

## Anselm's Argument(s) for God's Existence

Anselm of Canterbury (also known as 'Anselm d'Aosta' by Italians) (1033–1109) was a Christian philosopher and theologian. Of noble stock, he became a novice in his 20s, then a Benedictine monk (where he studied under Lanfranc, a noted jurist), then abbot of Bec (north-west France), and eventually archbishop of Canterbury (from 1093–1109). He composed a number of works including: *De Veritate* (On Truth), *De Libertate Arbitrii* (On the Freedom of Choice), *De Casu Diaboli* (On the Fall of the Devil), *Cur Deus Homo* (Why God was a Man), the *Monologion*, and the *Proslogion*. In these works, he offered a sophisticated and systematic approach to a number of philosophical problems from a Christian perspective. He is nowadays most well known for an argument for God's existence offered in the *Proslogion*, a translation of which may be found below.

### *Proslogion*

#### 2. *That God truly exists*

Accordingly, Lord, You who grant understanding to faith, grant me that — insofar as You see fit — I may understand that You exist in the manner that we believe that You exist and that You are what we believe You to be. We believe that You are something than which nothing greater can be conceived (*et quidem credimus te esse aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari possit*). Or is there no such nature, since 'the Fool has said in his heart, "there is no God"' [Psalm 14:1 (13:1); 53:1 (53:1)]? But when this very same fool hears me say: 'something than which nothing greater can be conceived', he must surely understand what he hears and what he understands is in his intellect even if he does not understand that it exists (*cum audit hoc ipsum quod dico: 'aliquid quo maius nihil cogitari potest', intelligit quod audit; et quod intelligit, in intellectu eius est, etiam si non intelligat illud esse*). You see, it is one thing for a thing to exist in the intellect, and another to understand that the thing exists (*aliud enim est rem esse in intellectu, alium intelligere rem esse*). Thus, when a painter thinks forward (*praecogitare*) to what he is going to do, he has it in the intellect, but he does not yet understand that it exists since he has not yet made it. However, once he has painted it, he has it in the intellect and he understands that it exists because he has now made it. Accordingly, even the fool must admit there to be something than which nothing greater can be conceived in the intellect because, when he hears this [i.e. 'something than which nothing greater can be conceived'] he understands it and whatever is understood is in the intellect (*convincitur ergo etiam insipiens esse vel in intellectu aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari potest, quia hoc, cum audit, intelligit, et quicquid intelligitur, in intellectu est*). But surely that than which a greater cannot be conceived

cannot exist only in the intellect (*et certe id quo maius cogitari nequit, non potest esse in solo intellectu*). For if it is only in the intellect, it can be thought to exist in reality — which is greater (*Si enim vel in solo intellectu est, potest cogitari esse et in re; quod maius est*). So if that than which a greater cannot be conceived is only in the intellect, then that very thing than which a greater cannot be conceived is something than which a greater can be conceived (*si ergo id quo maius cogitari non potest, est in solo intellectu: id ipsum quo maius cogitari non potest, est quo maius cogitari potest*). But this surely cannot be the case. Therefore there is no doubt that something than which a greater cannot be conceived exists both in the intellect and in reality (*existit ergo procul dubio aliquid quo maius cogitari non valet, et in intellectu et in re*).

Ergo Domine, qui das fidei intellectum, da mihi, ut, quantum scis expedire, intelligam, quia es sicut credimus, et hoc es quod credimus. Et quidem credimus te esse aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari possit. An ergo non est aliqua talis natura, quia ‘dixit insipiens in corde suo “non est Deus” [Ps 13,1; 52,1]? Sed certe ipse idem insipiens, cum audit hoc ipsum quod dico: ‘aliquid quo maius nihil cogitari potest’, intelligit quod audit; et quod intelligit, in intellectu eius est, etiam si non intelligat illud esse. Aliud enim est rem esse in intellectu, alium intelligere rem esse. Nam cum pictor praecogitat quae facturus est, habet quidem in intellectu, sed nondum intelligit esse quod nondum fecit. Cum vero iam pinxit, et habet in intellectu et intelligit esse quod iam fecit. Convincitur ergo etiam insipiens esse vel in intellectu aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari potest, quia hoc, cum audit, intelligit, et quidquid intelligitur, in intellectu est. Et certe id quo maius cogitari nequit, non potest esse in solo intellectu. Si enim vel in solo intellectu est, potest cogitari esse et in re; quod maius est. Si ergo id quo maius cogitari non potest, est in solo intellectu: id ipsum quo maius cogitari non potest, est quo maius cogitari potest. Sed certe hoc esse non potest. Existit ergo procul dubio aliquid quo maius cogitari non valet, et in intellectu et in re.

### ***3. That He cannot be conceived not to exist***

Certainly, He exists so truly that He cannot even be conceived not to exist. For it is conceivable that something exists which cannot be conceived not to exist: such a thing is greater than that which can be conceived not to exist. Accordingly, if that than which a greater cannot be conceived can be thought not to exist, then that very thing than which a greater cannot be conceived is *not* that than which a greater cannot be conceived; and this cannot be consistent.

Accordingly, something than which a greater cannot be conceived exists so truly that it is not possible to conceive that it does not exist. And this is You oh our Lord God. You exist so truly, Oh Lord my God that you cannot be conceived not to exist. And this is as it should be for if some mind (*mens*) could conceive something better than you, the creature would climb above its Creator and it would sit in judgement over the Creator, and that is enormously absurd. In fact, everything there is apart from You alone can be conceived not to exist. So of all the things there are, You alone have existence (*habes esse*) most truly and thus most greatly. For everything other than You does not have existence so truly and on that account has it less greatly. Why then was it that “the Fool has said in

his heart, “there is no God”, when it is so obvious to the rational mind that, of all things, You exist most greatly? Why indeed, unless it is because he is stupid and a fool?

Quod utique sic vere est, ut nec cogitari possit non esse. Nam potest cogitari esse aliquid, quod non possit cogitari non esse; quod maius est quam quod non esse cogitari potest. Quare si id quo maius nequit cogitari, potest cogitari non esse: id ipsum quo maius cogitari nequit, non est id quo maius cogitari nequit; quod convenire non potest.

Sic ergo vere est aliquid quo maius cogitari non potest, ut nec cogitari possit non esse. Et hoc es tu, Domine Deus noster. Sic ergo vere es, Domine, Deus meus, ut nec cogitari possis non esse. Et merito. Si enim aliqua mens posset cogitare aliquid melius te, ascenderet creatura super creatorem et iudicaret de creatore; quod valde est absurdum. Et quidem quidquid est aliud praeter te solum, potest cogitari non esse. Solus igitur verissime omnium et ideo maxime omnium habes esse, quia quidquid aliud est, non sic vere, et idcirco minus habet esse. Cur itaque ‘dixit insipiens in corde suo: “non est Deus”’ [Ps 13,1; 52,1], cum tam in promptu sit rationali menti te maxime omnium esse? Cur, nisi quia stultus et insipiens?