

ANSELM  
OF CANTERBURY

VOLUME FOUR

HERMENEUTICAL AND TEXTUAL PROBLEMS  
IN THE COMPLETE TREATISES  
OF ST. ANSELM

*by*

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## CONTENTS

*Preface*

*Chapters*

- I: On Translating Anselm's Complete Treatises
- II: *Monologion* 1-4: The Anatomy of an Interpretation and a Translation
- III: The Anselmian Theory of Universals
- IV: Anselm's Debate with Gaunilo
- V: Some Alleged Metaphysical and Psychological Aspects of the Ontological Argument
- VI. What Is a Translation?

*Bibliography*

*Index of Proper Names*

*Appendices*

- I: *Monologion* 1-5 (translation)
- II: *Corrigenda* for Volume I
- III: *Addenda* and *Corrigenda* for F. S. Schmitt's *Sancti Anselmi Opera Omnia*, Vols. I & II

*Abbreviations*

*Notes*

## CHAPTER VI

### WHAT IS A TRANSLATION?

1. People who do not speak or read a foreign language often entertain false beliefs about the nature of translating. Many tend to regard it as a more or less mechanical process which resembles decoding. They seem to think as if along the following lines:

Translating is to a printed foreign-language text what paleography is to medieval Latin manuscripts. The paleographer learns how to interpret symbols. For example, ÷ stands for “*est*”; “*dr*” stands for “*dicitur*.” Although these abbreviations vary from one writer to the next, when a paleographer masters a scribe’s shorthand, he can accurately *transcribe* the latter’s manuscripts into longhand. Similarly, if a translator has mastered a list of correlated words (e.g., “*das Pferd*” = “the horse”; “*der Baum*” = “the tree”), he can accurately *translate* the text into his native language.

The problem with this view is that it regards words as points-of-meaning instead of as spheres-of-meanings. And thus, it fails to recognize how crucial is the context in which a word occurs. Moreover, it oversimplifies the process of translation; for it envisions a gigantic word-list (i.e., a dictionary) by reference to which someone can readily know which word to correlate with the foreign word—just as by reference to a memorized Morse-code chart one knows what letters to put in place of the combinations of dots and dashes. Then too, the models of decoding and of rule-governed transcription foster the impression that translation is a word-for-word phenomenon, instead of manifesting that it is mainly a phenomenon of expression-for-expression. Finally, these models altogether miss sight of the fact that one must *understand* the text before he can translate it. Indeed, we have already seen abundant examples of

how in numerous instances the Latin texts of St. Anselm cannot be accurately translated without recourse to that special kind of understanding which we dignify as “interpretation.” For where what-is-said is embedded in, or implies, or is conditioned by, a philosophical theory, and where what-is-said can be “naturally” understood in two or more different ways: to disambiguate the language, the hearer (or the reader) may have to appeal to other information concerning what the speaker’s (or the writer’s) theory is; or he may have to appeal to what the logic of his argument requires. In such cases, we usually speak of *interpreting* (rather than merely of understanding) the words. Here I will give a final example of this phenomenon.

In *Proslogion* 4 we read:

*Nullus quippe intelligens id quod deus est, potest cogitare quia deus non est, licet haec verba dicat in corda, aut sine ulla aut cum aliqua extranea significatione. Deus enim est id quo maius cogitari non potest. Quod qui bene intelligit, utique intelligit id ipsum sic esse, ut nec cogitatione queat non esse. Qui ergo intelligit sic esse deum, nequit eum non esse cogitare.*

Two questions can immediately be raised. What is the referent of “*quod*” in “*Quod qui bene intelligit*”? And how is “*sic*” to be read in the last sentence? At one period of time in the past I took “*quod*” to refer to the entire preceding sentence, so that the “*quod*” sentence itself would read: “Anyone who comprehends this [viz., that God is that than which a greater cannot be thought] . . .” (Yet, being uncertain, I did not supply the bracketed words, but settled for leaving vague the reference of “*quod*.”) And I read “*sic*” in the last sentence in the same way as “*sic*” in the preceding sentence, viz., as an adverb: “Therefore, anyone who understands that this is the manner in which God exists cannot think that He does not exist.” Of course, both of these translations are consistent with the Latin sentences. But I now realize, from the sense of the argument, that each of these translations was incorrect. “*Quod*” refers only to a part of the preceding sentence; and “*sic*” in the last sentence is being used adjectivally, even though in the preceding sentence its use is adverbial. Accordingly, a correct translation of the entire passage will be:

Indeed, no one who understands what God is can think that God does not exist, even though he says these words [viz., “God does not exist”] in his heart either meaninglessly or else bizarrely. For God is that than which a greater cannot be thought. Anyone who comprehends this [description],

surely understands that this being [than which a greater cannot be thought] so exists that it cannot even conceivably not exist. Therefore, anyone who understands that God is such [a being] cannot think that He does not exist.

The decoding-model fails, then, because it is inadequate to account for the phenomena of understanding and interpretation, which are inseparable from translation.<sup>1</sup> Given a code-book, one can decipher a text without understanding it; but, given a dictionary, one cannot translate a text except as one understands it. To be sure, this contrast is—in its purity—a sharper one than can be made in practice. A manuscript, we all know, is often illegible or unclearly written. Accordingly, the paleographer may have to be guided by his understanding of what is being said.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, a redactor will have to choose which of the conflicting manuscript-readings to follow. And often his choice will be guided more by which reading better fits the discussion than by which manuscript is in general more authoritative.<sup>3</sup>

2. There are at least three different notions of interpreting which we need to keep distinct. The ancient sense accords with one of the meanings of the Latin words “*interpretatio*” and “*interpretari*”: to interpret is to translate, to give a translation. This sense has passed out of current English usage. The second and more usual sense has to do, loosely, with explaining the significance of something—whether it be the meaning of a literary text, the rationale for certain actions in the scene of a play, the intent underlying a physical gesture, etc. In this sense, we have agreed, one must sometimes *interpret* an author’s position in the course of deciding which of several semantically legitimate translations to use.

A third sense of “interpreting” is standard in European and American institutes of foreign-language study. To interpret a foreign-language speaker’s words is to give their gist in the native language without fretting about exact translation. When the diplomat says “*Es ist schon Mittag,*” the interpreter may well report: “It’s time for lunch.” An interpreter will feel free to abbreviate, paraphrase, idiomatize in ways that are not permitted to the translator, who must give a more faithful rendering. Informal conversations thrive on the services of an interpreter; formal documents need the attention of a translator. And whatever falls into a middle category will need a bit more of the one than of the

other. But if paraphrase is allowable to an interpreter, is it forbidden to a translator? Obviously, there are no set rules. Some translations of solemn materials do make use of paraphrase. In connection with the writings of St. Anselm, we have the examples of D. P. Henry and of Benedicta Ward. Now, the notion of *a translation* is a normative notion: What a translation is must be decided, not discovered. Some people would, and others would not, refuse to call “It’s time for lunch” a translation of “*Es ist schon Mittag.*” Some people would, and others would not, call various of D. P. Henry’s paraphrases translations.

3. According to F. S. Schmitt, translations of Anselm’s treatises ought ideally to be very literal. Thus, in prefacing his German translation of the *Monologion*, Schmitt cites the verdict of Igor Stravinsky: “*Die Sünde gegen den Geist eines Werkes beginnt immer mit der Sünde gegen den Buchstaben.*” And in the introduction to his translation of the *Cur Deus Homo* he says (p. xi): “The German translation takes pains to render the meaning of the author as faithfully as possible. This [faithfulness] was not possible by means of a freer rendering but only through a literal translation. Hereby, in particular, even the conjunctions (which are so important for literal translation) have, as a rule, been translated; and the sentence-structure (which in Anselm’s case is often lengthy) has, as far as possible, been preserved.” Schmitt’s translations themselves are virtually word-for-word renderings—so much so that they sometimes even preserve the text’s ambiguities. Thus, they do not regularly aim at disambiguating the reference of, say, “*hoc*” but simply put the corresponding German word “*dieses*.” Thus, where Anselm’s meanings are not immediately clear in the Latin text, Schmitt does not strive to make them immediately clear in the translation. His rationale is obvious: By not recasting Anselm’s sentence-structure, by not being more explicit than Anselm is, by not worrying unduly about style, there results a very cautious translation which conveys on its face Anselm’s Latin forms.

For my part, I have come a long way toward agreeing with Schmitt’s conception—at least vis-à-vis Anselm’s *Monologion* and *Proslogion*. These two texts are so condensed that a change in sentence-structure may well tend to change the emphasis and thereby, in subtle ways, the meaning. This fact was never more

apparent to me than in *Monologion* 1-5, which I have retranslated more literally in the appendix of this present volume. However, unlike Schmitt, I see no virtue in giving the flavor of Anselm's lengthy sentences or of his sometimes inelegant Latin style. For in English these clumsy features would actually *detract* from the clarity of the argument. And this clarity I regard as the primary goal of the English translation. Where ambiguity is deliberate—as in the case of certain of Plato's dialogues—the translator is obliged to preserve it in the translation. Where it is not deliberate—as in the case of St. Anselm—the translator ought to eliminate it by giving an unambiguous rendering. It is better, I would judge, for a translation to be clearly wrong than for it to be so opaque or so amphibolous that the reader does not know what to make of it.

Thus, I do not agree completely with Schmitt's approach. For I do not view a translation as some uninterpreted edifice which is syntactically congruent with its original. (Nor do I regard it as part of a translator's task to indicate to the reader every place at which there occurs in the text a word-switch—marking it, that is, by a corresponding change of words in the translation.)<sup>4</sup> There is, of course, a danger in giving a clear and explicit translation: viz., that one will over-interpret a passage or will even misinterpret it. But there is a similar danger in giving an opaque translation: viz., that the point of the argument will be missed. Schmitt's method—for all its virtues—has limits to its application. For instance, a word-for-word translation of Gaunilo's text or even a translation which exactly preserves Gaunilo's sentence-structure, will more than likely be unintelligible. From time to time I have asked myself why Schmitt included with his translation of the *Proslogion* the Latin texts of the debate between Anselm and Gaunilo—without, however, translating these. And I cannot help wondering whether there is something about his *wortgetreue und periodenbauliche Methode* that prevented the kind of translation he would have desired.

At any rate, different translators have differing convictions about how literally Anselm's treatises should be translated. Some believe that the *dialogues* should be rendered more freely and spritely than, say, the *Monologion* or *De Concordia*. Others believe that the *ipsissima verba* should be "reproduced," as it were. Still others, such as Rudolf Allers, have no qualms about

resorting to *précis*. Although I have come to believe that literal translations—and “literal” is not here synonymous with “word-for-word”—of Anselm’s treatises are preferable, I would be the last person to object to a more free translation. (As Henry recognizes, some of Anselm’s logical points are best understood when construed concisely and in the terminology of contemporary logic.) On the other hand, I would probably be among the first to voice reservations about *mot-à-mot*. For we have noticed how Anselm omits words such as “*eius*,” “*aliud*,” and (in *Monologion* 1) even “*bonum*.”<sup>5</sup> And—to repeat—the *Debate with Gaunilo* testifies to the impossibility of producing, in every case, a coherent translation which does not “fill in” between the words.

4. I have not answered the question posed by the title of this chapter. For I do not think that there is any one thing which a translation either is or must be. Whatever it is, it is neither a decoding nor an exact facsimile uninfluenced by the translator’s conceptual apparatus. In principle, there is no such thing as “the best possible translation” (although there might be such a thing as the best translation currently available). With respect even to a single sentence, there will be various words, word-orders, and sentence-structures which all adequately translate the sentence’s meaning. It would be naive to suppose that a passive construction in Anselm’s text will in every case be *better* rendered by the passive form in English, or that in some cases an infinitive construction cannot satisfactorily be rendered participially. And it would be folly to presume that a translation which preserves the very *punctuation* of the text will to this extent be better than one which does not.

I do not think, either, that there is any such thing as *definitive* translation. Or better, I am not sure what the phrase “the definitive translation” would mean. For I have never yet seen an extended translation which did not contain mistakes, could not in one way or another be improved upon, and was not *in some respect* inferior to those it replaced. Now, Joseph Colleran’s translation of the *Cur Deus Homo* and *De Conceptu Virginali* bears on its cover the epithet “the definitive translation from the critical edition.” Since Colleran’s work is altogether worthy of admiration, our noting some of its shortcomings will be worth-while.

These are noted *not* in order to dispute the admirable quality of Colleran's version but in order to attest to the fact that every translation has shortcomings—even “the definitive” one.

- (1) omissions: e.g., p. 114, between lines 24-25 (two speeches omitted); p. 146, line 5 (“*nec est aliquid quod huic obviet ratione*” omitted); p. 158, line 8 from bottom (“*ad honorem suum . . . sibi sicut*” omitted).
- (2) mistakes: e.g., p. 98, line 7 (has “wicked angels” instead of “wretched angels”; p. 148, line 13 from bottom (has “Son of Man” instead of “Son of God”).
- (3) inconsistencies: e.g., cf. p. 67, line 5 (“until God in some way manifests it to me with greater clarity”) with p. 100, lines 2-3 from bottom (“until God in some way makes known to me something better”); cf. p. 205, line 3 from bottom (“original sin is naturally equal in all infants conceived”) with p. 208, lines 11-12 (“this is equal in all infants generated in the natural way”).
- (4) sentence fragments: e.g., p. 97, last line and the succeeding ones on p. 98.
- (5) faulty punctuation which affects the meaning: e.g., p. 210, line 13 (Delete comma after “angels”).
- (6) unclear antecedent of a demonstrative pronoun: e.g., p. 80, line 11 (“this”); p. 122, line 19 from bottom (“this”).
- (7) wrong sequence of tenses: e.g., p. 129, lines 15-16 from bottom (“were” . . . “will”).

I do not myself think that all such imperfections can be eliminated from a translation. Nor do I regard the presence of these and other imperfections as detracting from the overall excellence of Colleran's accomplishment. Only someone who did not understand the inescapable practical limits<sup>6</sup> of any translation would dream of measuring a translation against some illusory ideal of inerrancy. Perhaps the problem with the epithet “the definitive translation” is that, to the uninitiate, it suggests a kind of finality which translations simply do not have—as well as displaying an immodest degree of self-confidence. (Colleran is not even modest enough to write “the definitive *English* translation from the critical edition.”) Furthermore, this epithet—by its very connotations—tends to minimize the credit due to all the previous translations, which in one way or another have given guidance to “the definitive” one.

If it is true that history must be written anew by each generation, it is equally true that each generation must make its own new translations. Therefore, the three volumes of translations just

published by Professor Richardson and me cannot—even apart from any outright errors—be thought of as more than provisional. They reflect our present understanding of the thought of St. Anselm. Thus, they render the title “*Cur Deus Homo*” as “Why God became a man” rather than as “Why God became Man.” They present Anselm as teaching that the Son of God assumed a human nature, rather than as teaching that He assumed Human Nature. They render “*grammatica*” by a phrase construed as one word. Moreover, in order to clarify the meaning of *Monologion* 32, they take the liberty of saying “Every word [or image] is a word [or image] of some thing ....” At places, they construe “*in nullo intellectu*” as “in no respect,” or as “not at all”; and for “*nec actu nec intellectu*” they say “neither actually nor conceivably.” In *Proslogion* 2 “*intelligit esse*” is construed as “judges to exist”; and at S I, 128:9 “*constare*” is taken as “to exist.” It would be tedious to rehearse the dozens of other instances which testify that these translations are in no sense decodings and which reveal how our (at least putative) comprehension of Anselm has become integral to the translations themselves. As our understanding progresses, we shall no doubt want to emend certain of these readings. And those who do not share with us our current understanding will, no doubt, not be able to accept the present readings. We invite them to help us to attain a better understanding, since we are willing to be led.

In last analysis, the utility and the viability of these translations of Anselm’s Complete Treatises will have to be judged by the community of Anselm-scholars. If the translations serve in some measure to convey the thoughts behind the words of the Latin text, if they serve as a basis for someone’s subsequently giving more elegant or more accurate renderings, if they serve to reawaken interest in Anselm’s ideas—then even though they are not definitive, they will perhaps be of some intermediate value. Of course, the serious student of Anselm will follow the example of the seasoned scholar in taking as his motto: *Zu den Lateintexten selbst!* But he may find himself confronted by the inability to understand the author of these texts *as well as* this author understood himself.<sup>7</sup> And this outcome may affect his evaluation of Schleiermacher’s claim that the goal of hermeneutics is to teach us how to understand an author *better than* this author understood himself.

## ABBREVIATIONS

### *Anselm's Works*

M	<i>Monologion</i> (A Soliloquy)
P	<i>Proslogion</i> (An Address)
DG	<i>De Grammatico</i>
DV	<i>De Veritate</i> (On Truth)
DL	<i>De Libertate Arbitrii</i> (Freedom of Choice)
DCD	<i>De Casu Diaboli</i> (The Fall of the Devil)
DIV	<i>Epistola de Incarnatione Verbi</i> (The Incarnation of the Word)
CDH	<i>Cur Deus Homo</i> (Why God Became a [God]-man)
DCV	<i>De Conceptu Virginali et de Originali Peccato</i> (The Virgin Conception and Original Sin)
DP	<i>De Processione Spiritus Sancti</i> (The Procession of the Holy Spirit)
DC	<i>De Concordia Praescientiae et Praedestinationis et Gratiae Dei cum Libero Arbitrio</i> (The Harmony of the Foreknowledge, the Predestination, and the Grace of God with Free Choice)
PF	<i>Ein neues unvollendetes Werk des hl. Anselm von Canterbury</i> (Philosophical Fragments). Latin text ed. F. S. Schmitt and published in <i>Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie and Theologie des Mittelalters</i> , 33/3. (Münster: Aschendorff Press, 1936)

### *Other Works*

DT	Augustine's <i>De Trinitate</i> (On the Trinity) E.g., DT 7.4.7 indicates Book 7, Chapter 4, Section 7
PL	<i>Patrologia Latina</i> (ed. J. P. Migne)
AA	<i>Analecta Anselmiana</i> (Frankfurt/M.: Minerva GmbH). Vol. I (1969); Vol. II (1970); Vol. III (1972); Vol. IV (1975); Vol. V (1976). Vols. I-III ed. F. S. Schmitt; Vols. IV-V ed. Helmut Kohlenberger. A continuing series.
S	<i>Sancti Anselmi Opera Omnia</i> . Ed. F. S. Schmitt. (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons). 6 Vols. (1946 – 1961). Vol. I first published in Seckau, 1938; Vol. II first published in Rome, 1940. All volumes reprinted by Friedrich Frommann Press (Stuttgart, 1968) with an introduction by Schmitt drawing together his articles on Anselm's text, and with corrigenda for the text.

## NOTES

### *Chapter VI: What Is a Translation?*

1. By way of further illustrating this point: Richard Campbell takes the second sentence of P 3 to mean: “it (i.e. that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought) can be thought to be something which cannot be thought not to be ....”

(See R. Campbell, *Theology*, 78 (August 1975), 442-443.) By contrast, I believe that the sense of the reasoning is: “For there can be thought to exist something whose non-existence is inconceivable . . .” (Or more literally: “For there can be thought to exist something which cannot be thought not to exist”: *Nam potest cogitari esse aliquid, quod non possit cogitari non esse . . .*) Cf. the Latin construction in P 15: *Quoniam namque valet cogitari esse aliquid huiusmodi: si tu non es hoc ipsum, potest cogitari aliquid maius te; quod fieri nequit*: “For since there can be thought to be something of this kind: if You were not this thing, then something greater than You could be thought—a consequence which is impossible.”

Cf. Proposition F on p. 116 above.

Of course, considered from a purely grammatical standpoint “*potest*” can be translated either as “it can” or as “there can.”

2. Of course, where a code-book does not exist, decoding becomes deciphering, and the contrast between deciphering and translating will be even less sharp. One thinks of the problems accompanying Ventris’ “breaking the code” of Linear B.

3. Thus, in P 2 Schmitt accepts the reading “*Nam cum pictor praecogitat, quae facturus est, habet quidem in intellectu, sed nondum intelligit esse quod nondum fecit,*” even though the principal ms. has “*Nam cum pictor praecogitat quae facturus est, habet quidem rem in intellectu et intelligit quam intelligit nondum esse.*” Cf. p. 64\*-65\* (i.e., of the Prolegomena) in Vol. I of *Sancti Anselmi Opera Omnia* (ed. F. S. Schmitt) as republished by Frommann Verlag, 1968.

4. See Ch. IV, p. 108 above.

5. See, above, Ch. I, p. 9; Ch. II, pp. 14-15; Ch. IV, p. 191, n. 6.

6. Note, for instance, the practical limits encountered by Michael Loux in his translation entitled *Ockham’s Theory of Terms: Part I of the Summa Logicae* (South Bend, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1974): (1) “Early in the project I realized that a *literal* translation in readable English would be difficult if not impossible. I opted for readability . . .” (p. xi). (2) “The examples Ockham employs also provide some difficulty. Upon occasion, these examples depend upon grammatical features of Latin that have no parallel in English, so that it is impossible to translate these examples into English while retaining their point in the text. Where such examples were essential I retained the Latin, where non-essential I eliminated them” (p. xii). (3) “In some cases it was difficult to determine whether Ockham is using a term in material or simple supposition. In those cases I opted for single quotes. In a few places, especially the section on the predicables, this convention forced arbitrary choices upon me; but alternative conventions would have involved considerable semantical and syntactical awkwardness” (p. xii).

7. One may, of course, legitimately wonder how well Anselm understood himself.