

## **What's Different About Anselm's Argument? The Contemporary Relevance of the 'Ontological' Proof**

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There is a story related concerning Bertrand Russell that makes what I hope is an elegant introduction to the following paper. It is said that as a young man Lord Russell, while out for a walk, became, in the course of his meditations, perfectly convinced of the validity of the ontological argument for the existence of God. Alas, he did not have a notebook handy and by the time he returned to his study to write down his discovery found that he had completely lost the train of thought which had led to so remarkable a conclusion (as the reader can see from this story, it is crucial to go nowhere without a pen and notepad!). In the following paper I will attempt nothing so grand as the retrieval of Russell's lost insight. I will however, be attempting a recuperation of another kind. To be brief, I will be asking what the ontological argument meant to its originator, Anselm of Canterbury, as well as how it might be significant for contemporary discussions concerning the so-called "negative theology." Here I refer in particular to the ongoing debate between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion to which, as Marion himself has recognized, Anselm's thought has a vital contribution to make.<sup>1</sup>

It has been observed by several people previous to me that "the ontological argument," as it has come to be called, has taken on a life of its own quite beyond what its first formulator (Anselm of Canterbury) could ever have intended.<sup>2</sup> So much is this the case that while his „argument“ has generated a huge literature, Anselm himself has generated only a steady but slow trickle. Thus, there is an argument we all think we know about, embedded in a literary and philosophical context that hardly anyone has examined. Now there have been voices in the wilderness, such as Katherine Rodgers, who have taken the tack of

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Luc Marion "Is the Ontological Argument Ontological?" *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 30, no. 2 (1992): 20-53. Marion's exchange with Derrida is contained in an article entitled "In the Name," which can be found in *God, The Gift and Postmodernism* ed. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1999), 20-53.

<sup>2</sup> See Katherine Rodgers, *The Neo-Platonic Metaphysics and Epistemology of Anselm of Canterbury* (Queenston: Edwin Mellon Press, 1997).

actually examining Anselm's own words in the full context in which he wrote them. This paper should be taken as building on the work of these scholars. More immediately though, I will be concerned with addressing the role of difference and negation in Anselm's argument as this is the aspect of his work that has, in particular, attracted Marion's attention for it is this aspect of his thinking that, for him, puts the God of the *Proslogion* outside the boundaries of so called "onto-theology" and "the metaphysics of presence."

Simply put, my thesis is that there is a historical context to Anselm's work, the ignorance of which renders much discussion of his „argument“ beside the point. Particularly, all those interminable wrangles about what "fallacy" the ontological argument commits if it commits any are rendered moot. Anselm's argument is nothing more and nothing less than a striking restatement of a claim basic to any form of Platonism, neo, paleo or otherwise: the claim that there is an intuition of unity prior to the duality of subject and object which cannot be brought into question by discursive reason because discursive reason in fact depends upon it. Nor can the object of this intuition be a „mental“ as opposed to a „real“ entity for it is the unity that grounds this distinction. It is neither „a thought“ nor „a being“ because it is the *arche* or first principle presupposed by this distinction; that which allows the difference as difference to appear and so is un-re-presentable as „a difference.“ This claim has, by dint of a long history, been turned into something wholly different than what Anselm intended: the discursive proof or deduction of God's existence from his concept that contemporary philosophy of religion now knows as "the ontological argument."

Thus, the Good whose revealing activity unites the knowing with the real according to Plato is the beginning and the end or terminal point of all philosophical reflection. Now this insight could be false, but if so it is false as an insight (though, as Anselm will teach us, how to conceive of its denial turns out to be a tricky point). It is not a fallacious argument because it is not in discursive terms an argument at all. I propose that what Anselm says in the *Proslogion* has just this character: it claims that the mind has an intuition of wholeness that cannot be captured in any finite category and especially not in the categories of cognitional or contingent being. The ontological argument expresses just such an insight and is to that extent only an „argument“ in a negative sense, a retorsive „showing“ of what we must affirm by adverting to the impossibility of doing otherwise (i.e. it is an insight that can be expressed discursively only in the form of a negative demonstration). Nor can one be completely comfortable in calling what Anselm says „ontological“ for, pace Kant, it is not concerned with finding a bridge from a „concept“ to its „realization“ from within the opposition of the two (something rightly declared impossible), but rather with showing this very opposition to be purely relative: the difference itself of concept and thing vanishes in the intuition of the Good or the One.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Kant's famous comment that "being is not a predicate that adds to the concept of the thing" may be true enough but the present author is hard put to find anything in Anselm, or for that matter Descartes, that violates this principle. Neither of them view existence as „conceptual“ at all which is why they speak of it as a „perfection“ (over and above the conceptual order) and *never* as „a

It is a great merit of Marion's treatment of Anselm that he recognizes just this point; the ontological argument only makes philosophical sense in the context of the supremacy of the good over all that is merely "ontic."<sup>4</sup> Properly speaking, it is an „axiological“ or „agathological“ argument though this crucial point is lost on those who do not view Anselm in relation to the neo-Platonic tradition to which he is giving expression. Still, understanding Anselm fully involves elaborating two further points that are not emphasized in Marion's piece. Firstly, Anselm's Platonism is heavily determined by the epistemological concerns of Hellenistic thought (as we find it in the Stoics and Skeptics) so that the adequation of human thinking to its divine object remains his central concern. Anselm seeks to know God as God is (however paradoxical the expression of this knowledge must perforce be for we know God only as we know him as surpassing all comprehension). His conception of union with God remains intellectual and does not have the character of a „Dionysian“ unknowing that transcends intellection. This is the point I will emphasize in the present paper. Secondly, the negativity of the God who is utterly other than what is simply in the understanding, the God of negative theology, is a mere beginning point for Anselm. This God who is other is also intimately present to us as self-communicating love; more than he is absolute otherness or difference, he is that

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predicate.“ Thus, as infinite goodness God has the perfection of actuality over and above the possible being of the concept because in God actuality and possibility are not opposed determinations. The „highest“ as „highest“ escapes *all* binaries, even that of idea and actuality. Kant was mistaken to assume that „existence“ for Anselm was a determinate property in the conceptual order added to our description of what it must mean to be God. On the contrary, existence here is purely axiological; it concerns the *realization* or *achieved expression* of our descriptive concept (or in Anselm's case our concept of what surpasses conception) and affirms that this cannot be adventitious to the idea of the Good. Thus, for all the weight of philosophical orthodoxy it has been granted, the Kantian criticism must be regarded as largely irrelevant to the assessment of Anselm's claims.

<sup>4</sup> Marion writes, “above and beyond the concept of any essence, the good defined as *epikeina tes ousias* in Plato's sense gives the criterion for the “*id quo majus cogitari nequit*.” The good appears as the dominant feature of any radical definition of God, because it exceeds the essence by the same leap by which it gets rid of the concept.” Marion, “Is the Ontological Argument Ontological?” 214. Marion is correct to point to Plato here in that God's existence has its ground in God's surpassing goodness such that the name of the Good retains always its priority for our understanding. However, *contra* Marion, I do not find in Anselm any trace of the notion that „existence“ is a distinct and lower determination belonging only to what is produced from the Good as in, say, Plotinus or Pseudo-Dionysius. The Good, for Anselm, surpasses all conceivable modes of existence. But note that it does not surpass existence simply for „being“ is not for him a finite determination. Thus, like Augustine, Anselm holds to a unity of the transcendentals rather than a hierarchy. This reflects what one might call the „Porphyrean“ wing of Neo-Platonism as it was Porphyry (most likely) who began the process of uniting (rather than distinguishing) Intellect/Being and the One. Accordingly, the intellect (for Anselm) does achieve a kind of union with God, however precarious and however paradoxical. However, this union remains simply negative in its expression (I know God as the unknowable limit of my conception) until the conclusion of the *Proslogion*, when Anselm achieves his final insight into the nature of God as Trinitarian self-communicating love. Of course, Marion fully concedes that an affirmation of God as infinite being does not by itself constitute an onto-theology. For his (quite strict) definition of this term see Marion, “In the Name,” 30.

which gives of itself (to us and for us) as trinity. This is why the *Proslogion* ends with an evocation of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This second point, however, must be elaborated in a sequel to the present work as it would entail a reading of the whole of the *Proslogion* from the fourth chapter onwards.

The centrality of the problem of our *knowledge* of God in Anselm's thought becomes clear if we consider his relation to the Hellenistic skeptical tradition as it would have been mediated to him by Augustine and Boethius. This is rather striking because Anselm nowhere mentions either the Academic or the Pyrrhonian Skeptics and certainly did not have their texts in front of him (actually Anselm never mentions any of his sources—all transpires within the mind's dialogue with itself and God). Still, whatever the source, the Skeptical problem is fully before Anselm's mind. His concern with the adequacy of knowledge to its object and the adequacy of self-knowledge to knowledge of God (classic Augustinian tropes) is apparent throughout the *Proslogion*, as will become evident below.

The Skeptics in antiquity were deeply concerned with the epistemological question as it had been framed by the Stoics: were there self-authenticating perceptions that could bridge the difference between the knowing subject and the object of knowledge based on a criterion internal to (and hence graspable by) the subject.<sup>5</sup> The Stoics claimed that the clarity and vividness of certain sense perceptions met the criterion of true knowledge: simply in and of themselves they compelled assent. To have what the Stoics called a cataleptic impression, one that was immediately persuasive, was to have an impression that met the inward criterion of truth and infallibly linked subject and object.<sup>6</sup>

The Academic Skeptics, notoriously, denied that this was so. They, rather, held that dreams, hallucinations and other misperceptions could have all the clarity and force of true ones and that one could have opposed presentations equal in vividness and persuasiveness.<sup>7</sup> The Pyrrhonian Skeptics developed an elaborate set of modes or „tropes“ for showing that a perfect equipollence held between all possible disjunctions and that all rational determinations dissolved into their contraries (i.e. like thought and sense; each could be shown to be and not be the criterion).<sup>8</sup> Thus, the Stoic criterion of a perception that compelled assent (dragging one by the hair as it were) could never unite subject and object. For example, I had a perfectly plausible presentation not so long ago that I was capable of levitation; now however it seems just as plausible to me that (sadly) I was dreaming. I cannot decide which is true because the degree of subjective conviction or „force“ is the same in both cases. Any principle to which I appealed to resolve this dilemma would also depend on „the force of conviction“; the very thing which has just been shown to be unreliable. This problematic, addressed in various ways by Pagan and Christian Platonists in late antiquity (especially by

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<sup>5</sup> A.A. Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 126-27.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 95-96

<sup>8</sup> Sextus Empiricus in *Hellenistic Philosophy: Introductory Readings*, trans. Brad Inwood and L.P. Gerson (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1988), 198-208.

Augustine in his criticisms of the Academics; but in his own way by Plotinus as well) lies at the base of what Anselm attempts in the *Proslogion*. The whole question addressed by this work is how a finite and divided subject can be adequate to the real; how we can know that there is an „object“ „out there“ that corresponds to our thinking about it. How, from the conceptual being of our internal presentations can we get to a real „x“? The Skeptics say this cannot be done. Anselm says it can but only in relation to „God“ or the Platonic „Good“; the one „reality“ of which it can make no sense to ask whether its concept corresponds to its actuality because it is a pure unity in which thought and being cannot be divided. Our awareness of God, as Augustine also held, is a cataleptic impression; the one self-authenticating mental datum, though, as the scare quotes used above indicate, God is not an „object“ in the usual sense (because he is not „an entity“ such as I can comprehend through a finite representation), is not really „out there“ except metaphorically (i.e. I am not intrinsic to his activity in the same way that he is intrinsic to mine), and is not really derived from his concept (because for him idea and reality are one). The solution to Skepticism is not really bridging the impossible gap between subject and object but to show that this is a relative distinction that cannot capture the character of our most fundamental intuitions of goodness and perfection.

Thus, whether or not Anselm ever read a skeptical author his thought passes through a skeptical moment precisely conceived. This can be seen from the very beginning of the *Proslogion* itself. In the preface to this work Anselm explains its genesis in terms of a certain problem he had in apprehending (*not* comprehending) the existence of God. In his previous theological synthesis, the *Monologion*, he had offered a series of demonstrations of the existence of God in terms of the universal good in which all particular goods had to be conceived as participating, the Being in which all beings had to be conceived as participating and the perfection which stood to all things as their measure.<sup>9</sup> These arguments assume a passage from the finitude of created things to their source and ground in something non-finite, something in which the transcendental properties shared partially by all beings were perfectly and fully realized at once.

Now these are interesting and subtle arguments in their own right but what we are now interested in is the reason why Anselm came to regard them as inadequate: put simply, they are vulnerable to the skeptical objection that their form does not correspond to the content they supposedly apprehend; they do not „adequate“ the mind to that which it seeks to know. Each of these arguments leads to a particular divine attribute that is only a distinct object of apprehension for us; it concludes to a plurality of attributes whereas the substance of God is a unity exclusive of the division of subject and predicate. These arguments do not conclude to the one but to a plurality posterior to the one and so fail of their object. The dividedness of human consciousness does not thus rise to the undivided and so never escapes itself and its own limited categories.

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<sup>9</sup> Anselm, *Major Works*, trans. Brian Davies and Gillian Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 11-16.

Thus, Anselm sets himself the task in the *Proslogion* of finding a bridge from the human mind to God that does not suffer from this limitation. He seeks an insight into the one that has the simplicity and immediacy of the one itself and so does not fall prey to the skeptical problem. Thus he says “I began to wonder if perhaps it might be possible to find one single argument that for its proof required no other save itself.”<sup>10</sup> This argument he finds in the following manner: “But as often and as diligently as I turned my thoughts to this, sometimes it seemed that I had almost reached what I had been seeking, sometimes it eluded my acutest thinking completely, so that finally, in desperation, I was about to give up what I was looking for as something impossible to define. However, when I decided to put aside this idea altogether...it began to force itself on me more and more pressingly. So it was that one day...there came to me, in the very conflict of my thoughts, what I had despaired of finding.”<sup>11</sup> Thus Anselm finds his argument at the very point at which he despairs of finding it.

There is a crucial moment to this that I should point out. The *Proslogion* is a dramatic work that organizes itself as a string of crises and resolutions of mounting intensity. This can be shown in detail through an examination of the structure of the whole work but I do not have space to do this here. This dramatic structure of the whole is encapsulated in the prologue which contains (pro-leptically) the structure of the entire work. It is crucial for this drama that Anselm’s insight be the child of his despair for, as we shall see, negation is crucial to mediating the difference of human and divine from which we start. It is only through the human „giving up on itself“ that the insight into the good can come; discursive reason must deconstruct itself, come to its own final limit, before what is prior can emerge (i.e. the ground of this emergence is the principle itself, not our finite effort-it is like grace). This by the way, is exactly what the ancient Skeptics held; it is only through giving up on finding the good that we find the good; as in the story of the painter Apelles related by Sextus Empiricus (i.e. the skeptic despairs of finding the criterion that leads to *ataraxia*, gives up, and in this very giving up finds *ataraxia*).<sup>12</sup> As an aside, if we need any proof that the ontological argument is not an argument at all, we need not look beyond this passage: if a discursive demonstration moving from known premises to an unknown conclusion was what Anselm wanted there is no inherent reason he couldn’t have found it through his own efforts.

Anselm does not, however, proceed directly to the exposition of his „proof.“ Nor, I hold, can he, as I shall explain below. The *Proslogion* begins with a general exhortation to raise the mind to God: “Come now insignificant man, fly for a moment from your affairs, escape for a little while from the tumult of your thoughts. Put aside now your weighty cares and leave your wearisome toils. Abandon yourself for a little to God and rest for a little in him.”<sup>13</sup> Yet this proves to be no easy thing: “What shall your servant do, tormented by love of you and

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<sup>10</sup> Anselm, *Major Works*, 82.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 82

<sup>12</sup> Sextus Empiricus, 189.

<sup>13</sup> Anselm, *Major Works*, 85.

yet cast off far from your face? He yearns to see you and your countenance is too far away from him. He desires to come close to you and your dwelling place is inaccessible: he longs to find you and does not know where you are.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, the good we seek, God, is both tantalizingly close and frustratingly distant; a simultaneous presence-in-absence. There is within the abyss of desire the trace of an infinite absence which, as we shall see, is the absence of the infinite.

Anselm illustrates this dual condition by means of the Hebraic myth of the expulsion from paradise (which he may also have understood as a historical fact, but that does not concern us in the least; here he is describing the condition pointed to by the myth). As he puts it: “He (Adam) lost the blessedness for which he was made. He found the misery for which he was not made...Once man ate the bread of angels for which he now hungers. Now he eats the bread of sorrow of which he then knew nothing.”<sup>15</sup> Thus there is a remembered good (the one) which is the measure of our present pain (division). We seek what we have forgotten because it is contained in our recollection; we are and are other than the good. It is not present for us but our whole being is a trace of it and accordingly, we cannot rest until the absent has become present for our consciousness and love.

The way out of this misery, our otherness from the one, turns out, as indicated in the prologue, to be the first principle itself.<sup>16</sup> Anselm says: “Teach me to seek you, and reveal yourself to me as I seek, because I can neither seek you if you do not teach me how, nor find you unless you reveal yourself, teach me how.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, the one reveals itself to those who give up on their own efforts and rely only on the principle itself; exactly as described in the prologue.

This section is not a frill or extraneous rhetorical flourish but completely necessary to the argument. For this reason, we must immediately ferret out any interpretation, critique or evaluation of Anselm’s proof which ignores this chapter or fails to show its connection with what follows. No, the basic datum of the argument, the idea of perfection or the whole is not an arbitrary supposition or manufactured concept. Indeed it is not a positive concept at all but an absence, an „x“ not seen or known except through its lack, yet that in relation to which lack appears as lack. The purpose of the first chapter is to show how this is so; we must know the whole or one that we seek first through its absence before we can seek to know it in itself. There is an absence, otherness, or non-being intrinsic to the presence of the divine; we must pass through the loss of meaning

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>16</sup> I use neo-Platonic language here because the „Christian difference“ contained in this work does not emerge till the end. The *Proslogion* begins in search of the abstract „one“ of negative theology but it does not end there. In the concluding chapters we find that as creatures we can only have a real relation to the divine when the one is conceived as ecstatically self-communicative; fully productive of itself as intelligence and love. In other words, the *Proslogion* can come to no satisfactory conclusion till the *arche* of neo-Platonism is re-prisinated as the Trinitarian principle of the Christian religion. This is an aspect of Anselm’s argument that is more fully developed in his successor Bonaventure.

<sup>17</sup> Anselm, *Major Works*, 86.

to get at meaning. To use terms close to Marion's there is a negative limit in our thinking which surpasses in all cases the power of our conception; we everywhere and always experience our power of conception as determinate and are thus straining always to think beyond our limits. Thus, our inability to conceive of God is both a proper knowledge of God and of ourselves, as the traditional Augustinian formula would have it.

Thus the argument of the *Proslogion* can be prefaced by nothing but an account of human misery and despair; the death of god without which God cannot be revealed, the „otherness“ without which there is no union. It is our *amor*, or *eros*, for the absent beloved (the beloved present only for memory) that gives us the starting point for our ascent for this is the first form in which we apprehend (inescapably) the idea of the one (in desire—the trace of its absence). This, by the way, puts in question interpretations of Anselm's proof (such as Barth's) which see it entirely in fideistic terms, as if the „datum“ of the argument, the highest or the best, were secured simply by explicit Christian faith. No, however important faith traditions might be for mediating *explicit* knowledge of God, the premise of Anselm's spiritual itinerary is not a positive faith claim strictly speaking but the human desire for a complete and integral participation in the good.

Now, at last we get to the proof itself, which turns out to be almost an anticlimax it is so direct and simple: Here is what Anselm says:

Surely that than which a greater cannot be thought (his verbal definition of the good) cannot be thought to exist in the mind alone. For if it exists solely in the mind, it can be thought to exist in reality also, which is greater. If then, that than which a greater cannot be thought exists in the mind alone, this same that than which a greater cannot be thought is that than which a greater can be thought. But this is obviously impossible. Therefore there is absolutely no doubt that something than which a greater cannot be thought exists both in the mind and in reality.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, I conceive of the highest or the good negatively (i.e. not as empty but as without determinate restriction) as that than which a greater cannot be conceived or (as I shall henceforth call it) G. This is the basic insight and no argument mediates it; it is present in the form of my own desire and my own pain. Then, I ask whether on the level of discursive reason I can conceive the object of my desire as a mental as opposed to a real entity and find immediately that this thought destroys itself. Mental being is a determinate restriction which must be negated of G; G cannot at one and the same time be pure unity and a difference within unity. It cannot be an x as opposed to a y for it is the principle that allows opposition to appear as such. Thus, it is unthinkable as simply a mental entity.

Nor is it thinkable as a finite thing taken in opposition to a mental entity. It is not an instance of an x. Thus, it is not thinkable as a contingent thing whose

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 87-88.

reality can be established or denied by discursive argument. This is the point of Anselm's restatement of the argument in chapter three in terms of the modes of necessity and contingency. As he says:

And certainly this being so truly exists 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 that which can be thought not to exist. Hence, if that than which a greater cannot be thought can be thought not to exist, then that than which a greater cannot be thought is not the same as that than which a greater cannot be thought, which is absurd. Something than which a greater cannot be thought exists so truly then, that it cannot even be thought not to exist.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, G is not a fact in the world and so it is no more thinkable as a mere possible entity than it is as a mental entity, a possible entity being divisible from its concept.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, I have an indefeasible intuition of the whole or unqualified unity. Can this be merely an idea in my mind, an empty aspiration? No, it cannot for my idea was of an unrestricted whole and an idea in the mind is a finite determination for it is opposed to another, the thing of which it is the idea. Nor is it a finite substance for this too is a particular determination over against the mentally real. No, the one or the whole is not a determination at all and so cannot be held as one moment in a binary opposition. It is rather a *coincidentum oppositorum* prior to the difference of subject and object; that in relation to which all finite oppositions disappear.

Thus, G turns out to prior absolutely to discursive reason and so incommensurate to the terms of that reason. There can be no negative judgment concerning its being for that is to make G a finite thing (a concept lacking an instance) nor can there be any contingent judgment about G as a possible (for a possible must have its determination outside itself and so be finite). Strictly speaking, there is no judgment (no verification or falsification) about G at all for the unity of thought and being is rather presupposed in all judgments (all verification and falsification). To say „God exists“ is simply to say there is a one prior to the division of thought and existent. It is certainly *not* to posit some entity as the highest term within being which can then be conceptualized by the mind as the *summum ens*, nor is it to disengage some „hyper-essential entity“ from other beings. G is not *an* entity (or entity as such) any more than it is *an* idea (or ideality as such).

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>20</sup> Charles Hartshorne (introduction, *St. Anselm: Basic Writings* [Lasalle: Open Court Press, 1968]) has argued that that chapter two presents a preliminary formulation of which chapter three is the development. However, if one keeps Anselm's Platonism sufficiently in mind, the two forms of the argument can be seen to reinforce the same basic point; the „Good“ as prior to the distinction of concept and determinate reality fully transcends both. Thus, the two formulations of the argument state the same truth from two different sides.

Now, there *is* some role for discursive rationality to play here. The insight must, for us, move from the implicit to the explicit; *we* must experience the unspeakable through failing to speak about it. This is the unfortunate fate of the fool who says in his heart there is no god; to deny the one he brings the one into the discursive categories of affirmation and negation and finds through the pain of contradiction that he no longer has before him what he seeks to deny. He experiences the power of otherness and negation (dare one say *différance*?) which Anselm has time and again hinted is essential to his procedure (the denial negates itself as denial along with all the affirmations; mental and contingent being are the penultimate negations of negative theology leaving only the absent-presence of the one.) Now I must say again that this is not where Anselm ends but where he begins; he will not long rest satisfied with what he has here uncovered (we are only in chapter 3!).

Still, we may say that to this point at least, it might be worthwhile to consider Jean-Luc Marion's ironic assessment of Anselm as a critical thinker concerned with discourse at the limits of reason and as therefore, in his own way, a good Kantian.<sup>21</sup> Anselm's argument is fully cognizant of the antinomies that occur when conceptual thought extends beyond its limits; his argument depends on this very thing for the mistake of the fool is to think of God as a determinate concept he can affirm or negate in a judgment. It is the fool who passes beyond the limits of pure reason and trips himself up in a tangle of contradictions. Yet Anselm is also willing to grant that for all this there is a thought which grasps the absolute in its absoluteness precisely by *not* being conceptual and this is the „negative“ thought which, without being a finite negation, grasps the „beyond“ of every determinate concept and thereby knows its own finitude.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, as Anselm is an „erotic“ thinker in a way that perhaps Kant never was, this thought is simultaneously the striving of love which reaches beyond all conception to the Good. The „negative“ is related to us as the term of desire.

What is more, the result of our examination supports Marion's general contention against Derrida that “onto-theology” and “the metaphysics of presence” are problematic categories under which to assess the Patristic and

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<sup>21</sup> Marion, “Is the Ontological Argument Ontological?” 209.

<sup>22</sup> Marion seems to me to go too far when he asserts that God is *in re* because he is neither in the understanding nor in the understanding and in reality but *in re* because he is not in the understanding at all (Marion, “Is the Ontological Argument Ontological?” 212). Surely Anselm's point is that there *is* in the understanding the notion of that which surpasses all conception as its negative limit and that *this* notion cannot be of something merely in the understanding but only of something in reality as well. This is why, in the *Reply to Guanilo*, he appeals to his critic to admit that, though inconceivable, God *is* nonetheless in the understanding exactly as the Sun is in the vision though it cannot be directly seen. (Anselm, *Major Works*, 113 ) Given that Marion engages in such a close reading of the text elsewhere it is odd that at this one point he should contradict

Anselm's clear assertion that God, though not conceivable, is nonetheless in the understanding in a non-conceptual way to the extent that we know what must be negated of him. To put this in terms close to Marion's, the understanding exceeds itself in the direction of the Good precisely as it touches the limit of its own power of conception.

Medieval theological heritage.<sup>23</sup> Anselm's God, like the Platonic Good, is not a „maximal being“ present to the mind as a reified object. The God reached in *Proslogion* II and III is not known as he is for any discursive thinking. I must caution though that, *contra* Marion, I *do* find an Augustinian intellectualism in Anselm that *does* affirm an inner identity (not *just* a difference but an identity attained by attending properly to a difference) between the highest human thought and the divine. God for Anselm is certainly inconceivable but not therefore unintelligible: though no discourse can express what God is, there is nonetheless a more or less adequate discourse about God.

Anselm can say this in all honesty because, as Marion does not seem to recognize, understanding is not for him coterminous with the power of conception; there *is* a non-objectifying, non-conceptual attentiveness to the idea of the Good that is *nonetheless* a real understanding that *nonetheless* grounds a limited (i.e. negative) but genuine propositional discourse about God (see *Reply to Gaunilo* I). Marion, however, hews more closely to the Dionysian position that God transcends intellection (and being) entirely and prefers to evacuate God-Talk of any content in favor of the performative utterance of naming and praise.<sup>24</sup> This is perhaps why, against Anselm's own words, he denies that the God of the *Proslogion* is “in the understanding.”<sup>25</sup>

Thus, our consideration of Anselm's argument reveals something subtler, certainly, than a crude onto-theology but also something potentially more nuanced than the strict form of negative theology that Marion seems to ascribe to him. Unfortunately, a full appreciation of this point calls for an account of how, for Anselm, the God who is in our thought as that which surpasses every conception can be, at the same time, thought of as the self-communicating God of Christian revelation and the principle by whom we are immanently sustained even in our otherness and difference from the One. This, in turn, entails a consideration of the remaining chapters of the *Proslogion*: a task which must be taken up in a subsequent paper.

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<sup>23</sup> Marion, “In the Name,” 33-38. In spite of my reservations about certain aspects of his presentation Marion should be commended for emphasizing that Anselm's God can in no way be conceived as a „super-being“ occupying the top rung of some ontological chain of essences. The whole burden of the argument is to show the „difference“ of the good from all that can be determinately conceived. It is this „difference“ of what is beyond conception that forces us to think it as exceeding the limits of the understanding so that we must always regard it as „in reality“ in the very same act by which we regard it as „in the intellect“ *because it surpasses the terms of this distinction*. Thus, God is known as beyond the opposition of thinking and being and not as the highest being or as a detached „super essence.“ He is *inclusive* of the ontological not *subordinated* to it.

<sup>24</sup> Marion, “In the Name,” 29-30.

<sup>25</sup> See note 22 above.