings from Scripture; here Matthew 6:6 and Psalm 27:8.
3 1 Timothy 6:16.

miserably—and alas, we remain empty! Why did he not keep for us, when he easily could, what we so grievously lack?[4] Why did he shut out the light from us like this, and cover us with darkness? Why did he take life from us and inflict death on us? Wretched as we are, from where have we been driven out, and where driven to! From where cast down, where buried! From our homeland into exile, from the vision of God into our blindness. From the delight of immortality into the bitterness and horror of death. Miserable change! From how great a good into how great an evil! Heavy loss, heavy grief, heavy all of it!

1.4 But alas, wretch that I am, one of the other wretched children of Eve, far removed from God! What did I set out to do, what have I achieved? Where was I heading, where have I come to? What was I reaching for, and what am I sighing among? "I sought good things, and behold, turmoil!" I was heading toward God, and I stumbled over myself. I sought rest in my inner privacy, and "I found trouble and sorrow" in my depths. I wanted to laugh for joy of mind, and I am forced "to roar with the groaning of my heart." Gladness was hoped for, and behold, what makes my sighs come thicker!

1.5 And you, "O Lord, how long? How long, Lord, will you forget us? How long will you turn your face away from us?" When will you "look upon us and hear" us? When will you "enlighten" our "eyes" and "show" us "your face"? When will you give yourself back to us? Look upon us, Lord, hear us, enlighten us, show yourself to us. Give yourself back to us, so that it may be well with us—for without you it is so ill with us. Have pity on our toils and strivings toward you, for we can do nothing without you. Invite us, "help" us. I beg you, Lord, let me not sigh myself into despair, but breathe again in hope. I beg you, Lord, my heart is made bitter by its desolation; sweeten it with your consolation. I beg you, Lord, I began to seek you hungry; let me not leave off still fasting from you. Famished I came to you; let me not go away unfed. Poor I came to the rich, wretched to the merciful;

4 Psalms 78:25 and 127:2. "He" is Adam.

let me not return empty and scorned.[5] And if "I sigh before I eat," give me at least after my sighs something to eat. Lord, bent over as I am, I can only look downward; raise me up, so that I can look upward. "My iniquities have gone over my head"; they wrap me round, "and like a heavy burden" they weigh me down. Unwrap me, unburden me, lest their "pit close its mouth over me." Let me look up at your light, even from afar, even from the depths. Teach me to seek you, and show yourself to me as I seek; for I cannot seek you unless you teach me, nor find you unless you show yourself. Let me seek you in desiring you, and desire you in seeking you. Let me find you in loving you, and love you in finding you.

1.6 I acknowledge, Lord, and I give thanks, that you have created in me this "image of yours," so that, remembering you, I may think of you and love you. But it is so worn away by the abrasion of vices, so darkened by the smoke of sins, that it cannot do what it was made to do unless you renew and reform it. I do not try, Lord, to penetrate your height, for I in no way compare my understanding with it; but I long to understand to some degree your truth, which my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand in order to believe; I believe in order to understand. For this too I believe: that "unless I believe, I shall not understand."[6]

## THAT GOD TRULY EXISTS

*Even the fool understands "that than which nothing greater can be thought," so it must exist in reality too.*

2.1 So, Lord, you who give understanding to faith, grant me to understand, as far as you know it to be good for me, that you exist as we believe, and that you are what we believe. And indeed we believe that you are something than which nothing greater can be thought. Or is there, then, no such nature, since "the fool has said in his heart: There is no God"? But surely this

5 Psalm 13:1–3.
6 Isaiah 7:9 in the Old Latin version, a text often cited by Augustine.

same fool, when he hears the very thing I am saying—"something than which nothing greater can be thought"—understands what he hears; and what he understands is in his understanding, even if he does not understand that it exists. For it is one thing for a thing to be in the understanding, and another to understand that the thing exists. When a painter thinks out beforehand what he is going to make, he has it in his understanding, but he does not yet understand that what he has not yet made exists. But once he has painted it, he both has it in his understanding and understands that what he has now made exists.[7] So even the fool is convinced that something than which nothing greater can be thought exists at least in the understanding, since when he hears this he understands it, and whatever is understood is in the understanding.

2.2 And surely that than which nothing greater can be thought cannot exist in the understanding alone. For if it exists even in the understanding alone, it can be thought to exist in reality as well, which is greater. If, then, that than which nothing greater can be thought exists in the understanding alone, the very thing than which nothing greater can be thought is something than which something greater can be thought. But surely this cannot be. Therefore there exists beyond doubt something than which nothing greater can be thought, both in the understanding and in reality.

### THAT GOD CANNOT BE THOUGHT NOT TO EXIST

*What cannot be thought not to exist is greater, so God cannot even be thought not to exist.*

3.1 And it exists so truly that it cannot even be thought not to exist. For something can be thought to exist that cannot be thought not to exist, and this is greater than what can be thought not to exist. So if that than which nothing greater can be thought can be thought not to exist, then that very thing than which nothing greater can be thought is not that than which nothing

7 Psalms 14:1 and 53:1.

greater can be thought—which cannot hold together. So something than which nothing greater can be thought exists so truly that it cannot even be thought not to exist.

3.2 And this is you, Lord our God. So truly, then, do you exist, Lord my God, that you cannot even be thought not to exist. And rightly so. For if some mind could think of something better than you, the creature would rise above the Creator and sit in judgment on the Creator, which is utterly absurd. Indeed, whatever else there is, apart from you alone, can be thought not to exist. You alone, then, of all things, have existence most truly, and therefore most fully of all; for whatever else exists does not exist so truly, and so has less existence. Why then "has the fool said in his heart: There is no God," when it is so obvious to a rational mind that you exist most fully of all? Why, except that he is dull and a fool?

## HOW THE FOOL SAID IN HIS HEART WHAT CANNOT BE THOUGHT

*One can think the words "God does not exist," but not while understanding what God is.*

4.1 But how has he said in his heart what he could not think? Or how could he not think what he said in his heart, since saying in the heart and thinking are the same? If he truly—or rather, since he truly—both thought it, because he said it in his heart, and did not say it in his heart, because he could not think it, then there is more than one way in which something is said in the heart or thought. For a thing is thought in one way when the word signifying it is thought, and in another when what the thing itself is is understood. In the first way God can be thought not to exist, but in the second not at all. No one who understands what God is can think that God does not exist, even though he may say these words in his heart, either with no meaning at all or with some foreign meaning. For God is that than which nothing greater can be thought. Whoever understands this well certainly understands that it exists in such a way that it cannot, even in

thought, not exist. So whoever understands that God exists in this way cannot think that he does not exist.

4.2 Thanks to you, good Lord, thanks to you, because what I first believed by your gift I now so understand by your illumination that, even if I did not want to believe that you exist, I could not fail to understand it.

### THAT GOD IS WHATEVER IT IS BETTER TO BE THAN NOT TO BE

*God, existing through himself and making all things from nothing, is just, truthful and blessed.*

5.1 What, then, are you, Lord God, you than whom nothing greater can be thought? What are you but that which, highest of all, alone existing through itself, made all other things from nothing? For whatever is not this is less than what can be thought; but this cannot be thought of you. What good, then, is lacking to the supreme good, through which every good exists? You are therefore just, truthful, blessed, and whatever it is better to be than not to be. For it is better to be just than not just, blessed than not blessed.

### HOW GOD PERCEIVES THOUGH HE IS NOT A BODY

*God perceives in the sense that he supremely knows all things, not through bodily senses.*

6.1 But since it is better to be able to perceive, omnipotent, merciful and impassible than not to be so, how are you able to perceive if you are not a body; or omnipotent if you cannot do all things; or at once merciful and impassible? For if only bodily things can perceive, since the senses are around a body and in a body, how are you able to perceive, since you are not a body but the supreme spirit, which is better than body?[8]

6.2 But if perceiving is nothing but knowing, or exists only for the sake of knowing—for whoever perceives knows according to

8 Impassible: not subject to being acted upon or to suffering.

the particular nature of each sense, as colors through sight and flavors through taste—then it is not inappropriate to say that whatever knows in some way perceives in some way. So, Lord, though you are not a body, you truly are supremely able to perceive in the sense that you supremely know all things, not in the way an animal knows through bodily sense.

## HOW GOD IS OMNIPOTENT THOUGH THERE ARE MANY THINGS HE CANNOT DO

*Being able to lie or be corrupted is powerlessness, not power, so God lacks nothing.*

7.1 But how are you omnipotent, too, if you cannot do all things? Or if you cannot be corrupted, or lie, or make the true false—such as making what has been done not to have been done—and many other things like these, how can you do all things?

7.2 Or is being able to do these things not power but powerlessness? For whoever can do these things can do what is not good for him and what he ought not to do. And the more he can do them, the more power adversity and wickedness have over him, and the less he has against them. So whoever can do things in this way can do them not by power but by powerlessness. For he is said to be able not because he himself is able, but because his powerlessness makes something else able to act on him; or else it is by some other manner of speaking, as many things are said improperly. For instance, we put "to be" for "not to be," and "to do" for what is "not to do," or for "to do nothing." For we often say to someone who denies that something is so: "It is as you say it is"; though it would seem more proper to say: "It is not, as you say it is not." Likewise we say: "This man is sitting, just as that man is doing," or "This man is resting, just as that man is doing," although "sitting" is a kind of not doing, and "resting" is doing nothing. So, when someone is said to have the power of doing or suffering what is not good for him or what he ought not, powerlessness is meant by "power"; for the more he has this power, the more powerful adversity and wickedness are against him, and the more powerless he is against them. Therefore, Lord

God, you are all the more truly omnipotent because you can do nothing through powerlessness, and nothing has power against you.

### HOW GOD IS BOTH MERCIFUL AND IMPASSIBLE

*We feel the effect of God's mercy, though God feels no emotion of compassion.*

8.1 But how are you at once merciful and impassible? For if you are impassible, you do not feel compassion; if you do not feel compassion, your heart is not made wretched by compassion for the wretched—which is what it is to be merciful. But if you are not merciful, where do the wretched find such consolation?[9]

8.2 How, then, are you both merciful and not merciful, Lord, unless it is that you are merciful with respect to us and not with respect to yourself? You are so according to our experience, and not according to yours. For when you look upon us in our wretchedness, we feel the effect of mercy, but you do not feel the emotion. So you are merciful because in your mercy you save us and spare those who sin against you; and you are not merciful because you are touched by no compassion for wretchedness.

### HOW THE WHOLLY JUST GOD SPARES THE WICKED

*God's mercy springs from his supreme goodness, which is itself not separate from his justice.*

9.1 But how do you spare the wicked if you are wholly just and supremely just? For how does one who is wholly and supremely just do something that is not just? Or what justice is it to give everlasting life to one who deserves eternal death? How, then, good God, good to the good and to the wicked, how is it that you save the wicked, if this is not just—and do you do anything that is not just?

9.2 Or is it because your goodness is incomprehensible that this lies hidden in the "inaccessible light in which you dwell"?

Truly, in the highest and most secret depth of your goodness lies hidden the spring from which the river of your mercy flows. For though you are wholly and supremely just, you are nonetheless kind even to the wicked, precisely because you are wholly and supremely good. For you would be less good if you were kind to no wicked person. One who is good to both the good and the wicked is better than one who is good only to the good. And one who is good to the wicked both in punishing and in sparing is better than one who is good only in punishing. That is why you are merciful: because you are wholly and supremely good. And while it may perhaps be seen why you repay good to the good and evil to the wicked, it is certainly altogether to be wondered at why you, wholly just and needing nothing, grant good things to the wicked and to those guilty before you. O height of your goodness, God! We see where your mercy comes from, and do not see through to it. We discern where the river flows from, and do not see the spring from which it rises. For it comes from the fullness of your goodness that you are gracious to those who sin against you; and it lies hidden in the height of your goodness for what reason you are so. For though you repay good to the good and evil to the wicked out of goodness, the principle of justice seems to demand this. But when you grant good things to the wicked, we know that the supremely good willed to do this, and we wonder how the supremely just could will it.

9.3 For although it is hard to understand how your mercy is not separated from your justice, we must nonetheless believe that what overflows from goodness is in no way opposed to justice—for goodness is nothing without justice—but truly agrees with justice. Indeed, if you are merciful because you are supremely good, and you are not supremely good except because you are supremely just, then truly you are merciful precisely because you are supremely just.

**9** Anselm plays on *misericors*, "merciful," as having a heart (*cor*) made wretched (*miserum*) for the wretched.

9.4 Help me, just and merciful God, whose light I seek; help me to understand what I am saying. Truly, then, you are merciful for this reason: because you are just.

9.5 Is your mercy, then, born of your justice? Do you, then, spare the wicked out of justice? If so, Lord, if so, teach me how it is. Is it because it is just that you should be so good that you cannot be understood to be better, and should work so powerfully that you cannot be thought more powerful? For what is more just than this? And this would certainly not be the case if you were good only in repaying and not in sparing, and if you made good people only out of those who are not good, and not also out of the wicked. In this way, then, it is just that you spare the wicked and make good people out of the wicked. Finally, what is not done justly ought not to be done; and what ought not to be done is done unjustly. If, then, you have mercy on the wicked unjustly, you ought not to have mercy; and if you ought not to have mercy, you have mercy unjustly. And if it is wrong to say this, it is right to believe that you have mercy on the wicked justly.

### HOW GOD JUSTLY PUNISHES AND JUSTLY SPARES

*Punishment fits the deserts of the wicked; sparing them befits God's goodness.*

10.1 But it is just that you punish the wicked. For what is more just than that the good receive good and the wicked evil? How, then, is it both just that you punish the wicked and just that you spare the wicked?

10.2 Or do you justly punish the wicked in one way and justly spare the wicked in another? When you punish the wicked, it is just, because it fits their deserts; but when you spare the wicked, it is just, not because it fits their deserts but because it befits your goodness. For in sparing the wicked you are just with respect to yourself and not with respect to us, just as you are merciful with respect to us and not with respect to yourself. For in saving us, whom you might justly destroy, just as you are

merciful not because you feel emotion but because we feel the effect, so you are just not because you give us what we are owed but because you do what befits you, the supremely good. In this way, then, without contradiction, you justly punish and justly spare.

## ALL THE WAYS OF THE LORD ARE MERCY AND TRUTH

*Whatever God wills is just, though why he spares some and not others cannot be grasped.*

11.1 But is it not also just with respect to yourself, Lord, that you punish the wicked? It is indeed just that you should be so just that you cannot be thought more just. And this you would by no means be if you repaid good to the good but not evil to the wicked. For one who repays both the good and the wicked their deserts is more just than one who repays only the good. It is just, therefore, with respect to you, just and kind God, both when you punish and when you spare. Truly, then, "all the ways of the Lord are mercy and truth," and yet "the Lord is just in all his ways." And certainly without contradiction: for those whom you will to punish, it is not just that they be saved; and those whom you will to spare, it is not just that they be condemned. For that alone is just which you will, and that is not just which you do not will.[10] So, then, your mercy is born of your justice, since it is just that you be so good that you are good even in sparing. And this, perhaps, is why the supremely just can will good things for the wicked. But if it can somehow be grasped why you can will to save the wicked, it certainly cannot be comprehended by any reasoning why, among those equally wicked, you save these rather than those through your supreme goodness, and condemn those rather than these through your supreme justice.

11.2 So, then, you are truly able to perceive, omnipotent, merciful and impassible, just as you are living, wise, good, blessed, eternal, and indeed whatever it is better to be than not to be.

10 Psalms 25:10 and 145:17.

### THAT GOD IS THE VERY LIFE BY WHICH HE LIVES

*Whatever God is, he is through himself: life, wisdom and goodness itself.*

12.1 But certainly, whatever you are, you are through nothing other than yourself. You are, then, the very life by which you live, and the wisdom by which you are wise, and the very goodness by which you are good to the good and the wicked; and likewise with the rest.

### HOW GOD ALONE IS UNBOUNDED AND ETERNAL

*God alone is wholly everywhere and always; created spirits are unbounded only compared with bodies.*

13.1 But everything that is enclosed in any way by place or time is less than what no law of place or time constrains. Since, then, nothing is greater than you, no place or time contains you; you are everywhere and always. And since this can be said of you alone, you alone are unbounded and eternal. How, then, are other spirits also said to be unbounded and eternal?

13.2 And indeed you alone are eternal, because you alone of all things, just as you do not cease to be, so you do not begin to be. But how are you alone unbounded? Is it that a created spirit, compared with you, is bounded, but compared with a body is unbounded? For that is wholly bounded which, when it is wholly in one place, cannot at the same time be elsewhere; and this is seen only in bodily things. That is unbounded which is at the same time wholly everywhere; and this is understood of you alone. And that is at once bounded and unbounded which, when it is wholly in one place, can at the same time be wholly in another, but not everywhere; and this is known of created spirits. For if the soul were not whole in each of the limbs of its body, it would not perceive as a whole in each of them. So you, Lord, are uniquely unbounded and eternal, and yet other spirits too are unbounded and eternal.

## HOW GOD IS SEEN AND NOT SEEN BY THOSE WHO SEEK HIM

*The soul has found God yet cannot see him, darkened by its weakness and dazzled by his light.*

14.1 Have you found, my soul, what you were looking for? You were seeking God, and you found him to be something highest of all, than which nothing better can be thought; and you found that this is life itself, light, wisdom, goodness, eternal blessedness and blessed eternity; and that this is everywhere and always. For if you have not found your God, how is he this which you have found, and which you have understood with such certain truth and true certainty? But if you have found him, why is it that you do not feel what you have found? Why does my soul not feel you, Lord God, if it has found you?

14.2 Or has it not found the one it found to be light and truth? For how did it understand this except by seeing light and truth? Or could it understand anything at all about you except through "your light and your truth"? If, then, it saw light and truth, it saw you. If it did not see you, it saw neither light nor truth. Or is what it saw both truth and light, and yet it has not yet seen you, because it saw you to some extent but did not see you "as you are"?

14.3 Lord my God, you who formed me and re-formed me, tell my longing soul what else you are than what it has seen, so that it may see clearly what it longs for. It strains to see more, and sees nothing beyond what it has seen but darkness—or rather, it does not see "darkness, of which there is none in you," but it sees that it cannot see more because of its own darkness. Why is this, Lord, why is this? Is its eye darkened by its own weakness, or dazzled by your brilliance? Surely it is both darkened in itself and dazzled by you. Truly it is both dimmed by its own smallness and overwhelmed by your immensity. Truly it is both cramped by its own narrowness and overcome by your vastness. For how great is that light from which shines every truth

that gives light to the rational mind![11] How vast is that truth in which is everything that is true, and outside which there is only nothingness and falsehood! How immense it is, which in one glance sees all things that have been made, and by whom, and through whom, and how they were made from nothing! What purity, what simplicity, what certainty and splendor are there! Surely more than a creature can understand.

### THAT GOD IS GREATER THAN CAN BE THOUGHT

*God is not only that than which nothing greater can be thought but greater than can be thought.*

15.1 So, Lord, you are not only that than which nothing greater can be thought; you are something greater than can be thought. For since it is possible to think that something of this kind exists, if you are not this very thing, something greater than you can be thought—which cannot happen.

### THAT THIS IS THE INACCESSIBLE LIGHT IN WHICH GOD DWELLS

*Everything is seen by God's light, yet the light itself is too bright to look at.*

16.1 Truly, Lord, this is the "inaccessible light in which you dwell." For truly there is nothing else that can pierce it so as to see you there fully. Truly, I do not see it because it is too much for me; and yet whatever I see, I see through it, as a weak eye sees what it sees by the light of the sun, which it cannot look at in the sun itself. My understanding cannot reach it. It shines too brightly; my understanding does not take it in, nor can the eye of my soul bear to gaze on it for long. It is dazzled by its brilliance, overcome by its vastness, overwhelmed by its immensity, bewildered by its fullness. O supreme and inaccessible light, O whole and blessed truth, how far you are from me, who am so near to you! How remote you are from my sight, while I am so

11 1 John 1:5.

present to yours! You are everywhere wholly present, and I do not see you. "In you I move and in you I am," and I cannot approach you. You are within me and around me, and I do not feel you.[12]

### THAT HARMONY, FRAGRANCE AND BEAUTY ARE IN GOD

*God has beauty, harmony, fragrance, savor and softness in his own way, but sin dulls the soul's senses.*

17.1 You are still hidden, Lord, from my soul in your light and blessedness, and so it still turns about in its own darkness and misery. It looks around and does not see your beauty. It listens and does not hear your harmony. It smells and does not perceive your fragrance. It tastes and does not recognize your savor. It touches and does not feel your softness. For you have these things, Lord God, in yourself, in your own ineffable way, you who have given them to the things you created in their own perceptible way; but the senses of my soul have grown stiff, have grown numb, have been blocked up by the ancient sickness of sin.

### THAT THERE ARE NO PARTS IN GOD OR IN HIS ETERNITY

*Anselm laments his fallen state again, then argues that God is simple unity with no parts.*

18.1 And again, "behold, turmoil"! Behold, again grief and mourning confront one who seeks "joy and gladness"! My soul was already hoping for fullness, and behold, again it is overwhelmed by want! I was already reaching out to eat, and behold, I hunger more! I was trying to rise to the light of God, and I have fallen back into my own darkness. Indeed, not only have I fallen into it, but I feel myself wrapped up in it. I fell before "my mother conceived me." Surely in it "I was conceived," and wrapped in it I was born. Long ago, surely, we all fell in him "in whom we all sinned." In him we all lost what he held easily and lost, to his

12 Acts 17:28.

harm and ours—what, when we want it, we do not know how to seek; when we seek it, we do not find; when we find it, it is not what we seek. Help me, "for your goodness' sake, Lord."[13] "I have sought your face; your face, Lord, I will seek; do not turn your face away from me." Lift me up from myself to you. Cleanse, heal, sharpen, "enlighten" the eye of my mind, "that it may gaze on you." Let my soul gather its strength again, and with all its understanding strain once more toward you, Lord.

18.2 What are you, Lord, what are you, what shall my heart understand you to be? Surely you are life, you are wisdom, you are truth, you are goodness, you are blessedness, you are eternity, and you are every true good. These are many things; my narrow understanding cannot see so many at once in a single glance, so as to delight in all of them at once. How, then, Lord, are you all these things? Are they parts of you, or rather is each of them the whole of what you are? For whatever is composed of parts is not altogether one, but in some way many and different from itself, and it can be broken up either in fact or in the understanding; and these things are foreign to you, than whom nothing better can be thought. So there are no parts in you, Lord, nor are you many; you are so much one thing, and the same as yourself, that in nothing are you unlike yourself. Indeed, you are unity itself, divisible by no understanding. So life and wisdom and the rest are not parts of you, but all are one, and each of them is the whole of what you are and what all the rest are. Since, then, neither you nor your eternity, which is you, has parts, nowhere and never is there a part of you or of your eternity; rather you are whole everywhere, and your eternity is whole always.

13 Psalm 51:5; Romans 5:12.

### THAT GOD IS NOT IN PLACE OR TIME, BUT ALL THINGS ARE IN HIM

*God did not exist yesterday and will not tomorrow; he simply is, outside all time.*

19.1 But if through your eternity you were and are and will be, and to have been is not to be going to be, and to be is not to have been or to be going to be, how is your eternity whole always? Or is it that nothing of your eternity passes away so as no longer to be, nor is anything of it future, as if it were not yet? So you did not exist yesterday, nor will you exist tomorrow; rather, yesterday and today and tomorrow you are. Or rather, you are neither yesterday nor today nor tomorrow, but you simply are, outside all time. For yesterday and today and tomorrow are nothing but in time; you, however, though nothing exists without you, are not in place or time, but all things are in you. For nothing contains you, but you contain all things.

### THAT GOD IS BEFORE AND BEYOND ALL THINGS, EVEN ETERNAL ONES

*God surpasses even eternal things, since their whole eternity is present to him at once.*

20.1 You, then, fill and embrace all things; you are before and beyond all things. And you are before all things because "before they came to be, you are." But how are you beyond all things? In what way are you beyond those things that will have no end?[14]

20.2 Is it because they can in no way exist without you, whereas you are in no way less even if they return to nothing? For in this way you are, in a sense, beyond them. Or is it also because they can be thought to have an end, but you cannot at all? For in this way they do have an end in a sense, but you in no sense. And surely what has no end in any sense is beyond what is ended in some sense. Or do you also surpass all things, even eternal ones,

14 Psalm 90:2.

in this way: that your eternity and theirs is wholly present to you, while they do not yet have the part of their eternity that is to come, just as they no longer have the part that is past? For in this way you are always beyond them, since you are always present to yourself, or since that which they have not yet reached is always present to you.

### WHETHER THIS IS THE AGE OF THE AGE

*God's eternity contains all the ages of time, yet has no extent or parts.*

21.1 Is this, then, "the age of the age," or "the ages of ages"? For just as an age of time contains all temporal things, so your eternity contains even the ages of time themselves. It is an age because of its indivisible unity, and ages because of its endless immensity. And although you are so great, Lord, that all things are full of you and are in you, yet you are so without any spatial extent that there is neither middle nor half nor any part in you.[15]

### THAT GOD ALONE IS WHAT HE IS AND WHO HE IS

*Only God exists properly and absolutely, with no past or future, only present being.*

22.1 You alone, then, Lord, are what you are, and you are who you are. For what is one thing as a whole and another in its parts, and has something changeable in it, is not altogether what it is. And what began from not being, and can be thought not to exist, and returns to not being unless it subsists through something else; and what has a past that it no longer is, and a future that it not yet is: that does not exist in the proper and absolute sense. But you are what you are, because whatever you are at any time or in any way, that you are wholly and always.[16]

22.2 And you are the one who exists properly and simply, for you have neither past nor future but only present being, and

15 *Saeculum saeculi* and *saecula saeculorum* are liturgical phrases usually rendered "for ever and ever."

you cannot be thought ever not to exist. And you are life and light and wisdom and blessedness and eternity and many goods of this kind, and yet you are nothing but the one supreme good: you, wholly sufficient to yourself, needing nothing, whom all things need in order to exist and to be well.

### THAT THIS GOOD IS FATHER, SON AND HOLY SPIRIT

*The supreme good is the Trinity, the one necessary thing, which is every good.*

23.1 This good is you, God the Father; this is your Word, that is, your Son. For there can be nothing other than what you are, nothing greater or less than you, in the Word by which you speak yourself; for your Word is true as you are truthful, and therefore it is Truth itself, just as you are, not other than you; and you are so simple that nothing can be born of you other than what you are. This same good is the Love that is one and common to you and your Son, that is, the Holy Spirit proceeding from both. For this same Love is not unequal to you or to your Son, since you love yourself and him, and he loves you and himself, as much as you and he are; nor is it anything other than you and him, since it is not unequal to you and him; nor can anything proceed from supreme simplicity other than what that is from which it proceeds. And what each one is individually, that the whole Trinity is together, Father and Son and Holy Spirit; since each individually is nothing other than supremely simple unity and supremely unified simplicity, which can neither be multiplied nor be one thing and another. "But one thing is necessary." And this is that one necessary thing in which is every good—or rather, which is the whole good, the one good, the complete good and the only good.[17]

16 Exodus 3:14: "I am who I am."
17 Luke 10:42.

### A GUESS AT WHAT KIND OF GOOD THIS IS, AND HOW GREAT

*If created goods delight us, the good that made them must delight far more.*

24.1 Wake up now, my soul, and raise up your whole understanding, and think as hard as you can what kind of good this is, and how great. For if particular goods are delightful, think intently how delightful that good is which contains the delight of all goods—and not such delight as we have experienced in created things, but as different from it as the Creator differs from the creature. For if created life is good, how good is the life that creates? If health that has been made is pleasant, how pleasant is the health that makes all health? If wisdom is lovable in the knowledge of things that have been created, how lovable is the wisdom that created all things from nothing? Finally, if there are many and great delights in delightful things, what kind of delight, and how great, is there in him who made those very delights?[18]

### WHAT GOODS AWAIT THOSE WHO ENJOY GOD, AND HOW GREAT

*Anselm lists the goods of heaven, from beauty and health to friendship, concord and security.*

25.1 O, whoever enjoys this good—what will he have, and what will he not have! Surely whatever he wants will be, and what he does not want will not be. For there will be goods of body and soul such as "eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man" conceived. Why, then, little man, do you wander through many things, seeking goods for your soul and your body? Love the one good in which all goods are, and it is enough. Desire the simple good that is every good, and it is sufficient. For what do

18 *Salus* means both health and salvation.

you love, my flesh, what do you desire, my soul? It is there, it is there, whatever you love, whatever you desire.[19]

25.2 If beauty delights you: "the just will shine like the sun." If speed, or strength, or a freedom of body that nothing can resist: "they will be like the angels of God," for "it is sown a natural body, and it will rise a spiritual body"—in power, that is, not in nature. If a long and healthy life: there is healthy eternity and eternal health, for "the just will live for ever, and the salvation of the just is from the Lord." If fullness: they will be filled "when the glory of God appears." If drunkenness: "they will be drunk with the abundance of the house of God." If melody: there the choirs of angels sing together to God without end. If any pleasure, not impure but pure: God "will give them drink from the torrent of his pleasure."

25.3 If wisdom: the very wisdom of God will show itself to them. If friendship: they will love God more than themselves, and one another as themselves, and God will love them more than they love themselves; for they will love him, and themselves, and one another through him, and he will love himself and them through himself. If concord: they will all have one will, for they will have no will but the will of God alone. If power: they will be all-powerful in their own will, as God is in his. For just as God will be able to do what he wills through himself, so they will be able to do what they will through him; for just as they will want nothing but what he wants, so he will want whatever they want; and what he wants cannot fail to be. If honor and riches: God "will set" his "good and faithful servants over many things"; indeed, they "will be called" "children of God" and gods, and so they will be; and where his Son is, there they too will be, "heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ." If true security: surely they will be as certain that never and in no way will these things—or rather this good—fail them, as they will be certain that they will not lose it of their own accord, that God who loves them will not take it from those who love him against

19 1 Corinthians 2:9.

their will, and that nothing more powerful than God will separate them from God against their will.

25.4 But what kind of joy is there, and how great, where there is a good of such a kind and so great? Human heart, needy heart, heart that has known hardships—no, heart overwhelmed by hardships: how much would you rejoice if you abounded in all these things? Ask your innermost self whether it could contain its joy at so great a happiness of its own. But surely, if someone else whom you loved exactly as yourself had that same happiness, your joy would be doubled, for you would rejoice no less for him than for yourself. And if two or three or many more had it, you would rejoice as much for each of them as for yourself, if you loved each one as yourself. So in that perfect love of countless blessed angels and human beings, where no one will love another less than himself, each will rejoice for every other just as for himself. If, then, the human heart will scarcely contain its joy over so great a good of its own, how will it have room for so many joys, and such great ones? And indeed, since each rejoices in another's good just as much as he loves that other, then just as in that perfect happiness each one will love God incomparably more than himself and all the others with him, so he will rejoice beyond all reckoning more in God's happiness than in his own and in that of all the others with him. But if they love God "with all their heart, all their mind, all their soul" in such a way that the whole heart, the whole mind, the whole soul is still not equal to the worthiness of that love, then surely they will rejoice "with all their heart, all their mind, all their soul" in such a way that the whole heart, the whole mind, the whole soul will not be equal to the fullness of that joy.

## WHETHER THIS IS THE FULL JOY THE LORD PROMISES

*The joy of the blessed exceeds all measure; Anselm prays to know and love God more.*

26.1 My God and my Lord, my hope and the joy of my heart, tell my soul whether this is the joy of which you speak to us through

your Son: "Ask and you will receive, that your joy may be full." For I have found a joy that is full, and more than full. When the heart is full, the mind full, the soul full, the whole person full of that joy, joy will still overflow beyond measure. So that joy will not enter wholly into those who rejoice; rather, those who rejoice will enter wholly into joy. Tell me, Lord, tell your servant inwardly, in his heart, whether this is the joy into which your servants will enter, those who will enter "into the joy of their Lord." But surely that joy with which your chosen ones will rejoice is something "eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor has it entered into the human heart."[20] So I have not yet said or thought, Lord, how greatly those blessed ones of yours will rejoice. Surely they will rejoice as much as they love, and they will love as much as they know. How much will they know you then, Lord, and how much will they love you? Surely "eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor has it entered into the human heart" in this life how much they will know and love you in that life.

26.2 I pray, God, that I may know you and love you, so that I may rejoice in you. And if I cannot do so fully in this life, may I at least advance day by day until that fullness comes. Let knowledge of you grow in me here, and there be made full; let love of you increase here, and there be full; so that here my joy may be great in hope, and there full in reality. Lord, through your Son you command us—no, you counsel us—to ask, and you promise that we will receive, "that our joy may be full." I ask, Lord, for what you counsel through our "wonderful counselor"; may I receive what you promise through your truth, "that my joy may be full." God of truth, I ask: may I receive, "that my joy may be full." Meanwhile let my mind meditate on it, let my tongue speak of it. Let my heart love it, let my mouth talk of it.[21] Let all that I am hunger for it, let my flesh thirst for it, let my whole

20 John 16:24 and Matthew 25:21.
21 "Wonderful counselor" is a title of the Messiah in Isaiah 9:6, here applied to Christ.

being long for it, until I “enter into the joy of my Lord,” who is God, three and one, “blessed for ever. Amen.”

# On Behalf of the Fool

*Liber pro insipiente*
*Gaunilo of Marmoutier objects, with the famous lost island.*

## GAUNILO RESTATES THE ARGUMENT

*Gaunilo summarizes Anselm's proof as he, speaking for the fool, understands it.*

G1.1 To one who doubts whether there is, or denies that there is, some nature of this kind, than which nothing greater can be thought, it is said that its existence is proved, first, from this: that the very person who denies or doubts it already has it in his understanding, since when he hears it spoken of he understands what is said; and next, that what he understands must exist not in the understanding alone but also in reality. And this is proved as follows: it is greater to exist in the understanding and in reality than in the understanding alone. And if that thing is in the understanding alone, then whatever also existed in reality would be greater than it; and so what is greater than all things would be less than something, and would not be greater than all —which is plainly a contradiction. Therefore what is greater than all, which has already been proved to be in the understanding, must exist not in the understanding alone but also in reality, since otherwise it could not be greater than all.

### ANYTHING CAN BE IN THE UNDERSTANDING

*Gaunilo objects that false and doubtful things are also in the understanding when heard.*

G2.1 The reply might be made that this is said to be in my understanding already only because I understand what is said. But could I not equally be said to have in my understanding all sorts of false things, things that in no way at all exist in themselves, since, if someone spoke of them, I would understand whatever he said? Unless perhaps it is established that this thing is such that it cannot be held in thought in the way that any false or doubtful things can; and that is why I am not said to think of it when I hear it, or to have it in thought, but to understand it and have it in the understanding—namely, because I cannot think of it except by understanding, that is, by grasping with knowledge, that it actually exists. But if that is so, then, first, there will be no difference here between having a thing in the understanding, which comes first in time, and understanding that the thing exists, which comes later—as happens with a picture, which is first in the painter's mind and afterwards in the finished work. Second, it could hardly ever be believable that, once this has been spoken and heard, it cannot be thought not to exist in the way that even God can be thought not to exist. For if God cannot, why was this whole argument undertaken against someone who denies or doubts that there is any such nature? Finally, that this thing is such that, as soon as it is thought, it cannot but be perceived by the understanding with certainty as indubitably existing—this must be proved to me by some unquestionable argument, but not by this one: that it is already in my understanding when I understand what I hear. For in my understanding, I still think, there could equally be any other uncertain or even false things spoken by someone whose words I understood; and all the more so if, deceived, as often happens, I believed them—I who do not yet believe this.

### THE PAINTER'S EXAMPLE DOES NOT FIT

*A picture in the painter's mind is part of his own understanding; God is not.*

G3.1 Hence the example of the painter who already has in his understanding the picture he is going to make cannot fit this argument well enough. For that picture, before it is made, is held in the painter's very art; and any such thing in an artist's art is nothing other than a part of his own understanding. As St Augustine says, when a craftsman is going to make a chest in actual work, he first has it in his art. The chest that is made in the work is not life; the chest that is in the art is life, because the craftsman's soul, in which all these things exist before they are brought forth, is alive. For why are these things life in the living soul of the craftsman, except that they are nothing other than the knowledge or understanding of that soul itself?[1] But whatever true thing, beyond those known to belong to the very nature of the mind, is perceived by the understanding, whether heard or thought up, that true thing is without doubt one thing, and the understanding by which it is grasped is another. So even if it is true that there is something than which nothing greater can be thought, this thing, when heard and understood, is still not like the not-yet-made picture in the painter's understanding.

### WE CANNOT THINK OF GOD AS A KNOWN THING

*Gaunilo can think of God only through the word, since he knows nothing like God.*

G4.1 Add to this the point made above: that this thing greater than all that can be thought, which is said to be nothing other than God himself, I can no more think of or have in my understanding when I hear of it, on the basis of a real thing known to me by species or genus, than I can God himself—whom for this very reason I can also think not to exist. For I neither know the real-

1 Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John* 1.17.

ity that God is, nor can I infer it from some other similar thing, since you yourself maintain that it is such that nothing can be like it. For if I heard something said about some man wholly unknown to me, whom I did not even know to exist, I could still think of him on the basis of the real thing that a man is, through that specific or general knowledge by which I know what a man, or men, are. And yet it could happen that, if the speaker were lying, the man I was thinking of did not exist; though I would still be thinking of him on the basis of a real thing—not the thing that this man was, but the thing that any man is. So I cannot have this thing in thought or in understanding, when I hear someone say "God" or "something greater than all," in the way I would have that false man. For while I can think of the man on the basis of a real thing known to me, I cannot do so at all with this, except only on the basis of the word; and on the basis of a word alone one can scarcely, if ever, think anything true. For when it is thought in that way, what is thought is not so much the word itself—which is indeed a real thing, namely the sound of letters or syllables—as the meaning of the word heard. But it is not thought as by someone who knows what is usually meant by that word, who thinks of it on the basis of the thing, or of something true at least in thought alone. It is thought rather as by someone who does not know it, and who thinks only by way of the movement of the mind produced by hearing the word, a mind trying to picture to itself the meaning of the word it has taken in—and it would be remarkable if it could ever do so truly. So it is in this way, and so far in no other, that this thing is established as being in my understanding when I hear and understand someone saying that there is something greater than all that can be thought. So much for the claim that this supreme nature is already in my understanding.

## EXISTENCE IN REALITY HAS NOT BEEN PROVED

*Gaunilo denies that the greater-than-all must exist in reality until it is first shown to exist.*

G5.1 Next, it is proved to me that it necessarily exists not only in the understanding but also in reality, on the grounds that, unless it did, whatever exists in reality would be greater than it; and so it would not be greater than all, which it has already been proved to be in the understanding. To this I reply: if we must say that something is in the understanding which cannot even be thought on the basis of the reality of any thing, I do not deny that it is in mine in that sense. But since existence in reality can in no way follow from this, I do not yet grant it that existence at all, until it is proved to me by an unquestionable argument. For whoever says that this thing exists because otherwise what is greater than all will not be greater than all does not pay enough attention to whom he is speaking. For I do not yet say—indeed I deny, or doubt—that that greater thing exists as any real thing; nor do I grant it any other existence than this (if it must be called existence): that the mind, on the basis of a word merely heard, tries to picture to itself a thing wholly unknown to it. How then is it proved to me that that greater thing subsists in reality because it is established that it is greater than all, when I still deny, or doubt, that this is established—so much so that I do not say that this greater thing is even in my understanding or thought in the way that many doubtful and uncertain things are? For it must first be made certain that this greater thing really exists somewhere; and only then, from the fact that it is greater than all, will it be beyond question that it also subsists in itself.

## THE LOST ISLAND

*The same reasoning would prove that a perfect lost island in the Ocean really exists.*

G6.1 For example: some say that somewhere in the Ocean there is an island which, because of the difficulty—or rather the impossibility—of finding what does not exist, some call "the lost island." They tell stories that it abounds in a priceless wealth of riches and delights of every kind, far more than is said of the Fortunate Isles; and that, though it has no owner or inhabitant, it surpasses in every way all the other lands that people inhabit in the abundance of its possessions. Suppose someone tells me that this is so; I will easily understand what is said, since there is nothing difficult in it.[2] But suppose he then goes on, as if drawing a consequence, and says: "You can no longer doubt that this island, more excellent than all lands, truly exists somewhere in reality, since you do not doubt that it is in your understanding. And since it is more excellent to exist not in the understanding alone but also in reality, it must exist in this way. For unless it did, any other land that exists in reality would be more excellent than it; and so the island you have already understood to be more excellent would not be more excellent." If, I say, he wanted by these means to establish for me that this island truly exists and that it can no longer be doubted, I would either think he was joking, or I do not know which of us I ought to consider the greater fool: myself, if I granted it, or him, if he thought he had established the existence of that island with any certainty—unless he had first shown me that its very excellence is in my understanding only as a thing truly and indubitably existing, and in no way as something false or uncertain.

2 The Fortunate Isles, or Isles of the Blessed, were a legendary paradise in the western Ocean in Greek and Roman tradition.

## CANNOT BE THOUGHT NOT TO EXIST

*Gaunilo suggests God's non-existence cannot be understood, and doubts whether he can think himself nonexistent.*

G7.1 These are the replies the fool might make, for the time being, to the objections. When it is next asserted to him that this greater thing is such that it cannot fail to exist even in thought alone—and this again is proved from nothing other than the fact that otherwise it would not be greater than all—he could give this same reply and say: "When did I say that such a thing, that is, something greater than all, exists in reality, so that from this it should be proved to me that it exists in reality so truly that it cannot even be thought not to exist?" Therefore it must first be proved by some utterly certain argument that there is some superior nature, that is, one greater and better than all that exist, so that from this we can then prove all the other attributes that what is greater and better than all must not lack. When it is said, though, that this supreme thing cannot be thought not to exist, it would perhaps be better to say that its not existing, or even its being able not to exist, cannot be understood. For in the strict sense of that word, false things cannot be understood—though they can certainly be thought, in the way that the fool thought that God does not exist. I too know with complete certainty that I exist, but I know no less that I am able not to exist; whereas I understand without any doubt that that supreme being which is God both exists and cannot fail to exist. Whether I can think that I do not exist, as long as I know with complete certainty that I exist, I do not know. But if I can, why not also anything else I know with the same certainty? And if I cannot, this will no longer be peculiar to God.

### PRAISE FOR THE REST OF THE BOOK

*Gaunilo praises the rest of the Proslogion and asks for a stronger opening argument.*

G8.1 The rest of that little book is argued so truly, so brilliantly and splendidly, is so full of benefit, and so fragrant with a certain inward perfume of devout and holy feeling, that it should in no way be despised because of those points at the beginning which, though rightly felt, are less firmly argued. Rather, those points should be argued more robustly, and the whole received with great reverence and praise.

# Anselm's Reply to Gaunilo

*Quid ad haec respondeat editor ipsius libelli*
*Anselm answers point by point and restates his argument.*

### ANSELM ANSWERS THE CATHOLIC, NOT THE FOOL

*Since his critic is a believer, Anselm will reply to him as a Catholic.*

R.Pr.1 Since the one who criticizes me in these remarks is not that fool against whom I spoke in my little work, but someone who is no fool, and a Catholic, speaking on the fool's behalf, it may be enough for me to reply to the Catholic.

### IF IT CAN BE THOUGHT, IT MUST EXIST

*Anselm argues that what cannot be thought to begin must exist if it can be thought at all.*

R1.1 You say—whoever you are who say that the fool can say these things—that something than which nothing greater can be thought is in the understanding only in the way that something is which cannot even be thought on the basis of the reality of any thing. And you say that what I claim—that that than which nothing greater can be thought exists also in reality because it is in the understanding—follows no more than that the lost island most certainly exists because someone who hears it described in words does not doubt that it is in his understanding. But I say: if that than which nothing greater can be thought is not understood or thought, and is not in the understanding or in thought, then surely either God is not that than which nothing greater can be thought, or he is not understood or thought, and is not in the understanding or in thought. To show how false this is, I

appeal to your faith and conscience as the firmest argument. Therefore that than which nothing greater can be thought is truly understood and thought, and is in the understanding and in thought. So either the premises by which you try to prove the contrary are not true, or what you think you conclude does not follow from them. You also think that it does not follow, from the fact that something than which nothing greater can be thought is understood, that it is in the understanding; nor, if it is in the understanding, that it therefore exists in reality. To this I say with certainty: if it can so much as be thought to exist, it must exist. For that than which nothing greater can be thought cannot be thought to exist except as without beginning. But whatever can be thought to exist, and does not exist, can be thought to exist through a beginning. So that than which nothing greater can be thought cannot be something that can be thought to exist and yet does not exist. If, then, it can be thought to exist, it exists of necessity. Further: if it can so much as be thought, it must exist. For no one who denies or doubts that there is something than which nothing greater can be thought denies or doubts that, if it existed, it could not fail to exist either in actuality or in the understanding. Otherwise it would not be that than which nothing greater can be thought. But whatever can be thought, and does not exist, could, if it existed, fail to exist either in actuality or in the understanding. So if it can so much as be thought, that than which nothing greater can be thought cannot fail to exist. But let us suppose that it does not exist, if it can so much as be thought. Yet whatever can be thought, and does not exist, would not, if it existed, be that than which nothing greater can be thought. So if that than which nothing greater can be thought existed, it would not be that than which nothing greater can be thought—which is utterly absurd. It is false, then, that something than which nothing greater can be thought does not exist, if it can so much as be thought; and much more so if it can be understood or be in the understanding. I will say something more. Without doubt, whatever does not exist somewhere or at some time, even if it does exist some-

where or at some time, can still be thought to exist never and nowhere, just as it does not exist somewhere or at some time. For what did not exist yesterday and exists today can, just as it is understood not to have existed yesterday, be taken never to exist; and what is not here but is elsewhere can, just as it is not here, be thought to exist nowhere. Likewise, a thing whose individual parts are not where or when its other parts are: all its parts, and therefore the whole itself, can be thought to exist never or nowhere. For even if time is said to exist always, and the world everywhere, still time as a whole does not exist always, nor the world as a whole everywhere. And just as the individual parts of time do not exist when the others do, so they can be thought never to exist; and the individual parts of the world, just as they are not where the others are, can be taken to exist nowhere. Moreover, what is joined together from parts can be taken apart in thought, and so not exist. Therefore whatever does not exist as a whole somewhere or at some time, even if it does exist, can be thought not to exist. But that than which nothing greater can be thought, if it exists, cannot be thought not to exist; otherwise, if it exists, it is not that than which nothing greater can be thought, which is incoherent. So in no way does it fail to exist as a whole somewhere or at some time; it exists always and everywhere as a whole. Do you think that the thing of which these things are understood can in some measure be thought or understood, or be in thought or in the understanding? For if it cannot, these things cannot be understood of it. And if you say that what is not fully understood is not understood and is not in the understanding, then say that someone who cannot gaze at the purest light of the sun does not see the daylight, which is nothing but the light of the sun. Surely that than which nothing greater can be thought is understood, and is in the understanding, at least to the extent that these things are understood of it.

### UNDERSTOOD, THEREFORE IN THE UNDERSTANDING

*Anselm defends each step: what is understood is in the understanding, and cannot be there alone.*

R2.1 So I said in the argument you criticize that when the fool hears "that than which nothing greater can be thought" spoken, he understands what he hears. Surely anyone who does not understand it, if it is said in a language he knows, has either no understanding at all or an extremely dull one. Next I said that if it is understood, it is in the understanding. Or is what has been shown to exist necessarily in reality in no understanding at all? But you will say that even if it is in the understanding, this does not follow from its being understood. See how it does follow, from its being understood, that it is in the understanding. For just as what is thought is thought by thought, and what is thought by thought is in thought just as it is thought; so what is understood is understood by the understanding, and what is understood by the understanding is in the understanding just as it is understood. What could be plainer? Next I said that if it is even in the understanding alone, it can be thought to exist also in reality, which is greater. So if it is in the understanding alone, then that very thing than which nothing greater can be thought is something than which something greater can be thought. What, I ask, follows more logically? For if it is even in the understanding alone, can it not be thought to exist also in reality? Or if it can, does not whoever thinks this think something greater than it, if it is in the understanding alone? What then follows more logically than that, if that than which nothing greater can be thought is in the understanding alone, it is the same as that than which something greater can be thought? But surely in no understanding is that than which something greater can be thought that than which nothing greater can be thought. Does it not follow, then, that that than which nothing greater can be thought, if it is in any understanding at all, is not in the understanding alone? For if it is in the understanding alone, it is that

than which something greater can be thought—which is incoherent.

### THE LOST ISLAND ANSWERED

*The argument applies only to that than which nothing greater can be thought, so the island fails.*

R3.1 But this, you say, is just as if someone were to say of an island in the Ocean, surpassing all lands in its fertility, which is called "lost" because of the difficulty—or rather the impossibility—of finding what does not exist, that it cannot be doubted that it truly exists in reality, because anyone easily understands it when it is described in words. I speak with confidence: if anyone finds for me something, existing either in reality or in thought alone, other than that than which nothing greater can be thought, to which he can apply the logic of this argument of mine, I will find that lost island and give it to him, never to be lost again. But it now seems plainly evident that that than which nothing greater can be thought cannot be thought not to exist, since it exists by so certain a reason of truth; for otherwise it would not exist at all. Finally, if anyone says that he thinks it does not exist, I say that when he thinks this, he either thinks something than which nothing greater can be thought, or he does not. If he does not, then he does not think that what he is not thinking of does not exist. But if he does, then surely he thinks something that cannot even be thought not to exist. For if it could be thought not to exist, it could be thought to have a beginning and an end; but this is impossible. So whoever thinks of it thinks of something that cannot even be thought not to exist; and whoever thinks this does not think that this very thing does not exist—otherwise he would be thinking what cannot be thought. Therefore that than which nothing greater can be thought cannot be thought not to exist.

### WHY "CANNOT BE THOUGHT" IS THE RIGHT PHRASE

*Anything but God can be thought not to exist, even while known to exist.*

R4.1 You say that when it is said that this supreme thing cannot be thought not to exist, it would perhaps be better to say that its not existing, or even its being able not to exist, cannot be understood. But "cannot be thought" is rather what needed to be said. For if I had said that the thing itself cannot be understood not to exist, perhaps you yourself, who say that in the strict sense of that word false things cannot be understood, would object that nothing that exists can be understood not to exist, since it is false that what exists does not exist; and so it would not be peculiar to God that he cannot be understood not to exist. And if one of the things that most certainly exist can be understood not to exist, then other certain things can likewise be understood not to exist. But this objection certainly cannot be made about thinking, if the matter is considered carefully. For even though none of the things that exist can be understood not to exist, they can all nevertheless be thought not to exist, except that which exists supremely. Indeed all those things, and only those, can be thought not to exist which have a beginning, or an end, or a joining of parts, and, as I have already said, whatever does not exist as a whole somewhere or at some time. But that alone cannot be thought not to exist in which no thought finds a beginning, or an end, or a joining of parts, and which any thought finds only as existing always and everywhere as a whole. Know, then, that you can think that you do not exist, even while you know with complete certainty that you exist—and I am surprised that you said you did not know this. For we think many things not to exist which we know do exist, and many things to exist which we know do not—not judging them to be so, but imagining them to be as we think them. And indeed we can think that something does not exist while we know that it does, because we can do the one at the same time as we know the other. And we cannot think

that something does not exist while we know that it does, because we cannot think that it exists and does not exist at the same time. If, then, someone distinguishes the two senses of this statement in this way, he will understand that nothing, while it is known to exist, can be thought not to exist; and that whatever exists, except that than which nothing greater can be thought, can be thought not to exist even when it is known to exist. So it is both peculiar to God that he cannot be thought not to exist, and yet many things cannot, while they exist, be thought not to exist. As for the way in which God is said to be thought not to exist, I think that has been sufficiently explained in the little book itself.

### "GREATER THAN ALL" IS NOT MY FORMULA

*Anselm says Gaunilo misstated his argument, which rests on "nothing greater can be thought."*

R5.1 What the other objections are that you raise against me on behalf of the fool is easy to see even for someone of little wisdom, and so I had thought I should refrain from showing it. But since I hear that some who read them think they carry weight against me, I will say a few words about them. First, you often repeat that I say that what is greater than all is in the understanding, and that if it is in the understanding, it is also in reality, since otherwise what is greater than all would not be greater than all. Nowhere in anything I have said is such a proof to be found. For saying "greater than all" and saying "that than which nothing greater can be thought" do not have the same force for proving that what is spoken of exists in reality. For if someone says that that than which nothing greater can be thought is not something in reality, or can fail to exist, or can even be thought not to exist, he can easily be refuted. For what does not exist can fail to exist; and what can fail to exist can be thought not to exist. But whatever can be thought not to exist, if it exists, is not that than which nothing greater can be thought; and if it does not exist, then surely, if it did exist, it would not be that than

which nothing greater can be thought. But it cannot be said that that than which nothing greater can be thought, if it exists, is not that than which nothing greater can be thought; or that, if it existed, it would not be that than which nothing greater can be thought. It is clear, then, that it neither does not exist, nor can fail to exist, nor can be thought not to exist. For otherwise, if it exists, it is not what it is said to be; and if it existed, it would not be. But this does not seem so easy to prove of what is said to be greater than all. For it is not as clear that what can be thought not to exist is not greater than all things that exist as it is that it is not that than which nothing greater can be thought. Nor is it as indubitable that, if there is something greater than all, it is nothing other than that than which nothing greater can be thought, or that, if there were, it would likewise be nothing other, as it is certain of what is called that than which nothing greater can be thought. For suppose someone says that there is something greater than all things that exist, and yet that this very thing can be thought not to exist, and that something greater than it can be thought, even if it does not exist: can one here infer as plainly, "So it is not greater than all things that exist," as one would most plainly say in the other case, "So it is not that than which nothing greater can be thought"? For the former needs some argument other than this phrase, "greater than all." But in the latter case there is no need for anything other than the very words "that than which nothing greater can be thought." So if what that than which nothing greater can be thought proves of itself, through itself, cannot be proved in the same way of what is said to be greater than all, you have unjustly criticized me for saying what I did not say, since it differs so much from what I did say. And if it can be proved by some other argument, you still should not have criticized me for saying what can be proved. Whether it can, anyone easily judges who recognizes that that than which nothing greater can be thought can do this. For that than which nothing greater can be thought can in no way be understood except as that which alone is greater than all. So just as that than which nothing greater can

be thought is understood and is in the understanding, and is therefore asserted to exist in reality, so what is said to be greater than all is concluded to be understood and to be in the understanding, and therefore to exist in reality of necessity. You see, then, how rightly you compared me to that fool who wanted to assert that the lost island exists merely because it is understood when described.

### FALSE THINGS IN THE UNDERSTANDING

*Showing the thing is in the understanding was only the first step of the proof.*

R6.1 You object that any false or doubtful things can equally be understood and be in the understanding, just like what I was speaking of. I wonder what you thought you were objecting against me here. I wanted to prove something that was in doubt, and for that it was enough, at first, to show that it is understood and is in the understanding in some way or other, so that it could then be considered whether it is in the understanding alone, like false things, or in reality as well, like true ones. For if false and doubtful things are understood and are in the understanding in this way—because, when they are spoken, the hearer understands what the speaker means—nothing prevents what I spoke of from being understood and being in the understanding. But how do these two claims of yours fit together: that if someone spoke false things, you would understand whatever he said; and that, since this thing exists, you are not said to think of it when you hear it, or to have it in thought, in the way that even false things are held in thought, because you cannot think of it except by understanding—that is, by grasping with knowledge—that it actually exists? How, I say, do they fit together: that false things are understood, and that to understand is to grasp with knowledge that something exists? That is no concern of mine; you see to it. And if false things too are understood in some way, and this definition applies not to every kind of understanding but to one particular kind, then I should not have been criti-

cized for saying that that than which nothing greater can be thought is understood and is in the understanding, even before it was certain that it actually exists.

### SOMETHING UNDERSTOOD IN PART

*It is easier to prove what is understood in some way than what is not understood at all.*

R7.1 Next, you say that it could hardly ever be believable that, once this has been spoken and heard, it cannot be thought not to exist in the way that even God can be thought not to exist. Let those who have acquired even a little skill in disputation and argument answer for me. Is it reasonable for someone to deny what he understands because it is said to be the same as something he denies because he does not understand it? Or if what is in some measure understood is sometimes denied, and it is the same as what is not understood at all, is not what is in doubt more easily proved from what is in some understanding than from what is in none? So it cannot be believable that anyone denies that than which nothing greater can be thought, which he understands in some measure when he hears it, on the grounds that he denies God, whose meaning he does not think of in any way. Or if the one is also denied because it is not fully understood, is not what is understood in some way still more easily proved than what is not understood in any way? So it was not unreasonable, in arguing against the fool to prove that God exists, to bring forward that than which nothing greater can be thought, since he would understand God in no way, but this in some way.

### WE CAN FORM AN IDEA OF THE GREATEST

*By rising from lesser goods to greater ones, one can form an idea of the greatest.*

R8.1 As for your careful proof that that than which nothing greater can be thought is not like a picture not yet made in the painter's understanding, it serves no purpose. For I did not

bring in the picture planned in advance because I wanted to claim that the thing under discussion was like it, but only so that I could show that something is in the understanding which is not understood to exist. Again, you say that when you hear of that than which nothing greater can be thought, you cannot think of it or have it in your understanding on the basis of a real thing known to you by genus or species, since you neither know the thing itself nor can you come to know it from some other similar thing. But it is plain that the matter stands otherwise. For since every lesser good is like a greater good insofar as it is good, it is clear to any rational mind that, by climbing from lesser goods to greater ones, we can infer a great deal about that than which nothing greater can be thought from those things than which something greater can be thought. Who, for example, cannot at least think this, even if he does not believe that what he thinks exists in reality: that if something that has a beginning and an end is good, then a good that begins but does not end is much better; and that just as the latter is better than the former, so what has neither end nor beginning is better than the latter, even if it always passes from the past through the present into the future; and that, whether or not there is anything of this kind in reality, what in no way needs, or is forced, to change or move is far better still? Can this not be thought? Or can something greater than this be thought? Or is this not to infer that than which nothing greater can be thought from things than which something greater can be thought? There is, then, a way by which that than which nothing greater can be thought can be inferred. So the fool, who does not accept sacred authority, can easily be refuted if he denies that that than which nothing greater can be thought can be inferred from other things. But if any Catholic denies it, let him remember that the invisible things of God, from the creation of the world, are clearly seen, being understood through the things that are made, even his eternal power and divinity.[1]

1 Romans 1:20.

### EVEN THE FOOL UNDERSTANDS THE PHRASE

*Whoever denies the phrase must understand it, and so thinks of what cannot fail to exist.*

R9.1 But even if it were true that that than which nothing greater can be thought cannot be thought or understood, it would still not be false that "that than which nothing greater can be thought" can be thought and understood. For just as nothing prevents us from saying "ineffable," though what is called ineffable cannot be said; and just as "unthinkable" can be thought, though what is fittingly called unthinkable cannot be thought: so when "that than which nothing greater can be thought" is said, what is heard can without doubt be thought and understood, even if the thing itself than which nothing greater can be thought cannot be thought or understood. For even if someone is such a fool as to say that there is not something than which nothing greater can be thought, he will not be so shameless as to say that he cannot understand or think what he is saying; or if such a person is found, not only should his words be spat out, but he himself should be spat upon. Whoever, then, denies that there is something than which nothing greater can be thought surely understands and thinks the denial he makes; and he cannot understand or think that denial without its parts. But one part of it is "that than which nothing greater can be thought." So whoever denies this understands and thinks that than which nothing greater can be thought. Now it is plain that, in the same way, what cannot fail to exist can be thought and understood; and whoever thinks this thinks something greater than one who thinks what can fail to exist. So when that than which nothing greater can be thought is being thought, if what is thought is something that can fail to exist, then that than which nothing greater can be thought is not being thought. But the same thing cannot be thought and not thought at the same time. Therefore whoever thinks that than which nothing greater can be thought thinks not of something that can fail to exist, but of something

that cannot. Hence what he thinks must exist, since whatever can fail to exist is not what he is thinking of.

## CONCLUSION AND THANKS

*Anselm restates that his proof is necessary and thanks his critic for his praise and criticism.*

R10.1 I think I have shown that in the little book mentioned above I proved, by an argument not weak but quite necessary, that something than which nothing greater can be thought actually exists, and that this argument is not weakened by the strength of any objection. For the meaning of this phrase contains such force of proof in itself that what is said is, of necessity, by the very fact that it is understood or thought, both proved to exist in reality and proved to be whatever we ought to believe about the divine substance. For we believe of the divine substance whatever can be thought, without qualification, to be better to be than not to be. For example, it is better to be eternal than not eternal; good than not good; indeed goodness itself than not goodness itself. But that than which nothing greater can be thought cannot fail to be anything of this kind. Therefore that than which nothing greater can be thought must be whatever we ought to believe about the divine essence. I thank you for your kindness, both in your criticism and in your praise of my little work. For since you have extolled with such praise what seems to you worthy of acceptance, it is quite clear that what seemed weak to you, you criticized out of goodwill, not ill will.