

# The One Fatal Flaw in Anselm's Argument

PETER MILLICAN

Anselm's Ontological Argument fails, but not for any of the various reasons commonly adduced. In particular, its failure has nothing to do with violating deep Kantian principles by treating 'exists' as a predicate or making reference to 'Meinongian' entities. Its one fatal flaw, so far from being metaphysically deep, is in fact logically shallow, deriving from a subtle scope ambiguity in Anselm's key phrase. If we avoid this ambiguity, and the indeterminacy of reference to which it gives rise, then his argument is blocked *even if his supposed Meinongian extravagances are permitted*. Moreover it is blocked in a way which is straightforward and compelling (by contrast with the Kantian objections), and which generalizes easily to other versions of the Ontological Argument. A significant moral follows. Fear of Anselm's argument has been hugely influential in motivating ontological fastidiousness and widespread reluctance to countenance talk of potentially non-existing entities. But if this paper is correct, then the Ontological Argument cannot properly provide any such motivation. Some of the most influential contributions to ontology, from Kant to Russell and beyond, rest on a mistake.

## 1. Anselm, Kant, and the virtues of shallowness

The Ontological Argument, and Anselm's version in particular, has long held a fascination for philosophers, but not usually because they have found it convincing. On the contrary, most have considered the argument to be unquestionably fallacious, no doubt often on the ground that it is just 'too good to be true', purporting to demonstrate the existence of God from what looks like a mere definition. But the argument nevertheless remains intriguing because despite the efforts of many notable philosophers over the centuries it has proved to be extremely difficult to pinpoint exactly where the fallacy lies. Many diagnoses have of course been proposed, and one of these, namely the Kantian doctrine that 'existence is not a predicate' (especially when fortified by the Fregean quantificational treatment of existence) has for most of the last century assumed the status of orthodoxy. But even this most popular objection to the argument has not stood up entirely convincingly under critical scrutiny, partly because it has never been fully satisfactorily elucidated and defended, but also partly because its implications for the argument are anyway rather obscure: suppose we

accept that ‘exists’ is not ‘logically’ a predicate—how *exactly* does this undermine Anselm’s reasoning: which particular step in it fails to go through, and what right have we to presume that it cannot be reformulated without the objectionable ‘predication’? These questions of detail were typically left unanswered during the heyday of the Kantian slogan, which was commonly assumed to demolish the foundations of the argument so completely as to render it unworthy of further discussion. However this sort of dismissive attitude can, paradoxically, endow an argument with more status than it would otherwise enjoy. For if it is attacked *only* by means of a general assault on the metaphysical framework within which it functions, then the impression may be given that it stands or falls with that framework. And the history of philosophical debate indicates that fundamental objections to metaphysical frameworks are seldom beyond dispute, so that if the Ontological Argument’s validity were thought to depend *exclusively* on whether or not ‘exists’ is a predicate, then this would be likely to encourage the view that perhaps the argument might indeed be worth taking seriously. Because it is surely not, after all, so *very* obvious that ‘exists’ can *never* function as a genuine predicate (consider, for example, the question of whether Robin Hood really existed).<sup>1</sup>

In my view a far better method of refuting a philosophical argument is, where possible, to challenge it at the level of detail, taking for granted its fundamental framework but then showing that it fails even on its own terms to establish its conclusion. If successful, such a refutation can be far more solid and persuasive than an attack on an argument’s foundations, if only because it is so much easier to be confident about shallow logical details than about deep philosophical theories. This, then, is the approach that I shall take to Anselm’s Ontological Argument, developing on his behalf a radically non-Kantian theory of existence-independent ‘natures’ within which his argument can be framed so as to resist the standard objections, but then going on to identify a hitherto unremarked flaw in his reasoning which not only invalidates the argument in its original form, but which also, unlike those standard objections, operates at a level which makes it ineradicable by any plausible reformulation. His Ontological Argument, in other words, fails to prove the existence of God even at the relatively superficial level of logical detail. And it fails for a refreshingly straightforward reason, namely, that it trades on an equivocation between (at least) two interpretations of its central concept: one under which it provides an invalid argument for

<sup>1</sup> Indeed the Kantian doctrine can and has been challenged more generally, as recently for example by McGinn (2000, Ch. 2), who advances a number of strong arguments against it.

God's existence, and another under which it is valid—and indeed sound—but fails to prove the existence of *God*.

## 2. Anselm's text

Anselm's Ontological Argument is presented in his *Proslogion*, starting with Chapter II, though where the argument ends is more controversial. Here is the entire text of Chapter II, entitled 'That God truly exists', generally following—with one footnoted exception—the deliberately literal translation by Charlesworth (Anselm (1077–8) p.117):

- II Well then, Lord, You who give understanding to faith, grant me that I may understand, as much as You see fit, that You exist as we believe You to exist, and that You are what we believe You to be. Now we believe that You are something than which nothing greater can be thought. Or can it be that a thing of such a nature does not exist, since 'the Fool has said in his heart, there is no God'? [*Anselm here alludes to Psalms 13:1 and 52:1 in the Vulgate, which are Psalms 14:1 and 53:1 in Hebrew and modern editions of the Bible.*] But surely, when this same Fool hears what I am speaking about, namely, 'something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought', he understands what he hears, and what he understands is in his mind, even if he does not understand that it actually exists. For it is one thing for an object to exist in the mind, and another thing to understand that an object actually exists. Thus, when a painter plans beforehand what he is going to execute, he has [the picture] in his mind, but he does not yet think that it actually exists because he has not yet executed it. However, when he has actually painted it, then he both has it in his mind and understands that it exists because he has now made it. Even the Fool, then, is forced to agree that something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought exists in the mind, since he understands this when he hears it, and whatever is understood is in the mind. And surely that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought cannot exist in the mind alone. For if it exists solely in the mind, something that is greater can be thought to exist in reality also.<sup>2</sup> If then that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought exists in the mind alone, this same that-than-

<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to Alexander Broadie for the correct translation of this sentence. Charlesworth's translation, like most others, instead relies on the idea of *the same thing's* being (thought) greater if it existed in reality also: 'For if it [namely, that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought] exists solely in the mind even, it can be thought to exist in reality also, which is greater.' Such a reading would potentially complicate the logic of the argument, but fortunately it is unwarranted, being an artefact deriving from the later insertion of commas into Anselm's original which contained none, as Anscombe (1993) emphasises. Moreover it seems that Anselm's correspondent Gaunilo understood the sentence in the way preferred here, and was given no hint of any objection to this (see fn. 26 below). Lewis (1970) p. 178, unaware of the mistranslation, takes Anselm's logic as requiring that greatness must be relativized to possible worlds, implicitly ruling out the 'Gaunilo'

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.

This paragraph is clearly intended to establish (at least) that *something-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought* exists in reality. Whether Anselm saw this as equivalent to establishing that *God* exists (as suggested by the chapter's title) is debatable—Campbell, for example, argues quite persuasively that the definite identification of God as *something-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought* is not achieved until the second paragraph of Chapter III.<sup>3</sup> But it is anyway evident that Anselm's train of thought continues into that chapter, going on to deduce an important corollary regarding God's special mode of existence ('that God cannot be thought not to exist') using an argument which commentators such as Malcolm, Hartshorne, and Plantinga have even thought to constitute the core of his entire chain of reasoning.<sup>4</sup> Fortunately it is possible here to ignore exegetical questions about the precise relationship between Anselm's chapters, because although I shall be examining only Chapter II, the 'fatal flaw' referred to in my title concerns the key phrase which is common to both chapters, and so it will inevitably infect the argument of *Proslogion* Chapter III also, even if that argument is supposed capable of standing entirely alone. For similar reasons, I shall also ignore the interpretative debate about Anselm's motives in presenting his 'Ontological Argument', and will take for granted that he intended it as a contribution to natural theology, rather than a vehicle for mystical illumination or a work of *Konklusionstheologie* (the inferring of one article of faith from another).<sup>5</sup> My aim here is logical rather than theological—to get to the bottom of a puzzle that

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interpretation of his key phrase which will prove of significance later (cf. fn. 41 below). Lewis ultimately exploits this to draw a characteristic moral, that the seductive fallaciousness of the Ontological Argument goes hand in hand with a prejudice for the actual.

<sup>3</sup> See Campbell (1976) pp. 12–28, who acknowledges here the prior influence of Stolz (1933) pp. 198–206.

<sup>4</sup> For defence of Anselm's supposed 'second' Ontological Argument in *Proslogion* III, see for example Malcolm (1960), Hartshorne (1967), and Plantinga (1974) Ch. 10. Henry (1967) pp. 142–50 provides a detailed and illuminating discussion of the logical relation between *Proslogion* II and III.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of this issue, which came to prominence with Barth (1931), see especially McGill (1967) pp. 51–68. Also pertinent are Charlesworth (1965) pp. 40–8, Henry (1967) pp. 148–50, Barnes (1972) pp. 6–8, and Campbell (1976) pp. 172–8.

has perplexed philosophers for many years—and in pursuing this aim, my analysis will bring to light a crucial ambiguity which is highly relevant whatever Anselm's motives might have been. Moreover the upshot of all this will be that the traditional interpretation of Chapter II of *Proslogion* is by far the most interesting. Read as mystical illumination it would be confused, as *Konklusionstheologie* it would be trivial, but as natural theology, though ultimately flawed, it turns out to be not only fascinating, but far more subtle and resistant to criticism than most of its commentators have supposed.

### **3. The structure of Anselm's argument, and nine standard objections**

The essential structure of Anselm's *Proslogion* II argument seems to be as follows:

- (1) The Fool understands the phrase: 'something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought'.
- (2) Hence something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought exists at least in the Fool's mind.
- (3) It is greater to exist in reality than to exist in the mind alone.<sup>6</sup>
- (4) So if that-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought existed only in the Fool's mind, then it would be possible to think of something greater (that is, something existing in reality also).
- (5) But this would be a contradiction, since it is obviously impossible to think of something greater than that-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought.
- (6) Therefore something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought must exist both in the Fool's mind and in reality also.

Given that it occupies only a single short paragraph, Anselm's argument has provoked a remarkable variety of criticisms, but the summary above can help us to situate the most important of these in terms of the steps with which they take issue. Some of these objections are closely interrelated, and understandably they have often been conflated with each other in the literature, but I have tried below to disentangle them

<sup>6</sup> This premiss is implicit in Anselm's text rather than explicitly stated; for discussion relevant to its interpretation, see especially fns 2 and 26.

so that as far as possible each concerns just one very specific point, and given each a nickname to facilitate reference to them in what follows.

(a) *The neo-Platonic presupposition*

Anselm's notion of 'greatness', and also his specific judgements of relative greatness, presuppose a neo-Platonic background of 'degrees of existence' and metaphysical 'perfections' which would now be generally rejected. Without it, his key phrase 'something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought', and hence his entire argument, cannot make sense.<sup>7</sup>

(b) *The mental entity confusion*

In moving from step (1) to step (2) Anselm treats the mental existence of something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought as involving mere understanding of the phrase, whereas in moving on from step (2) he treats this mental 'existent' as an entity in its own right. This is a confusion, since something that merely 'exists in the mind' in the sense of being understood, conceived or thought about, need not thereby really *exist* as such at all—it is not a genuine entity with properties than can be assessed and compared with those of other things.<sup>8</sup>

(c) *The intentional object fallacy*

Even if the notion of mental entities that genuinely 'exist in the mind' can be made sense of in some way, it still seems questionable to infer from (1) '*The Fool understands the phrase "something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought"*' the apparently far more significant existential claim (2) '*Something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought exists in the Fool's mind*'. This inference seems analogous to the well-known fallacy of moving from 'I am conceiving of an X' (for example, a unicorn, an unconceived tree) to 'There is an X of which I'm conceiving'.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> See Charlesworth (1965) pp. 60–62 for criticism along these lines.

<sup>8</sup> Cargile (1975) pp. 75–6 advances this objection to Anselm particularly clearly.

<sup>9</sup> Berkeley's argument that it is a contradiction to conceive of an unconceived tree (1710, para 23) is perhaps the most familiar example here (though Berkeley's words may bear a less objectionable interpretation). Prior (1976) pp. 60–3 identifies this fallacy as Anselm's principal error, as does Parsons (1980) p. 215, who describes it as an illicit switch from a *de dicto* to a *de re* reading of the key phrase.

(d) *The comparison difficulty*

There seems to be something logically odd about purporting to compare something that exists only 'in the mind' with something existing in reality. Therefore Anselm's premiss (3), which crucially depends on the possibility of doing so, is dubious.<sup>10</sup>

(e) *The unique referent problem*

Anselm seems to equivocate between the indefinite 'something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought' and the apparently more specific 'that-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought' (he also combines both 'something' and 'that' with the alternative ending '-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought', but this variation seems to be logically insignificant). His introduction of the phrase 'that-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought' in moving from step (2) to step (4), moreover, is presumably illegitimate unless he has already established that there is one and only one thing to which this phrase can refer, and he can do this only by *antecedently* proving the existence of God.<sup>11</sup>

(f) *The Kantian dogma ('existence is not a predicate')*

As Kant famously argued (anticipated to a significant extent by Gassendi and Hume),<sup>12</sup> it seems dubious to consider something's existence as a property that characterizes it, and hence as a factor that can contribute to the assessment of its greatness. Rather, its existence seems to be something presupposed if it is to have any properties at all. So when we think of God, we think of an existing supremely great Being, but our ability to think of Him in this way is quite independent of whether or not He really exists, or even of whether or not we believe Him to exist. If God does not exist, therefore, this in no way implies that the concept of God fails on that account to be the concept of an unsurpassably great Being. So Anselm's step (3) is incoherent, and step (4) fallacious.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Both Broad (1953) p. 181 and Charlesworth (1965) pp. 63–65 press this point, relating it to what I call below the 'Kantian Dogma'.

<sup>11</sup> Barnes (1972) pp. 13, 80 sees this assumption of singularity as the main flaw in Anselm's argument. Russell (1905) p. 54 appeals to his theory of descriptions in attacking, on similar grounds, a Cartesian version of the argument starting 'The most perfect Being has all perfections'.

<sup>12</sup> Gassendi (1641) pp. 224–6, Hume (1739) pp. 66–7, Kant (1781) pp. 500–7.

<sup>13</sup> No doubt influenced by Frege (1884, para 53) and Russell (e.g. 1919, p. 203), it soon became almost routine for analytic philosophers to recite the Kantian mantra as though it were an immediate and complete refutation, e.g. Ryle (1935) p. 251 and Kneale (1936) pp. 154–6. This dismissive attitude to the argument continued to be the norm for several decades (as typified by Flew (1966)

*(g) The separate realms principle*

Kant rounds off his discussion of the Ontological Argument by stating the principle ‘Whatever, therefore, and however much, our concept of an object may contain, we must go outside it, if we are to ascribe existence to the object’. (Kant 1781 p. 506). This implies a gulf between the realm of concepts and the realm of real things: no matter what concepts we devise, it is always a further question whether or not they are realised or instantiated in reality.<sup>14</sup> So even if we include existence, under the guise of ‘greatness’, within our concept of God, this in no way guarantees that there must be something real corresponding to that concept. As applied to Anselm’s argument, the Separate Realms Principle takes issue with the steps from (1) to (4) by facing him with a dilemma over the realm within which they are to be interpreted. If, on the one hand, (2) and (4) are to be interpreted as propositions within the realm of concepts (that is, concerning only the content of the Fool’s conception), then (2) can indeed be inferred from (1) but step (4) fails because external existence is irrelevant to that realm (Mackie 1982 p. 52 puts the point nicely: the non-existence of a supreme being outside the mind does not imply that the Fool has within his mind the self-contradictory conception of *a-not-really-existing-being-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-conceived*). If, on the other hand, (2) is to be interpreted in such a way that one can only ‘think’ about something that exists in reality, then the atheist can simply refuse to accept it as a legitimate implication from (1).<sup>15</sup>

*(h) The Aquinas rebuttal*

Aquinas seems to suggest, in his *Summa Contra Gentiles*, that there is no contradiction as claimed in step (5), because unless the real existence of that-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought is already presupposed, there cannot be a contradiction in our thinking of ‘something greater ... than anything given in reality or in the intellect’.<sup>16</sup> The precise reasoning behind Aquinas’s rebuttal is unclear (and was abbrev-

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p. 80), but has noticeably declined more recently, in line with the relative tolerance of ‘Meinongianism’ alluded to in the final paragraph of this paper.

<sup>14</sup> Mackie (1982) focuses on this objection, applying it first against Descartes (pp. 48–9) and then against Anselm (pp. 51–5).

<sup>15</sup> Oppy (1995) pp. 114–8 proposes the Separate Realms Principle (through the kind of dilemma described here) as ‘The General Objection’ to all ontological arguments, and the main part of his substantial book consists in applying this type of objection to a wide range of such arguments from the vast Ontological Argument literature (cf. fn. 36 below).



viated still further in his later *Summa Theologiae*), but his idea may be that if that-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought does not really exist outside the mind, then its greatness is actually much less than Anselm supposes—hence there is a sense in which that-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-conceived will then fail to be something than which nothing greater can be conceived.

(i) *Gaunilo reductios*

If Anselm's argument were indeed sound, then it would be hard to see why equivalent arguments could not be constructed to prove the existence of a supremely excellent island, a perfect Pegasus, an Antigod whose evil is unsurpassably effective, and so on; but it is grossly implausible to suggest that these things do exist, or even if they did, that their existence could be proved in this *a priori* manner. There are many varieties of this sort of attempted *reductio ad absurdum* of Anselm's argument, but it seems appropriate to call them 'Gaunilo *reductios*' after the monk who famously responded in this way to Anselm's *Proslogion* when it first appeared, and whose *Reply on Behalf of the Fool* was then included at Anselm's request (along with Anselm's response to it) when the *Proslogion* was subsequently published.<sup>17</sup>

#### 4. The need for a theory of 'natures'

These nine objections attack Anselm's argument in a variety of ways. At one extreme, the Neo-Platonic Presupposition focuses on its allegedly

<sup>16</sup> 'Now, from the fact that that which is indicated by the name *God* is conceived by the mind, it does not follow that God exists save only in the intellect. Hence, that than which a greater cannot be thought will likewise not have to exist save only in the intellect. From this it does not follow that there exists in reality something than which a greater cannot be thought. No difficulty, consequently, befalls anyone who posits that God does not exist. For that something greater can be thought than anything given in reality or in the intellect is a difficulty only to him who admits that there is something than which a greater cannot be thought in reality.' Aquinas (1259) 1.11.1, p. 82. Aquinas's relatively cursory comments in the *Summa Theologiae* are more frequently quoted (for example, in Plantinga 1965, pp. 28–30), and perhaps in part for this reason some commentators take him to have missed the point of Anselm's argument. Davies (1992) p. 24 n., for example, comments that '[in so far as] Aquinas's treatment of the Ontological Argument does not seem to engage fully with the argument as found in Anselm ... the reason might lie in the fact that the version of the argument discussed by Aquinas was not so much Anselm's as a version of Anselm's argument current in the 13th century and offered by writers such as Alexander of Hales (c.1186–1245).' Charlesworth (1965, pp. 58–9) is also rather dismissive of Aquinas's criticisms though for different reasons. It is ironic, therefore, that of all the specific logical objections to Anselm itemised here, the Aquinas Rebuttal turns out, as we shall see, to be arguably the most on target

<sup>17</sup> The example of the supremely excellent island is in paragraph 6 of Gaunilo (1078) pp. 163–5, the perfect Pegasus variant is from Gassendi (1641) pp. 225–6, and the Antigod than which nothing more effectively evil can be conceived is from Millican (1989) p. 196.

suspect conceptual basis, while at the other, the Intentional Object Fallacy, the Unique Referent Problem, and the Aquinas Rebuttal all concern specific logical moves. Most of the remaining objections (the Mental Entity Confusion, the Comparison Difficulty, the Kantian Dogma, and the Separate Realms Principle) combine both conceptual and logical aspects, but Gaunilo *reductios* make no attempt to identify any specific error and simply challenge the argument as a whole: *something* must be wrong with its premisses or with its logic, if parallel reasoning can lead to such manifestly absurd conclusions.

It is no coincidence that the one purely conceptual objection (a) is also the weakest, for even if it is true that Anselm is presupposing dubious neo-Platonic concepts, then unless this has adverse implications for the detailed logic of his reasoning, any objectionable dependence is likely to be remediable by the simple expedient of substituting appropriately defined alternative concepts (as we shall see later). Far more serious is the part-conceptual and part-logical Mental Entity Confusion (b), which together with the associated Intentional Object Fallacy (c) highlights the need for a much deeper rethinking of the conceptual framework if Anselm's argument is to appear plausible—on pain of Gaunilo *reductios* and other similar problems, the Fool's understanding of any phrase just cannot straightforwardly be taken to imply the existence of some entity with corresponding properties, and it is simply not in general valid to infer from 'I am thinking of an X' to 'There is some X of which I'm thinking'. To circumvent these difficulties it will be necessary to sketch (at least) a suitable theory of mental or intentional objects, and this, as we shall see, is by no means trivial. To provide a foundation for any non-question-begging version of Anselm's argument it must obviously countenance the ascription of properties to 'entities' that are not already known to be actual, and must also license the drawing of inferences about other properties of those entities (including, potentially, their real existence). As terminology for these existence-independent entities, the most appropriate choice seems to be the language of 'natures' which is used by both Anselm and Gaunilo, and also by Descartes when presenting and discussing his own Ontological Argument.<sup>18</sup>

The aim of the following section, therefore, will be to develop a rudimentary theory of natures that can as far as possible sanction the relevant steps of Anselm's argument while avoiding both the Mental Entity Confusion and the Intentional Object Fallacy. If we are able to develop

<sup>18</sup> For example Anselm (1077–8) p. 117; Gaunilo (1078) pp. 157, 163; Descartes (1641) pp. 44–5, 48, 83–5, 117, 263.

such a theory, moreover, then the Comparison Difficulty (d), the Unique Referent Problem (e), the Kantian Dogma (f) and the Separate Realms Principle (g) might well prove relatively easy to circumvent, for all of these derive force from presuppositions that may seem questionable given a theory of natures so understood. To take the Unique Referent Problem first, if it is possible to make sense of *something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought* as denoting a legitimate nature, then it is hard to see why referring back to this same nature as '*that-something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought*' should raise any additional difficulties, or why the 'something' within this last phrase should not then be omitted without any loss of coherence. In other words, Anselm's replacement of 'something' by 'that' within the main body of his argument may prove to be essentially stylistic but nevertheless well motivated, involving no logical sleight-of-hand whatever, but merely having the point of emphasising how his key phrase is consistently being used to make reference to a specific nature, with an unambiguously denoting use which might however run the risk of being misunderstood if the phrase were always to be presented as starting with the indefinite 'something'.<sup>19</sup> There need be no illicit assumption of a unique real referent here, for if talk of existence-independent natures makes any sense at all, then it should be unproblematic to speak of a particular nature without presupposing that it is uniquely exemplified in reality.

In a very similar manner the Comparison Difficulty would cease to be a major problem in the context of an acceptable theory of natures, for if talk of natures is to serve any useful purpose, then this must be because some natures correspond to really existing things in the world (let us say that they are 'instantiated' or have a 'real archetype'), whereas others do not.<sup>20</sup> And if natures are truly existence-independent

<sup>19</sup> Barnes (1972) p. 5 takes the switches between 'something' and 'that' in Anselm's formula to be arbitrary and logically unmotivated, while at the opposite extreme Campbell (1976) pp. 32–4 sees them as being not merely well-motivated but logically required, with a role analogous to the substitutions that take place in the predicate calculus when reasoning by means of the standard rule of existential elimination (using an 'arbitrary name'). On the latter interpretation Anselm is deliberately using an indefinite reference in his initial premiss that *something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought* exists in the Fool's mind, and also when stating his conclusion that some such thing exists in reality. But between the premiss and the conclusion, his use of the formula '*that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought*' is more than merely a variation of style or emphasis, since it is needed to indicate that he is here speaking anaphorically about this previously identified *something*. Campbell's account is logically elegant and fits the variations in the text; it also has the important implication that Anselm's use of his formula must be intended as a descriptive identification of a nature rather than a 'characterization', which fits well with the interpretation to be developed here (cf. fn. 35 below and its context).

<sup>20</sup> The term 'real archetype' was coined by Alston (1960) p. 103.

in this way, then in comparing instantiated with non-instantiated natures we are genuinely comparing like with like (albeit we are in an indirect sense comparing existent with non-existent ‘types of thing’). The Kantian Dogma would also be defused in this context, because if natures indeed form a coherent and well-defined domain, and we can draw a legitimate distinction within that domain between those natures that are instantiated and those that are not, then the notion of *instantiation* will provide an appropriate ‘predicate’ ranging over this domain, to enable Anselm’s argument to be expressed perfectly well without having to invoke the troublesome general concept of existence. If, moreover, his argument proves valid when so expressed, then the Separate Realms Principle will have been overcome through the use of this notion which has one foot in each realm—connecting natures in the conceptual realm with the real archetypes that instantiate them.

It is harder to anticipate in advance what implications a theory of natures might have for the force of the Aquinas Rebuttal (h) and the various Gaunilo *reductios* (i), though if anything such a theory can only strengthen Anselm’s argument in these respects. Anselm’s step (5) is based on convicting the Fool of a ‘contradiction in thought’, but as the Aquinas Rebuttal illustrates, such apparent contradictions provide a very slippery basis on which to rely when prescribing limits on our thinking. Anselm himself is aware that it is possible to ‘think of the inconceivable’ (1078, p. 189), and one of the logical examples collected by Paul of Venice in the fifteenth century emphasises that if I grasp a proposition that refers to ‘something I am not thinking about’ (for example, ‘He is thinking about something I am not thinking about’), I am even able *to think about what I am not thinking about* (1499, ff. 17–18).<sup>21</sup> So ordinary language can be extremely misleading in this sort of context, and a theory of natures that forces clearer distinctions to be drawn between different types of object of thought, both real and intentional, is likely to render any genuine contradiction that may be present in the Fool’s thought both more explicit and easier to pin down. For this very reason there is even some ground for optimism that the scope of possible Gaunilo *reductios* may be reduced, because if genuine contradictions become clearly distinguishable from the merely apparent, and if the form of Anselm’s reasoning is in fact legitimate, then appropriate boundaries should emerge regarding what can, and cannot, be proved to exist by such methods.

<sup>21</sup> I owe this reference to Peter Geach.

## 5. Outline of an 'Anselmian' theory of natures

The aim of this section is accordingly to sketch a theory of 'natures' sufficient to do justice to the logic of Anselm's reasoning, and to identify some of the fundamental difficulties that must be addressed in the development of any such theory. Here, however, it will be developed only so far as is necessary to provide a logical framework within which Anselm's argument can be represented as clearly as possible, and no commitment is intended either to the theory's ultimate cogency or its completeness—thus potentially troublesome issues such as individual and higher-order natures will quickly be put to one side, and some related topics, notably Aristotelian essentialism, bypassed entirely. Given this dissociation of 'natures' from traditional essences, the theory that emerges cannot pretend to be one that Anselm himself would have endorsed in detail, but we can ignore this complication here because the distinction between genuine essences and relatively arbitrary 'natures' plays no role in the logical progression of his argument.<sup>22</sup> Indeed there are some significant benefits to be gained from presenting the theory independently of any Aristotelian background, not least that this greatly simplifies the devising of appropriate illustrative examples (especially in the case of non-instantiated natures).

To provide an appropriate framework for Anselm's reasoning, the central requirement of our theory must be to enable reference to be made to an 'entity' (such as God) without presupposing either its existence or its non-existence—as explained above, we shall refer to such an existence-independent entity as a 'nature', and speak of a nature as 'instantiated' if it has at least one real archetype (that is, if such an entity 'really exists'). However this already implies a significant constraint on the theory, for reference to any nature presumably requires that it be identified in some way, and if it is to be identified without presupposing its instantiation, then this appears to rule out demonstrative or direct causal identification ('That

<sup>22</sup> Descartes's appeal to the distinction between 'true and immutable natures' and those 'which are invented and put together by the intellect' (1641, p. 83) seems to be an entirely *ad hoc* method of avoiding Gaunilo *reductios*, since he provides no clear account of the basis of the distinction, no criterion of discrimination, no proof that the nature 'God' is true and immutable rather than invented, and most crucially, no explanation of why one kind of nature should be capable of grounding an Ontological Argument while the other is not (that is, why 'truth and immutability' should be supposed to have any relevant *inferential* role). Other defenders of the Ontological Argument (e.g. Leibniz in section 44 of his *Monadology*) have followed Descartes in claiming that the nature of God is somehow special, with essence including existence in His case alone, so that His existence can be proved while Gaunilo *reductios* are blocked. But such a claim is clearly question-begging—the alleged coincidence of God's essence and existence is more appropriate as the intended *conclusion* of an Ontological Argument rather than as a premiss, and if it is indeed a premiss, then if the argument is to serve any useful purpose this premiss requires not mere dogmatic assertion but independent justification, with a clear explanation of its logical role in the argument which makes clear how Gaunilo *reductios* are to be avoided.

entity *there*, ‘Whatever caused *this* to happen’, etc.), leaving reference by means of a description as the only obvious alternative.<sup>23</sup> This might well be a serious difficulty for any theory of natures that aspired to give an adequate general treatment of the existence and non-existence of concrete individuals, but fortunately for present purposes we can rest content with a purely descriptive theory which accordingly treats natures as characterizations only of kinds rather than of individuals. Such a restriction is probably anyway more faithful to Anselm, because although he sometimes seems to speak of ‘that-that-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought’ as the individual nature or essence of God, this in itself gives little ground for supposing that he is here deviating from Aristotle’s preference for essences of species rather than of individuals, since such language is only to be expected when the nature in question is of such evident magnitude as to permit at most one instantiation.<sup>24</sup>

If we do restrict ourselves to non-indexical descriptive natures, then it becomes relatively straightforward to give an outline of how they might be represented. One simple option is to enclose the relevant description(s) within angle brackets—here, for example, are possible specifications of four natures that correspond respectively to some of the more significant properties of the Russian space dog Laika [*pronounced ‘Lyka’*], the television dog Lassie, and the ancient British heroes King Alfred and King Arthur:<sup>25</sup>

- <Laika>:      <first dog to be sent into space>  
 <Lassie>:      <dog, catches villains, rescues victims, star of film and television>

<sup>23</sup> As explained earlier, I am treating Anselm’s argument as natural theology, intended to provide a reason for any reader to accept the existence of God, rather than merely an elucidation of the nature of God’s existence aimed only at the religious believer. The believer, unlike the atheist, might indeed take himself to have had direct demonstrative or causal experience of God, and if this seemed to reveal God as *something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought*, then he might be persuaded by the argument of *Proslogion* III to draw the conclusion *that God exists necessarily*. However the *Proslogion* II argument seems peculiarly futile if interpreted in this sort of way—someone who starts from the premiss *that God has revealed His nature* manifestly learns nothing whatever from the conclusion merely *that God exists*.

<sup>24</sup> Anselm appeals to his formula as the essence of God in *Proslogion* IV, when explicating the sense in which God cannot be thought not to exist (as maintained in *Proslogion* III), and contrasting this with the sense in which God *can* be thought not to exist (as by the Fool of *Proslogion* II). He argues in detail for the uniqueness of the supreme being in Chapters I to IV of his *Monologion* (1076).

<sup>25</sup> Other more detailed natures could of course be defined, adding descriptions of further properties of each of these four individuals (cf. fn. 28 below), but for present purposes the ones given here will do. Formally, each nature is to be understood as an unordered set of properties, but any technical implications of this can be ignored here.

- <Alfred>: <King of England, defeated the Danes, translated Boethius>  
<Arthur>: <Saintly and heroic king, kept a court of knights, sought  
the Holy Grail>

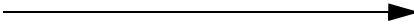
Although for convenience we here refer to these four natures by the labels '<Laika>', '<Lassie>', '<Alfred>' and '<Arthur>' (and include such proper names as 'England' and 'Boethius' within their descriptive characterizations), it should be borne in mind that this syntax is shorthand only—the natures have no essential connection to any particular real or imagined individual, and are constituted purely by the descriptive properties that characterize them (let us call these their 'characteristic properties').

We are now in a position to introduce the crucial Anselmian notion of 'greatness', which though rather vaguely explicated in Anselm's writings, presumably involves the paradigmatic godly qualities of power, wisdom, and goodness, but also, notably, real existence (or strictly *instantiation*, since we are considering greatness as a quality primarily of natures rather than of individuals). Some judgements of greatness seem fairly straightforward, for example, that <Alfred> is greater than <Laika> and <Arthur> greater than <Lassie> (given that the human is in each case characterized as being vastly greater in both power and wisdom than any dog), but others are more tricky. <Laika>, for example, is a nature which involves no remarkable canine qualities—to be the real archetype of this nature, the dog Laika had only to allow herself to be placed within Sputnik 2 before blastoff. <Lassie>, by contrast, is a nature which is characterized by unusual intelligence, bravery, and even moral discrimination, and would no doubt outscore <Laika> on every relevant measure if only it were fortunate enough to have a real archetype. But since it doesn't, the relative greatness of the two natures is indeterminate—nothing that Anselm says makes clear what advantages in other respects, if any, are sufficient to outweigh the additional share of greatness that is conferred on a nature which is instantiated in reality as compared with one which is not.

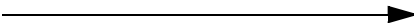
At this point, therefore, it will considerably streamline our discussion if we make a simplifying assumption which, though not unquestionably Anselmian, at least has the authority of having been stated by his correspondent Gaunilo without being contested by him. Namely, that among the various criteria for greatness (power, wisdom, goodness etc.), real existence 'trumps' all others, so that any nature which has a real archetype, however lowly its characteristic properties may be, will on that account alone be greater than any nature, however impressively characterized, which does not.<sup>26</sup> This, then, determines that <Lassie> is certainly the least great of the

four natures specified above, though the relative ordering of the others will depend upon the historical question as to whether <Arthur> is, or is not, instantiated.<sup>27</sup> If there really was a saintly and heroic king who kept a court of knights and sought the Holy Grail, then it is reasonable to expect that <Arthur> will be greater than <Alfred>, whose characteristic properties, though no doubt impressive, seem somewhat less demanding. If, on the other hand, the nature <Arthur> in fact has no real archetype, then not only <Alfred> but also <Laika> will be greater than it.

Assuming for present purposes that <Arthur> is not in fact instantiated—that there was no such king—we can illustrate the relation between greatness, instantiation, and the other main greatness-conferring properties as follows:

<i>Scale of increasing power/wisdom/goodness</i> 			
<i>Modest characteristics of power/wisdom/goodness</i>		<i>Impressive characteristics of power/wisdom/goodness</i>	
<Laika>	<Lassie>	<Alfred>	<Arthur>

<i>Scale of increasing greatness</i> 			
<i>Non-instantiated natures ('non-existent' types of thing)</i>		<i>Instantiated natures ('existent' types of thing)</i>	
<i>Modest power/wisdom/goodness</i>	<i>Impressive power/wisdom/goodness</i>	<i>Modest power/wisdom/goodness</i>	<i>Impressive power/wisdom/goodness</i>
<Lassie>	<Arthur>	<Laika>	<Alfred>

<sup>26</sup> In the first paragraph of his *Reply on Behalf of the Fool*, Gaulino paraphrases what he takes to be Anselm's view that 'if this same being exists in the mind alone, anything that existed also in reality would be greater than this being' (Gaunilo 1078, p. 157). Anselm himself is never quite so explicit, but gives no indication of disagreement with Gaunilo on the point. As we shall see later (fn. 42), the logic of Anselm's argument could not possibly be strengthened (and might well be weakened) if instead we were to assume that some significant superiority in power, wisdom and goodness can outweigh an inferiority in existential status when assessing a nature's greatness, and this would also make the illustration of the theory's implications far more cumbersome.

<sup>27</sup> 'Is' rather than 'was' because (again for the sake of simplicity) I assume here that all judgements of greatness are time-independent, and therefore treat the instantiation of natures as timeless. Nothing of significance for Anselm's argument hangs on this assumption



Hence although the nature <Arthur> is characterized by significantly more impressive qualities of power, wisdom and goodness than <Alfred> and <Laika>, nevertheless since <Arthur> is not instantiated whereas they are, both <Alfred> and <Laika> are to be accorded a higher place in the scale of greatness.

Turning now to recognizably Godlike natures, let us consider the following (in which the word 'omniprfect' is used as an abbreviation for 'omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good'):

<God>:        <omniprfect, creator of the universe>

Presumably <God> is a nature of some significant greatness even if it is not instantiated—its characteristic properties would make it far greater, for example, than <Lassie>, <Arthur> or any other non-instantiated nature of a mere animal or human. But if <God> is in fact instantiated (that is, if there is indeed an omniprfect creator) then it seems to reach a level of greatness which is almost unsurpassable.<sup>28</sup> The theist, accordingly, will see <God> as a nature of supreme greatness, whereas the atheist will see it as a nature of only limited greatness, less great than <Alfred>, <Laika> or any other instantiated nature.

Suppose now that, heedless of Kantian scruples, we allow real existence to feature as one of the characteristic properties of a nature, and accordingly specify the following:

<EGod>:        <omniprfect, creator of the universe, really existing>

<sup>28</sup> I say 'almost unsurpassable' since as we shall see below <God> as defined here lacks at least one characteristic property that contributes to Anselmian greatness, namely necessary existence. Moreover if there is indeed a God, presumably with additional particular qualities some of which may be greatness-conferring, then it may be possible to specify other greater natures whose characteristic properties include those of <God> plus these additional qualities (for example, <omniprfect, creator of the universe, eternal, inspirer of prophets>). This last point illustrates a general implication of our theory of natures: any really existing being will instantiate a potentially infinite number of increasingly specific natures, and it may be that the full greatness of any real individual (for example, King Alfred) cannot be captured by any descriptive nature that has only a finite number of characteristic properties. Considerations of this kind might motivate postulation of the limiting case of a nature that is characterized by *all* the descriptive properties of some particular individual—this, if accepted, would provide a sort of Leibnizian individual nature.

How great is this nature? Again the answer must depend on whether or not it is instantiated: if there is in fact a really existing omniperfect creator, then <EGod> will presumably—like <God>—possess almost unsurpassable greatness, whereas if there is in fact no such being, then <EGod> will—again like <God>—enjoy a relatively modest degree of greatness, somewhere between that of <Arthur> and <Laika>. It is tempting to suggest, therefore, that as far as greatness is concerned <EGod> and <God> are in exactly the same boat: the addition of ‘really existing’ to a nature’s characteristic properties makes no difference whatever. But this need not require us to insist, with Kant, that real existence is *illegitimate* as a characteristic property; it is sufficient to agree here with Hume, that as a characteristic property existence is just peculiarly *empty*.<sup>29</sup>

The case with *necessary* existence, however, is very different, because the nature:

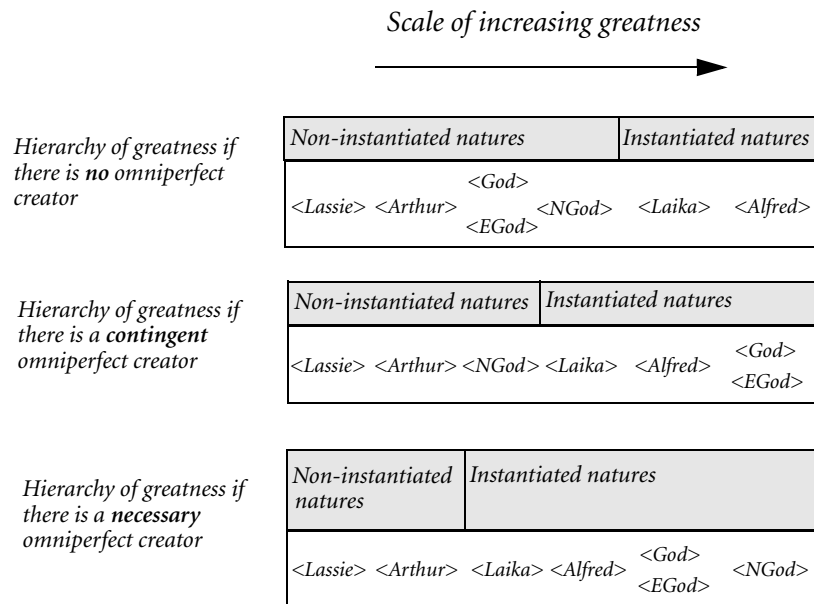
**<NGod>:**    <omniperfect, creator of the universe, necessarily existing>

can certainly differ in greatness from <God>, most strikingly if there is indeed an omniperfect creator but one who is merely contingent (in which case <God> is almost supremely great whereas <NGod>, being non-instantiated, is less great even than <Laika>). In any other circumstance, by contrast, Anselmian principles would seem to require that <NGod> is greater than <God> in virtue of its more impressive characteristic properties: both Anselm’s main argument in *Proslogion* III, and a number of other points that he makes in his response to Gaunilo, explicitly hinge on the principle that necessary existence is greater than mere contingent existence.

Putting all this together we can now spell out, from three different points of view, the hierarchy of greatness among the seven natures that

<sup>29</sup> ‘To reflect on any thing simply, and to reflect on it as existent, are nothing different from each other. That idea [of existence], when conjoin’d with the idea of any object, makes no addition to it.’ (Hume 1739, pp. 66–7). Our discussion highlights a distinction between *real existence* as an ‘internal’ characteristic property of a nature and *instantiation* as an ‘external’ property of that nature, which is similar in spirit to Meinong’s distinction between ‘being existent’ and ‘existing’ (cf. Simons (1988), pp. 178, 181; as Simons shows, Meinong’s own theory is far more subtle and tenable than its better-known Russellian caricature). The Kantian Dogma is perhaps best seen as a somewhat obscure statement of the correct point that instantiation is not a purely internal characteristic property, but concerns a nature’s relation to the world.

we have discussed, depending on what we take to be the existential and modal status of an omnipotent creator:



There is an important though unsurprising lesson here: the greatness of a nature depends, in general, not only on its characteristic properties but also, crucially, on whether or not it happens to be instantiated. And it is precisely because instantiation contributes so significantly to the greatness of a nature that Anselm feels able to conclude that the greatest of all natures must indeed be instantiated.

The points made so far only partially determine the interpretation of our reformulated Anselmian notion of greatness, but they may already provide a sufficient basis for the analysis and evaluation of Anselm's argument. Leaving aside all modal complications, greatness as understood here involves four positive criteria, namely power, wisdom, goodness and instantiation, with the last of these being dominant over all the others.<sup>30</sup> Beyond that it has been left indeterminate what the relation might be between the three lesser criteria—whether for example they also fall into some dominance hierarchy (with any difference in power, say, always outweighing any difference in wisdom), or whether

<sup>30</sup> The simplest way of taking account of whether the instantiation is necessary or contingent is probably to count a nature's modality of instantiation as a fifth, subordinate criterion (a 'tie-breaker', so to speak). This avoids the inappropriateness of having numbers or other purely abstract entities deemed greater than a contingent God, and fits neatly with modality's being an all-or-nothing affair.

alternatively they contribute on a more or less comparable footing (for example, so that for any given *superiority* in power, it will always be possible to find some corresponding *inferiority* in wisdom that would exactly compensate). For this reason (as well as the relatively superficial but real difficulty of assessing each individual criterion on any objective and unified scale) it remains in general indeterminate which worldly natures are greater than others, but judging on the authority of Edward Gibbon, perhaps the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus is as good a candidate as any for the accolade of supreme greatness within the natural order—I shall accordingly take him as an example in what follows.<sup>31</sup> Fortunately this sort of indeterminacy ceases to be a problem in the divine sphere as traditionally understood, because if indeed it makes sense to speak of an infinitely powerful, infinitely wise, and perfectly good being, then this omniperfect nature, if instantiated, will clearly be unsurpassably great and, if not instantiated, will at least be unsurpassable by any other non-instantiated nature.<sup>32</sup> So although our treatment of greatness has not been by any means comprehensive, it is at any rate quite sufficient for the purposes of Anselm's argument.

Before returning to the details of that argument, however, there is one more rather thorny question in the theory of natures that deserves at least a mention. Namely, whether it is legitimate to make reference to natures themselves, within the descriptions that characterize a nature. Are we, for example, permitted to specify 'higher-order' natures such as the following?

<Greatest>: <greatest of all natures>

My strong inclination is to say 'no', for at least four reasons. First, the theory of natures has been introduced here for one specific purpose—to facilitate existence-independent reference to kinds of thing—and a higher-order nature such as <Greatest> gives no clear characterization

<sup>31</sup> Gibbon comments of Marcus Aurelius and his time that 'his life was the noblest commentary on the precepts of Zeno [that is, Stoicism]. He was severe to himself, indulgent to the imperfections of others, just and beneficent to all mankind ... If a man were called to fix the period in the history of the world, during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous, he would, without hesitation, name that which elapsed from the death of Domitian to the accession of Commodus. The vast extent of the Roman empire was governed by absolute power, under the guidance of virtue and wisdom.' (1776, pp. 77–8). Given the regrettable rarity with which significant virtue accompanies such degrees of power, Marcus Aurelius probably has few competitors on the human scale of greatness.

<sup>32</sup> Again for the sake of simplicity I ignore modality and the other complications in note 28 above. The point made here shows that 'greater than' need not be a totally ordered relation to be usable within Anselm's argument (as seems to be claimed by Broad (1953) pp. 177–9). For this role it does not matter if some natures are neither greater nor lesser than some others, as long as there is one (or more) supreme nature which, if instantiated, will be at least as great as any other.

of a kind of thing. Secondly, and related to this, higher-order natures can seem peculiarly indeterminate or vacuous (in a way that is highly reminiscent of liar-paradoxical or truth-teller-paradoxical sentences), and even those that do succeed in providing some determinate characterization do so only at second-hand—in such cases it seems best to replace these higher-order natures through ‘translation’ into a first-order equivalent. Thirdly, if we permit any ‘ineliminably’ higher-order natures (where such translation is not possible), then this will almost certainly open the door to paradox.<sup>33</sup> Finally, and clinchingly for present purposes, the admission of higher-order natures would not in fact assist Anselm’s argument at all, but would only make its analysis far more complicated and murky. And as we shall see, the fundamental objection to Anselm’s reasoning is in any case quite independent of this issue, so that even if the admission of higher-order natures were to prove after all to be well-motivated and consistent, their introduction would still do nothing to help remedy the fatal ambiguity that I shall shortly identify.

## **6. Anselm’s argument reconsidered**

The theory of natures that has been developed above, though admittedly rudimentary (and quite possibly subject to various objections), is at least sufficient to enable us to assess how Anselm’s argument will fare within a far more sympathetic theoretical context than it is usually permitted. The steps of that argument can be fairly straightforwardly translated from the mentalistic idiom in which he presents it into the language of natures, as follows:

- (1') The phrase ‘a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought’ is clearly understood by the Fool, and apparently makes sense.

<sup>33</sup> To take just two very simple examples, consider the paradoxical potential of allowing such ineliminably higher-order natures as: (a) <GreaterStill>, characterized as <that nature which is even greater than <Greatest>>; or (b) <Self-Refer>, characterized as <the nature <Self-Refer>>. Many familiar paradoxes are likely to have analogues within a theory that is permissive enough to countenance these sorts of constructions, inevitably casting doubt on arguments that are framed within it.

- (2') Hence we can take the phrase 'a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought' as successfully denoting some specific nature.<sup>34</sup>
- (3') A nature which is instantiated in reality is greater than one which is not.
- (4') So if a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought were not instantiated in reality, then it would be possible to think of a nature that is greater (for example, any nature that is in fact instantiated in reality).
- (5') But this would be a contradiction, since it is obviously impossible to think of a nature that is greater than a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought.
- (6') Therefore a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought must indeed be instantiated in reality.

It is, I believe, very clear that this argument is essentially the same as Anselm's—there is a step-by-step correspondence between the two, and the logic by which the conclusion is reached is structurally parallel. And yet, I claim, this translated version of the argument is resistant to at least eight of the nine standard objections that were itemized earlier. To start with conceptual matters, any supposed reliance on some dubious Neo-Platonic Presupposition (a) has been removed by our reformulation of the Anselmian notion of greatness, which has made comparisons of greatness dependent only on four very explicit non-Platonic criteria, and in doing so has ensured that such comparisons are as well-defined and determinate as is necessary for the purposes at hand. That these comparisons now all unambiguously relate pairs of natures (rather than a mixture of existing individuals and non-existents) completely avoids the Comparison Difficulty (d), while the substitution of existence by instantiation as the dominant criterion for greatness has left the Kantian Dogma (f) without a target—by confin-

<sup>34</sup> Though Anselm believed that there was only one supreme nature, he seems to have taken care to present his argument in such a way that its logic could still succeed if there were more than one, each as great as the other (for example, <God> and <EGod>). Hence I have rendered his formula using the indefinite article ('a-nature ...') rather than the definite article ('the-nature ...'), which conforms to his own use of *something* ... rather than *that* ... when introducing the formula. (However for simplicity I retain the same formula throughout, though Anselm's usage would suggest a switch from 'a-nature ...' to 'that-nature ...' in step (4'), as explained in fn. 19 above.) Accordingly, I employ the word 'denoting' in the manner of the first paragraph of Russell's 'On Denoting' (1905), to cover not only the use of a definite description, but also indeterminate 'reference' by means of an indefinite description.

ing our theory to the domain of descriptive natures, and thus sidestepping the problems associated with individual 'essences', we have ensured that instantiation emerges as an apparently coherent and certainly non-vacuous property (and one, moreover, which conforms to Fregean orthodoxy to the extent of being an implicit quantification involving predicatively characterized natures, rather than being itself a predicate of concrete individuals).

Turning now to the logic of the argument, the step from (1') to (2') is entirely free of mentalistic objectification, and so retains no trace of either the Mental Entity Confusion (b) or the Intentional Object Fallacy (c). In proceeding forward from step (2'), the Unique Referent Problem (e) is also avoided, since there is now no equivocation between 'something' and 'that' within the key phrase, and no presupposition of a unique real instantiator. Moreover the Aquinas Rebuttal (h) seems inapplicable to the contradiction in thought that emerges at step (4')—in this translated argument 'a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought' functions unequivocally as a description (rather than as a characterization) of the nature in question, and hence the contradiction alleged in step (5') seems to be genuine: it is presumably impossible to think of a greater nature than one that is correctly so described.<sup>35</sup> Finally, the argument as a whole seems to violate the Separate Realms Principle (g)—as any successful Ontological Argument must—but for reasons related to those just given in response to (e) and (h), this 'Principle' suggests no clear point of objection: on the one hand the reference to a nature at step (2') does not presuppose the existence of a real archetype and so is not obviously question-begging, while on the other hand, the contradiction at (4') cannot apparently be confined within the realm of thoughts.<sup>36</sup>

The only type of standard objection that has not yet been dealt with is the Gaunilo *reductio* (i), and here the situation is indeed less promising. However our reformulated argument does at least have the merit of appearing somewhat more resistant to such *reductios* than is Anselm's

<sup>35</sup> Within our theory the key formula must be interpreted as a description rather than a characterization, given that higher-order characterizations are not permitted. See fn. 19 above for evidence that this is also faithful to Anselm's own intentions.

<sup>36</sup> The most comprehensive discussion of the Separate Realms Principle, by Oppy (1995), seems to overlook this subtle logic which has always made Anselm's Ontological Argument so much more intriguing and puzzling than the Cartesian-style versions. Instead of addressing the *Proslogion* II argument itself, Oppy focuses (pp. 108–11) on three very simplified 'interpretations' of that argument, two of which are so distant from Anselm's words as to be virtually unrecognizable, while the other—dubbed *the conceptual interpretation*—plays into the hands of his 'General Objection' both by the simple way in which it is represented and also by being phrased entirely in terms of conceiving and conceivability.

original, as we can see if we attempt to start a parallel argument using Gaunilo's own 'most excellent island' example:

- (1g) The phrase 'a-nature-of-an-island-than-which-no-more-excellent-can-be-thought' is clearly understood by the Fool, and apparently makes sense.
- (2g) Hence we can take the phrase 'a-nature-of-an-island-than-which-no-more-excellent-can-be-thought' as successfully denoting some specific nature. (*etc.*)

The advantage of the reformulation is to make explicit something which in Anselm's original is masked by his apparent Intentional Object Fallacy (and also obscured by his failure to distinguish explicitly between characterizing a nature and referring to one)—namely, that even if the fallacy is avoided there is an ineradicable logical gap between the first step of the argument and the second, between the mere understanding of a phrase that purports to denote a nature, and there being in fact some specific nature which that phrase successfully denotes. Accordingly Gaunilo's own attempted *reductio* can be blocked by denying the transition from (1g) to (2g), on the basis that there simply is no such nature as a-nature-of-an-island-than-which-no-more-excellent-can-be-thought. Moreover such a blocking move is particularly plausible here, because just as there is no such nature as a-nature-of-an-integer-than-which-no-larger-can-be-thought, so it may well be that the excellence of islands, like the magnitude of integers, can never even in principle reach a particular unsurpassable limit: however excellent an island might be, there could always remain room for possible improvement.

Any atheist worth his saltpetre,<sup>37</sup> of course, will not be content to leave the matter here, but will challenge Anselm's own transition from (1') to (2') on similar grounds: perhaps there is no such nature as 'a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought'. And this sort of question might easily lead into traditional debates about the coherence of the concept of God—do omnipotence, omniscience and perfect goodness make sense, and are they mutually compatible? However the atheist is better advised to steer clear of all this and instead stay faithful to the straightforward Gaunilo *reductio* strategy. Grant to Anselm his premisses, that infinite power, infinite wisdom, and perfect goodness are individually coherent and mutually compatible, but then

<sup>37</sup> A turn of phrase borrowed from Cargile (1975) p. 79.



frame a *reductio* that is as close as possible a parody of Anselm's original. One such parody is a simple mirror-image in the moral dimension, which copies the Anselmian pattern almost exactly in other respects. Just as that required some preliminary spadework to define the notion of *greatness* in terms of four positive criteria (instantiation, power, wisdom, and moral goodness), so similar work can be done to define the notion of *effective evilness* in terms of the same criteria, except that in this case moral goodness counts negatively rather than positively (or, which presumably comes to much the same thing, moral evilness takes the place of moral goodness as a fourth positive criterion). The result, after appropriate substitutions, will be an argument beginning something like this:

- (1e) The phrase 'a-nature-than-which-no-more-effectively-evil-nature-can-be-thought' is clearly understood by the Fool, and apparently makes sense.
- (2e) Hence we can take the phrase 'a-nature-than-which-no-more-effectively-evil-nature-can-be-thought' as successfully denoting some specific nature.

And we are already apparently well on the way to 'proving' the real existence of a being of unsurpassably effective evilness, whom we might appropriately name 'Antigod'.<sup>38</sup>

Not only does this antitheistic argument have a conclusion which is even more manifestly unacceptable to the theist than is Gaunilo's island (because two such different beings clearly cannot both have unlimited power), but also, its structural similarity to the Anselmian original radically reduces the scope for finding any logically relevant asymmetry between them. In the absence of any plausible basis for claiming a *relevant* asymmetry between moral goodness and evilness in themselves, Anselm's defender apparently has no recourse but to appeal to a difference in their relation to the other criteria involved, notably God's and Antigod's supposed infinite wisdom.<sup>39</sup> The obvious way of developing this idea is to maintain that moral goodness can (or even must) accompany infinite wisdom whereas evilness cannot, for example on the

<sup>38</sup> An argument presented in Millican (1989) p. 196.

<sup>39</sup> An asymmetry between goodness and evilness has been claimed (for example, by Augustine and Aquinas in the context of the Problem of Evil) on the ground that goodness is positive and evilness merely negative. But even if evilness is understood negatively as a privation of goodness, this provides no basis for a *relevant* objection to the parody argument, for if a scale of goodness can be set up then a scale of evilness can be defined straightforwardly as its inverse, and if good-

ground that objective moral values are intrinsically motivating for those who fully grasp them and would therefore be known as such by any infinitely wise being.<sup>40</sup> But even if such a manoeuvre (and the questionable moral metaphysics that underlies it) were to be accepted, the opponent of Anselm could respond quite simply, by dropping the wisdom criterion from his definition of 'effective evilness' and thus modifying his parody argument into one with a less ambitious but still antitheistic conclusion, namely the existence of a being who is infinitely powerful and maximally evil (but not necessarily infinitely wise). To block this less ambitious—and therefore logically more resilient—argument, the Anselmian must establish a necessary antipathy between infinite power and maximal evil, and without falling back on some Neo-Platonic Presupposition about the fundamental place of goodness in the universe, this looks a tall order.

Although the dialectic of the last few paragraphs has made some progress, and has certainly established the Gaunilo *reductio* as at least a major obstacle even for the reformulated version of Anselm's argument, it nevertheless leaves a rather unsatisfactory impression of inconclusiveness and even irrelevance. Perhaps this should come as no surprise, because a similar impression is typical of discussions of the Gaunilo strategy (for example, Devine 1975), probably for the following reason. The great strength of this method of opposing the Ontological Argument is its generality—if there is *any* flaw in Anselm's premisses or in his reasoning, then *some* parody argument is likely to be able to exploit it, no matter what that flaw may be. But this strength entails a corresponding weakness, because the very generality of the method makes it totally non-specific and hence ill-suited for identifying the flaw in question. Hence debates that are centred around Gaunilo *reductios* tend to be rather directionless, with parody arguments being proposed by one side, and then opposed by the other on grounds which often seem to have very little to do with the logic of the argument itself—*any* method of obstructing the *reductio* is embraced, even if this means appealing to principles (such as the objective prescriptivity of moral values) that played no role whatever in the original argument. Unless one believes in some pre-established harmony whereby God has providentially sup-

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ness has a determinate limiting value then it is hard to see why evilness should not have one too, even if that value is different (and for the purposes of this argument a zero limit would do just as well as an infinite limit).

<sup>40</sup> Such a claim is made in Ch. 11 of Swinburne (1977).

plied an appropriate refutation for every possible Gaunilo *reductio*, one is likely to be left feeling that the Anselmian's replies are frustratingly beside the point, and that the essentially simple lesson of the parody arguments—that the principles used within Anselm's own reasoning would sanction parallel inferences that are *plainly* invalid—has been lost amid the scholastic discussion of the particular case. To move beyond this frustrating standoff we must resist the temptation to add yet more epicycles to the *reductio* dialectic, and instead get to the bottom of what is really wrong with Anselm's argument.

## 7. The fatal flaw

So far the positive conclusions of our analysis of Anselm's argument seem rather meagre, though we have plenty of negative results to show. Namely, that when translated into the language of natures the Anselmian argument avoids eight of the nine standard objections that were outlined earlier, and although Gaunilo *reductios* continue to cast very serious doubt on its validity, they unfortunately do nothing to show us where the logical error is to be found. The obvious way forward, then, is to examine the translated argument in detail within its proper context of the theory of natures, and see what logical tricks it might conceal.

The argument begins by pointing out that the phrase 'a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought' makes sense, and then goes on to infer that we can legitimately take this as successfully denoting some specific nature. But *which* nature, exactly? If we take for granted that Marcus Aurelius embodied the greatest combination of power, wisdom and moral goodness to be found in the non-divine world, and ignore, both here and in subsequent discussion, all complications concerning additional supposed greatness-conferring properties (notably modalities of existence such as necessity and eternity), then the best two contenders are as follows:

<Aurelius>: <absolute Emperor of the Roman Empire, wise,  
just, beneficent>

<God>: <omnipotent, creator of the universe>

Since the argument purports to prove a contradiction in the denial of God's existence, the best way to identify any logical flaws is to take up the atheist point of view and then see whether such a contradiction can be forced upon us. So let us now accordingly presuppose the non-exist-

ence of an omnipotent being, and ask from that perspective which of the two natures above might be correctly describable as ‘a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought’.

The most straightforward answer, perhaps surprisingly, is that <Aurelius> is so describable, simply in virtue of being (from the atheist point of view that we are here presupposing) *the greatest nature there is*. For if <Aurelius> is indeed the greatest nature there is, then it is not possible to think of any nature that is (in fact) greater, and hence <Aurelius> can be accurately described as ‘a-nature-so-great-that-no-nature-that-is-greater-can-be-thought-of’, which seems a fairly plausible interpretation of the Anselmian formula.<sup>41</sup> Obviously this answer will not satisfy the Anselmian himself, however, because if his formula is understood as referring only to whichever nature is *in fact* unsurpassably great (for example, <Aurelius> if there is no divine being), then the conclusion of his Ontological Argument, that such a nature is really instantiated, will fail to provide any support whatever for the existence of *God*. So even if this interpretation yields a sound argument (which it does), the Anselmian must insist on an alternative interpretation of his key phrase.<sup>42</sup>

One alternative immediately suggests itself, because it seems in a way to be quite easy to think of a greater nature than <Aurelius>, simply by thinking of the nature <God> as instantiated. When we think of <God> as instantiated, we are indeed thinking of this nature as being so great that no nature could be thought greater, and in this sense, the nature <God> can be appropriately described as ‘a-nature-which-can-be-thought-so-great-that-no-nature-can-be-thought-greater’. So here we have a second possible interpretation of the Anselmian formula, and one which is likely to be more acceptable to the Anselmian than the first because it at least enables his Ontological Argument to get under way with a recognisably theistic subject-matter. And with this interpreta-

<sup>41</sup> Here ‘can-be-thought’ in the original phrase has been taken to mean simply ‘can-be-thought-of’, and so becomes more or less equivalent to ‘exists’. However the term ‘exists’ may conjure up misleading ideas about non-existent natures, so under this interpretation a more straightforward way of expressing the key phrase is just ‘a-nature-so-great-that-no-nature-is-greater’. Gaunilo uses the formulae ‘something greater than everything that can be thought of’ and ‘that which is greater than everything’ (e.g. Gaunilo 1078, p. 161), and he accordingly seems to be interpreting Anselm’s phrase in this sort of way (albeit he confusedly takes the relevant relation to be ‘greater than’ when it should be ‘at least as great as’). But in his response Anselm takes issue with Gaunilo for using forms of words inadequate to the subtleties of his argument (1078, p. 179).

<sup>42</sup> In securing a sound argument here, a significant role is played by our simplifying assumption that instantiation ‘trumps’ the other criteria for greatness (cf. fn. 26 above). If a nature (e.g. <God>) could be greater than <Aurelius> without being instantiated, then clearly Anselm would have no right to suppose even that the actually greatest nature must be instantiated.

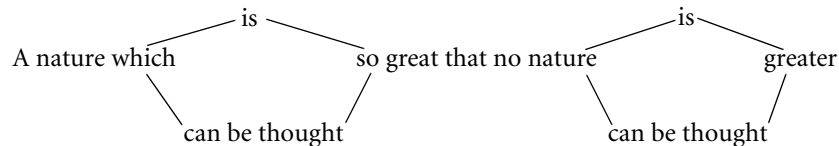
tion, the argument can proceed quite smoothly as far as step (4'). Unfortunately, however, it then falls down completely at step (5'), because if the key phrase is interpreted in this way, as meaning a-nature-which-can-be-thought-so-great-that-no-nature-can-be-thought-greater, then the atheist will see no contradiction whatever in thinking of a nature that is *in fact* greater. For while it remains true that the nature <God> *can be thought to be* so great that no nature could possibly be greater, if *in fact* it is not instantiated, then <God> is not *in fact* that great.

Having found one interpretation which ensures a sound argument, and another which gives it a recognizably theistic subject, the Anselmian might be tempted to try a hybrid of the two, and stipulate that his key phrase be understood as meaning 'a-nature-so-great-that-no-nature-can-be-thought-greater'.<sup>43</sup> If the atheist accepts this as denoting some nature then he will indeed be forced into a contradiction, but this is hardly surprising, because to accept that some nature is (in fact) so great that no nature can even be *thought to be* greater is already to accept that some nature is as great as any nature could possibly be, or in other words, that <God> is instantiated. So no atheist worth his saltpetre will accept that under this interpretation the key phrase succeeds in denoting any nature at all—as far as he is concerned, *there is no nature that great*.

So none of these interpretations of 'a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought' is able to fulfil all of the roles that Anselm requires of it within his argument, and hence the crucial problem with that argument turns out to be nothing whatever to do with deep philosophical complexities regarding his talk of mental entities, existence-independent natures, predications of greatness and so forth, but simply results from a relatively shallow (though very seductive) ambiguity in his key phrase. This is something like an ambiguity of scope, which arises from an indeterminacy over what extent of the phrase is gov-

<sup>43</sup> An alternative hybrid is 'a-nature-which-can-be-thought-so-great-that-no-nature-that-is-greater-can-be-thought-of', but this simply combines the weaknesses rather than the strengths of the first two interpretations (moreover if there is no divine being the denotation of the phrase will be radically indeterminate, since it will be satisfied by any of the countless uninstantiated natures whose characteristics of power, wisdom and goodness are at least as impressive as those of <Aurelius>). Yet more interpretations become available if the argument is situated within the sort of possible worlds framework envisaged by Lewis (1970, cf. fn. 2 above), including two (p. 180) which might be paraphrased as 'a-nature-which-must-be-thought-so-great-that-no-nature-can-be-thought-greater', and 'a-nature-which-cannot-be-thought-to-be-less-great-than-any-nature'. But such interpretations seem rather artificial as construals of Anselm's words, and anyway provide no assistance to his argument.

erned by the ‘can-be-thought’ operator, and we can accordingly schematize the different interpretations as follows:



With two possible readings at each of two points, we have four possible interpretations altogether, whose significance for the cogency of Anselm’s argument can be tabulated as follows:

Interpretation of ‘a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought’	Denotation if <Aurelius> is the greatest instantiated nature	Implications for the validity and soundness of Anselm’s Ontological Argument
A nature which <i>is</i> so great that no nature <i>is</i> greater (i.e. <i>no greater nature can be thought of</i> )	<Aurelius>	Argument is sound, but proves the instantiation of the greatest instantiated nature—hence it fails to prove the existence of God.
A nature which <i>can-be-thought</i> so great that no nature <i>can-be-thought</i> greater	<God>	The <i>reductio</i> at Step (5′) fails, because it is not contradictory to suppose that the nature in question is exceeded in actual greatness.
A nature which <i>is</i> so great that no nature <i>can-be-thought</i> greater	there is no such nature (unless God exists)	Step (2′) is unwarranted, because if no God exists, then no nature is in fact great enough to satisfy the key phrase, so it fails to denote.
The nature which <i>can-be-thought</i> so great that no nature <i>is</i> greater	there are many such natures, from <Aurelius> to <God>	A <i>reductio</i> at Step (5′) fails, because it is not contradictory to suppose that such a nature should be exceeded in <i>actual</i> greatness.

It is interesting to note that of the standard objections to the logic of the argument itemized earlier, only the Aquinas Rebuttal, which blocks the inference from (4′) to (5′) under the second interpretation and the fourth, has been vindicated as relatively clearly on target. As for the other genuine faults in the argument in its various interpretations, none of the standard objections even acknowledges the possibility of a sound argument under the first interpretation (whereby something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought is indeed proved to exist); none therefore gets close to identifying the logical gap that opens up under this interpretation between something-than-which-nothing-

greater-can-be-thought and *God*. Likewise the denotation failure which is the only real logical fault in the argument under the third interpretation has gone largely unnoticed—the Unique Referent Problem is no doubt somewhat analogous, but that involves the crude failure of reference to a particular *existent* rather than the relatively subtle failure to denote any *nature*. (The vital point here being that even if—in a perhaps extravagantly Meinongian spirit—we allow any arbitrary set of descriptions to *characterize* a nature, it can still remain the case that there is in fact no nature, however characterized, that *satisfies* Anselm's description.) In view of all this, it is perhaps not surprising how many commentators have tended to assume that Anselm's argument can be kept at bay only by rejecting the implicit theory of natures on which it builds: they simply have not seen the fundamental ambiguity which stands out from the background confusion only when the argument is considered within a favourable theoretical context. However this ambiguity, once identified, can be recognized and spelt out quite independently of the detailed theory of natures within which it has emerged, as I shall now illustrate.

### 8. The fatal flaw restated and generalized

Anselm uses his key phrase with the aim of denoting some nature (or type of thing, or concept), identified by its supreme greatness when compared with all others. But since instantiation (or actuality, or real existence) is a crucial component of his notion of greatness, he then goes on to conclude that this supremely great nature (or type, or concept) must indeed be instantiated (or actual, or really existent).

Unfortunately there is a double ambiguity in Anselm's key phrase, introduced by the overtones of modality in his words 'can be thought' and by the potential application of this modality not only to the particular nature (or type, or concept) that he intends to pick out, but also to the others with which he favourably compares it. In short, it is left indeterminate whether these comparisons are being made in terms of *actual greatness* or *thought greatness*, and hence whether the natures (or types, or concepts) are being compared in terms of their actual or hypothetical qualities.

If all comparisons concern *actual* greatness, then it is clear that Anselm's argument can at best prove the existence of something that is *actually* unsurpassed by any competitor—for the atheist, this will be quite insufficient to elevate it to any sort of divine status. If, on the other hand, all comparisons concern hypothetical greatness, then

although the atheist may concede that there is some potentially divine contender in the frame (namely the nature, type or concept of an omniperfect creator), the argument will do nothing to show that this contender is anything more than hypothetically supreme: if something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought can satisfy this description purely in virtue of being *thought* supremely great, then clearly its satisfaction of the description provides no ground for going on to conclude that it is *actually* supremely great. Anselm's argument probably derives much of its slippery seductiveness from a third, hybrid, interpretation whereby the comparisons are made between the *actual* greatness of his key nature (or type, or concept) and the *hypothetical* greatness of its competitors: in effect, we are invited to contemplate the existential status of *something-which-is-actually-so-great-that-nothing-can-be-thought-greater*. But once made explicit it becomes clear that this simply begs the question against the atheist: to accept that the key phrase, so interpreted, denotes anything—even a nature or concept—is already to concede the real existence of a being than which no greater can even be imagined. Nothing in Anselm's argument gives the slightest ground for supposing that such a being exists, or hence for the atheist's conceding that this phrase, when thus interpreted, can successfully denote.

There is here the basis of a general method of criticism which can be applied to other versions of the Ontological Argument and which, once stated, seems rationally compelling. Such arguments typically proceed by referring to or specifying some 'entity' (nature, type, concept, or whatever) whose 'reality' (instantiation, actuality, existence, or whatever) is to be proved. The means of reference or specification will involve some suitably godlike description whose content is then supposed to provide a means of demonstrating the reality of the entity in question. For simplicity, suppose that the description used is 'the *G*', in which case the argument will proceed by using this description to identify the entity in question and then unpacking the descriptive content with the aim of showing that *the G* must really exist. To counter such an argument I recommend that the atheist should face its proponent with a simple dilemma through the following question: 'Is it necessary, in order to satisfy the description "the *G*", that an entity *really* possess the properties that qualify it as the denotation of that description, or is it sufficient that it *be thought of as* possessing the relevant properties?' If it is necessary that *the G* really have those properties, then the atheist can reasonably question whether 'the *G*' succeeds in denoting any godlike entity in the first place; if it is *not* necessary that *the G* really have those



properties, then the theist cannot hope to prove that any entity thus denoted must therefore really exist with those properties.<sup>44</sup>

We have already seen how the horns of this dilemma impale Anselm's Ontological Argument: his key phrase can be interpreted in a way that guarantees successful denotation only by relaxing either the requirement of divinity (the sense in which it might denote Marcus Aurelius) or the requirement of reality (the sense in which it can denote a divine entity even if that entity is merely hypothetical). But Anselm's failure to evade impalement should not surprise us, for it is an obvious tautology that the reality of a divine being can be inferred from his key phrase's successful denotation only if that phrase is used in a sense that prevents it from denoting successfully unless a divine being really exists. So in using the phrase with the presumption that it does successfully denote something, and then arguing back that it can only successfully denote a real divine entity, Anselm is surreptitiously trying to have his cake and eat it.

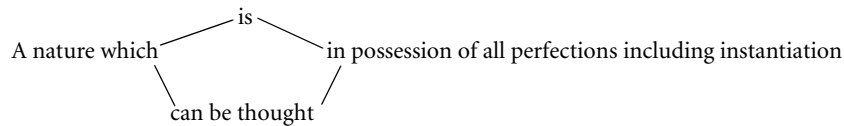
As an illustration of the wider relevance of this kind of dilemma, we can apply it to the version of the Ontological Argument presented in Descartes's *Meditations*, the essential points of which are contained in the following short quotation (Descartes 1641 pp. 45–6, following the wording of the French edition):

[The] idea of God, or a supremely perfect being, is one which I find within me just as surely as the idea of any shape and number. And my understanding that actual and eternal existence belongs to his nature is no less clear and distinct than is the case when I prove of any shape or number that some property belongs to its nature ... it is just as much of a contradiction to think of God (that is, a supremely perfect being) lacking existence (that is, lacking a perfection), as it is to think of a mountain without a valley.

Here Descartes purports to make reference to some thought-of 'being' which is characterized as possessing all perfections. He then infers from the nature of this being that existence is one of the perfections that it possesses, and hence that it must really exist. Translated into the termi-

<sup>44</sup> The dilemma is posed in terms of something's 'really' possessing properties rather than 'actually' possessing them, to accommodate modal arguments such as Plantinga's (1974, pp. 213–6), in which it is claimed that some entity in a possible world (rather than a mere object of thought) has a 'world-indexed' property which carries implications for the actual world also. Here the appropriate target of the dilemma is the supposition that there really is such a possible entity; for as Plantinga himself points out (p. 218), the exemplification of this kind of world-indexed property can only be either necessary or impossible—hence accepting the real possibility of such an entity cannot reasonably be expected even of an agnostic, let alone an atheist. The question-begging nature of Plantinga's argument because clearer if it is translated out of the idiom of possible worlds, which seems to invest possibilities with so much more 'reality' than mere thoughts or fictions. Thus translated, Plantinga's claim is in effect: 'The following property—*essential omniperfection which if possibly exemplified is necessarily exemplified*—is possibly exemplified.'

nology that we have used to analyse Anselm's argument, we can see diagrammatically how Descartes's simpler version trades on the same kind of ambiguity, albeit with only one instance of the ambiguity rather than two:



However the fatal dilemma can be posed to Descartes without relying on any such translation, as follows:

When you refer to 'God', you are purporting to speak about some perfect being—but it is not clear whether, in order to qualify as the referent of this term, a being needs to be perfect *in reality*, or whether it is sufficient that the being be merely *thought of as* perfect. If your term 'God' can denote only a being that is perfect *in reality*, then you have given no reason to suppose that the term succeeds in referring, because your merely having the idea of a perfect being shows at best that some being is *thought of by you as* perfect, not that there exists some really perfect being for 'God' to denote. If on the other hand a being can qualify as the referent of your term 'God' just in virtue of being *thought of as* perfect, then even if 'God' succeeds in referring, you clearly cannot argue that on pain of contradiction the being thus denoted must be perfect *in reality*. Either way, your argument does nothing to establish the real existence of a perfect being.

As compared with the standard objections to the Ontological Argument surveyed earlier, this method of refutation has a number of major advantages. First, it presupposes no sophisticated theoretical background or terminology, for as we have seen it can be posed to Anselm or Descartes, or indeed to any other proponent of a similar form of argument, in the same terms that he uses himself. Secondly, because of this terminological modesty the objection can be urged in a way that remains ontologically and metaphysically neutral, sidestepping any debate on the status of mental, intentional or other potentially controversial types of 'entity' even if these are explicitly employed in the criticized argument. Thirdly, the avoidance of such metaphysical red herrings leaves the thrust of the objection clear and straightforward, directly targeting the logic of the presented argument and highlighting plainly where the real logical gap arises. Finally, and most importantly,

this simple and direct attack succeeds where so many of the familiar standard objections fail or are at best inconclusive: Anselm's Ontological Argument, and that of Descartes, are indeed decisively refuted.

## **9. Conclusion, and a moral**

The refutation developed above is, in the end, gratifyingly simple, and conforms nicely with the preference expressed at the beginning of this paper for 'shallow' as opposed to 'deep' refutations. If I am right, then Descartes's version of the argument trades on an ambiguity between real perfection and thought perfection, while Anselm's version contains two instances of the same ambiguity, with the doubly indeterminate scope of 'can be thought' cleverly camouflaged inside his key formula. Anselm's argument can thus be added to what is already a distinguished list of implicit scope fallacies, including (arguably) such classical examples as Aquinas's 'Third Way', Aristotle's, Hobbes's and Mill's arguments for a primary good or standard of value, Berkeley's inference to an all-perceiving spirit, and various other notable arguments given by philosophers from Plato to Spinoza to contemporaries such as Ayer.<sup>45</sup> Of course the scholarly identification of such shallow fallacies within an author's work can be very controversial, but if substantiated, it brings the considerable benefit of delivering a logical verdict that will stand the test of time. Whereas convicting Anselm of treating existence as a predicate still leaves it obscure whether this supposed error is in fact disastrous for his argument (since it might turn out not to be an error at all), convicting him of a shallow scope fallacy leaves no such room for doubt.

The long-standing assumption that the fallacy in the Ontological Argument is deep rather than shallow may have had a significant impact on the development of twentieth-century logic and philosophy. Russell's flirtation with Hegelianism was apparently based on his acceptance of a form of the argument (as evidenced both by his essays at the time and by a letter of 1911 to Ottoline Morrell), and although it is unclear how far explicit consideration of the argument motivated his subsequent work, the closely related topic of existence (and the status of non-existents) figured prominently both in his discussions with Moore in the 1890s and in the thinking that led ultimately to his theory of

<sup>45</sup> All of these philosophers have been accused of committing the most familiar form of scope fallacy, known as the 'quantifier shift' fallacy. For this accusation against Plato, Aristotle, Spinoza and Berkeley, see Geach (1958) pp. 2–5; against Hobbes and Mill, see O'Neill (1998), p. 194 fn. 50 and pp. 122–3; against Aquinas, see Davies (1982) p. 42; against Ayer, see Anscombe (1967) p. 138.

descriptions in 1905.<sup>46</sup> In 1911 he was still viewing the Ontological Argument as the rational basis for the Hegelianism that he had since so emphatically disowned; hence it seems very likely that the prospect of undermining it would have provided at least some of the motivation for his intense interest in these logical issues. Over the next few decades the Ontological Argument and the concept of existence were widely seen as intimately entwined, not only because the argument was standardly ‘refuted’ by appeal to the Kantian Dogma and the quantificational interpretation of existence (as for example by Frege, Russell, Ryle, and Kneale), but also because—just as it had done for Kant—the argument continued to play a major role in discussions of the nature of existence itself.<sup>47</sup> Such a background would inevitably discourage talk of ‘natures’ or of entities that might or might not exist, for if *all* that was wrong with the Ontological Argument was its treatment of existence as a property which such entities might have or lack, then admitting such entities into philosophical discourse would risk opening the door to the Anselmian fallacy and no doubt a host of others (such as the Gaunilo-style parodies). So ‘Meinongian’ theories became widely neglected and even ridiculed ‘as the supreme example of a philosophical *reductio ad absurdum*’ (Passmore 1985, p. 127), eventually making a modest comeback only in the 1970s after Kripke’s seminal *Naming and Necessity* (1972) had made talk of possible worlds and their occupants respectable. In Kripke’s wake a number of such theories were soon developed, for example by Castañeda (1974), Rapaport (1978), Routley (1979), and Parsons (1980), but among the general run of philosophers deep suspicion still remains.<sup>48</sup> Perhaps this suspicion can be significantly allayed by showing that the fundamental flaw with the Ontological Argument is not its treatment of existence which so provoked Kant and his successors, but instead a relatively shallow ambiguity which, if expunged, blocks the inference even if Anselm’s supposed Meinongian extravagances are permitted. When reformulated within an appropriate theory

<sup>46</sup> See Griffin (1991) pp. 70–8 for the influence of the Ontological Argument in Russell’s conversion to Hegelianism and pp. 296–304 on his discussions with Moore. See Simons (1988) for Russell’s later correspondence with Meinong (and with Frege) which played such a large part in the development of his theory of descriptions as first presented in Russell (1905).

<sup>47</sup> For example, the 1936 symposium between Kneale and Moore on the topic ‘Is Existence a Predicate?’—perhaps the best-known such discussion—starts from Descartes’s version of the argument, and the argument also features prominently in numerous articles on ‘Existence’ or ‘Being’ in philosophical dictionaries and encyclopaedias throughout the twentieth century.

<sup>48</sup> An engaging attempt to answer such scepticism is provided by Jacquette (2000), which takes the form of an explicit ‘confession’ to what is generally reckoned to be a philosophical sin. He develops his own position most thoroughly in Jacquette (1996).

of 'natures', the *one* fatal objection to the argument is this ambiguity. Hence as long as such ambiguities are assiduously avoided, we have seen no reason to suppose that even the relatively crude theory of natures sketched above will sanction any such objectionable inferences. If this is right, then the analysis of what is *really* wrong with Anselm's ancient enigma may yet hold a valuable lesson for contemporary philosophy.<sup>49</sup>

*School of Philosophy*  
*University of Leeds*  
*Leeds, LS2 9JT*  
*p.j.r.millican@leeds.ac.uk*

PETER MILLICAN

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