

**A NEW, INTERPRETIVE TRANSLATION  
OF ST. ANSELM'S  
MONOLOGION AND PROSLOGION**

**BY JASPER HOPKINS**

**THE ARTHUR J. BANNING PRESS  
MINNEAPOLIS**

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 86-70086

ISBN 0-938060-33-3 (cloth edition)

0-938060-34-1 (paperback edition)

Printed in the United States of America

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**III. On the Interpretation and Translation of  
“Si enim vel in solo intellectu est potest cogitari esse  
et in re quod maius est” (*Proslogion 2*).**

In an intrepid article entitled “Why Anselm's Proof in the *Proslogion* Is Not an Ontological Argument,”<sup>45</sup> G.E.M. Anscombe takes issue with the traditional reading of Anselm's text. According to this reading Anselm's proof in *Proslogion 2* depends upon the premise that existence is a perfection; and as a result of this dependency it has been given the label “ontological argument.”

**I**

In challenging the traditional reading, Anscombe proposes a corrected version of Anselm's proof—a version which eliminates the premise that existence is a perfection and which thereby undermines the rationale for considering the proof to be an “ontological argument.” Her corrected version runs as follows:

- i. God = [Def.] that than which nothing greater can be conceived.
- ii. That than which nothing greater can be conceived exists at any rate in the intellect of the fool who says no such thing exists.
- iii. If this does exist only in an intellect, what is greater than it can be thought to exist in reality as well.
- iv. Therefore if something than which nothing greater can be conceived is only in the intellect, it is not something than which nothing greater can be conceived.
- v. But this involves a contradiction.
- vi. Therefore that than which nothing greater can be conceived exists in reality as well.<sup>46</sup>

A crucial feature of the “corrected” interpretation of Anselm’s reasoning occurs in Step 3, whose formulation is based upon Anscombe’s revisionist translation of “*Si enim vel in solo intellectu est potest cogitari esse et in re quod maius est*”<sup>47</sup> as: “For if it is only in the intellect, what is greater can be thought to be in reality as well.” Now, were we to ask just what it is that Anselm is referring to as *greater*, and just what it is that is *greater* about it, then several answers stemming from Anselm’s reply to Gaunilo suggest themselves. One such answer, explains Anscombe, would be the following:

On the assumption that that than which nothing greater can be conceived is nothing outside the mind, we can certainly say that it is something that can not-exist, can be non-existent. But it is possible to think that that than which nothing greater can be conceived *does* exist. If it is thought of as existing, it must not be thought of as possibly not-existing. For it could be thought of as not possibly not-existing, and the thought of it as not possibly not-existing is obviously a thought of it as greater than if it is thought of as possibly not-existing. Thus the thought of it as existing *leads* to a thought of it as greater than what was thought of as not-existing. But there is here no suggestion that it is the *existing* that is the greater thing about what is thought to exist.<sup>48</sup>

So, then, Anscombe does consider Anselm to present in *Proslogion 2* an *argument* for God’s existence—but not an *ontological* argument. No doubt, she tells us, the *Proslogion* proof will need to be filled out by recourse to *Reply to Gaunilo*. And what will result, she claims, will be an argument that is more interesting and powerful than is the argument which traditionally has been ascribed to Anselm and which presumably depends upon the premise that existence is a perfection.

## II

Anscombe’s reinterpretation of *Proslogion 2* rests in an essential way

upon her construal of “*Si enim vel in solo intellectu est potest cogitari esse et in re quod maius est*” as: “For if it is only in the intellect, what is greater can be thought to be in reality as well.” One common way of punctuating the foregoing Latin sentence is “*Si enim vel in solo intellectu est, potest cogitari esse et in re, quod maius est.*” And this punctuation corresponds with the traditional way of rendering the Latin into English—viz., as something like: “For if it is only in the intellect, it can be thought to exist in reality as well, which is greater.”<sup>49</sup> But Anscombe maintains that this way of punctuating and translating constitutes a “misinterpretation” (her word) and that the correct way of punctuating and translating will be without the comma after “*in re*”: “*Si enim vel in solo intellectu est, potest cogitari esse et in re quod maius est*” (“For if it is only in the intellect, what is greater can be thought to be in reality as well”).

Anscombe offers three reasons in support of her revisions. First of all, she points to manuscript evidence: “I have looked at many MSS of this passage and have not seen even one of such dots in this place”<sup>50</sup>—i.e., not even one dot of punctuation between “*in re*” and “*quod*”. Anscombe does not want to place too much emphasis upon this kind of evidence from manuscript punctuation; but she obviously supposes it to have some weight, because otherwise she would not have mentioned it at all. Yet, in dealing with the manuscript evidence, Anscombe has not looked far enough; and she has not looked at *all* the relevant passages. Now, she would not have had to look very far! For Latin Ms. Edinburgh 104 (University of Edinburgh) contains exactly the punctuation that Anscombe did not find; and this manuscript is one of the very codices explicitly compared by F. S. Schmitt in his edition of the *Opera Omnia Anselmi*. Furthermore, Anscombe, in consulting whatever manuscripts she did—and it would have been appropriate for her to cite these by name—apparently looked only at *Proslogion* 2. However, she should also have consulted two other passages: viz., (1) *Proslogion* 2 as it was recopied (“*Sumptum ex eodem libello*”) for the appendix that contains the *Debate with Gaunilo*,<sup>51</sup> and (2) the almost exact reoccurrence—of the sentence in question—that is found in *Reply to Gaunilo* 2:12-13. As a case in point, let us take Latin Ms. Bodley 271 at Oxford University: in the sentence now under discussion no dot occurs between “*in re*” and “*quod*” either in *Proslogion* 2 or in *Sumptum ex eodem libello*; but there *is* a dot in the sentence found in *Reply* 2:12-13. As another case in point, let us take Latin Ms. Rawlinson A.392, also at Oxford University’s

Bodleian Library: again, neither in *Proslogion* 2 nor in *Sumptum ex eodem libello* is there a pause between “*in re*” and “*quod*”; but, again, there *is* such a pause in *Reply* 2:12-13. By contrast, Edinburgh 104, which has the dot both in *Proslogion* 2 and in *Sumptum ex eodem libello*, does not have it in *Reply* 2:12-13.

In last analysis, the alleged evidence from manuscript-punctuation can be ignored. Such punctuation was often impressionistic or impulsive; in general, it cannot be relied upon. Anscombe herself seems to put only slight credence in it. Yet, it is surprising that she even bothers to mention it at all—and still more surprising that, having mentioned it, she does not carefully explore the matter more fully, by examining all the manuscripts upon which F. S. Schmitt based his critical edition. “I have looked at many MSS of this passage and have not seen . . .” is no proper substitute for scholarly methodicalness.

A second of Anscombe’s reasons in support of her revised punctuation and translation of the sentence in question is truly amazing: “If ... you leave out that comma, you get better Latin . . .”<sup>52</sup> She follows this up with “Anselm wrote beautiful Latin.” There seems to be some intimation here that because Anselm wrote beautiful Latin and because you get better Latin by leaving out the comma, Anselm did not intend for there to be a comma between “*in re*” and “*quod*”—or, at least, he would not sanction any editor’s or copyist’s putting one there. But whether or not such a claim is intimated or implied, and whether or not Anselm is judged to have written beautiful Latin,<sup>53</sup> the important issue is really whether or not the disputed sentence constitutes better Latin without the comma than with it. Are we not entitled to ask?: by what plausible criteria could the sentence “*Si enim vel in solo intellectu est, potest cogitari esse et in re quod maius est*” be deemed to be *better* Latin than the sentence “*Si enim vel in solo intellectu est, potest cogitari esse et in re, quod maius est*”? Are we, perhaps, supposed to find something objectionable about a grammatical construction in which “*quod*” functions as a relative pronoun whose antecedent is an entire phrase? If so, then we would have to raise the same kind of objection regarding the use of “*quod*” in *Monologion* 7:33; 7:40; 8:51; 15:17; 18:28; 18:38; 19:30; 21:10; 21:36; 24:20; 31:13; 31:15; 32:18; 33:25; 70:23; 76:16; 78:7; 79:11—as well as in *Proslogion* 3:7; 3:12; 13:13; 13:14; 13:16, etc. And the multitude of such objections—if Anscombe were to make them—would be bound to detract from her judgment about the beauty of

Anselm's Latin. And yet, is not the following the case?: precisely because Anselm does so frequently use “*quod*” in this free-ranging way, it is not unnatural for us to construe “*quod*” in the same way in *Proslogion* 2. On the other hand, if this syntactical use of “*quod*” is not what Anscombe has in mind when she judges that on her interpretation Anselm turns out to be writing better Latin, then she owes us an explanation of her cryptic remark.

Apparently, Anscombe entertains a third reason in support of her revised punctuation and translation: viz., that under her interpretation Anselm's reasoning becomes more interesting and powerful. No longer is his reasoning deemed to rest upon the metaphysically dubious assumption that existence is a perfection—an assumption that is not explicitly made in *Proslogion* 2. Instead, his reasoning may now be expanded—e.g., in the way that he expands it in the *Reply to Gaunilo*—so that it depends upon some different, but obviously true, claim: e.g., the claim that “the thought of it [viz., of that than which nothing greater can be conceived] as not possibly not-existing is ... a thought of it as greater than if it is thought of as possibly not-existing.”<sup>54</sup> Now, Anscombe's new way of formulating Anselm's argument may well provide us with a proof that is philosophically superior to the traditional way of formulating it. But the question before us is not the question of which version holds philosophical superiority over which. The question is, which version is a more accurate interpretation of Anselm's actual reasoning in *Proslogion* 2? And in order to answer *this* question reliably, we will need to know what textual evidence there is in favor of Anscombe's interpretation. It will not be enough for us merely to invoke some *a priori* principle such as the principle of charitable construals and to urge that this principle obliges us to put the best possible face on Anselm's reasoning. Nor will it be acceptable to beg the interpretive question by having recourse to the principle that Anselm was too astute a thinker not to have meant “*quod est maius*” in Anscombe's sense rather than in the alternative sense. So the fact that Anscombe's reading of “*quod maius est*” makes for a more interesting and powerful argument does not, by itself, at all show that this more powerful argument was Anselm's actual argument in *Proslogion* 2.

Anscombe offers, at most, the foregoing three defenses of her claim that the traditional interpretation of *Proslogion* 2 is a misinterpretation. But since the last defense (if Anscombe is really employing it) cannot

stand up by itself and since the first two defenses are so feeble as to be discountable, Anscombe has not at all done what she set out to do: “I will now shew [*sic*] that the whole thing *is* a misinterpretation.”<sup>55</sup> And having failed to fault the traditional interpretation, she has no basis for continuing to claim that her reinterpretation is superior. But might we, then, regard her not as providing a *more defensible* interpretation but as providing an *equally viable* one? Might Anselm’s text be compatible with both the traditional reading and Anscombe’s reading?—so that if an interpreter has a penchant for believing that Anselm was a pretty good metaphysician, he may admissibly select Anscombe’s reading; and if he has a different penchant, he may select the traditional reading, though neither selection will be obviously right (or obviously wrong). To these queries the only exegetically possible answer is “absolutely not.” For Anscombe’s reading can itself be shown to be a misinterpretation. The evidence that refutes her comes from *Reply to Gaunilo* 2:12-16, where Anselm recapitulates the disputed segment of *Proslogion* 2:

*Postea dixi quia si est vel in solo intellectu, potest cogitari esse et in re quod maius est. Si ergo in solo est intellectu: idipsum, scilicet quo maius non potest cogitari, est quo maius cogitari potest. Rogo quid consequentius? An enim si est vel in solo intellectu, non potest cogitari esse et in re?*<sup>56</sup>

The first Latin sentence, by itself, admits of being construed as Anscombe construes it. But the last Latin sentence does not admit of Anscombe’s construal.<sup>57</sup> Now, the last sentence explicates the meaning of the first sentence; and, thus, it precludes our construing the first sentence as Anscombe does. Since the first sentence is but a restatement of the sentence in *Proslogion* 2, Anscombe’s understanding of Anselm’s meaning in *Proslogion* 2 is erroneous.<sup>58</sup>

### III

There is good reason to infer that Anselm did subscribe to the metaphysical doctrine that existence is a perfection. For in *Monologion* 36 we read:

No one doubts that created substances exist in themselves much differently from the way they exist in our knowledge. For in themselves they exist in virtue of their own being; but in our knowledge their likenesses exist, not their own being. It follows, then, that the more truly they exist anywhere by virtue of their own being than by virtue of their likenesses, the more truly they exist in themselves than in our knowledge.

Here Anselm tells us that a thing exists more truly in reality than it exists in our mind. Now, both from *Monologion* 31 and from *Proslogion* 3:13-15 we know that Anselm correlates *existing truly* with *existing greatly*.<sup>59</sup> And in both the *Monologion* and the *Proslogion* a thing's degree of existing greatly is correlated with its degree of perfection.<sup>60</sup> The clearest statement of this correlation occurs in *Monologion* 31:

From some substance which lives, perceives, and reasons let us mentally remove first what is rational, next what is sentient, then what is vital, and finally the remaining bare existence. Now, who would not understand that this substance, thus destroyed step by step, is gradually reduced to less and less existence—and, in the end, to non-existence? Yet, those [characteristics] which when removed one at a time reduce a being to less and less existence increase its existence more and more when added [to it] again in reverse order. Therefore, it is clear that a living substance exists more than does a non-living one, that a sentient substance exists more than does a non-sentient one, and that a rational substance exists more than does a non-rational one. So without doubt every being exists more and is more excellent to the extent that it is more like that Being which exists supremely and is supremely excellent.<sup>61</sup>

So since, on Anselm's view, *existing more truly* entails *existing more greatly*, and *existing more greatly* entails *being more excellent*, or *being more perfect*, then just as a thing which exists in reality exists more truly than it would if it existed only in our mind through its likeness, so too it is more perfect than it would be if it existed only in our mind. And Anselm's reason for affirming that it is more perfect is that he considers its own bare existence (*nudum esse*) to be as much a perfection as are life or sentience or rationality. Accordingly, there is no need to shy away from the traditional interpretation of *Proslogion* 2—to do so, say, on the alleged (*a priori*) ground that Anselm was too astute a metaphysician to countenance the view that existence is a perfection.<sup>62</sup>

#### IV

Three other weaknesses in Anscombe's article should, perhaps, not be left unnoticed. (1) To begin with, the article is not true to Anselm's articulation in *Proslogion* 2—where he uses both "*aliquid quo maius nihil cogitari potest*" and "*id quo maius cogitari nequit*." Now, although in *Proslogion* 2 Anselm's argument begins with the *credo* that God is *something* than which nothing greater can be thought, Anscombe's version of the argument begins with the *definition* of God as *that* than which nothing greater can be conceived. Hereby the question is begged

against people such as Richard Campbell<sup>63</sup> when it is *assumed* that Anselm's formula "*aliquid quo ...*" is equivalently interchangeable with his formula "*id quo ...*" (2) Moreover, in maintaining that Anselm's *credo* serves to enunciate a *definition* of God, Anscombe nowhere rebuts, or even takes seriously, the reasons advanced by Richard La Croix,<sup>64</sup> and repeated by Richard Campbell,<sup>65</sup> as to why Anselm ought not to be understood as setting forth a *definition* in *Proslogion* 2. (3) A further weakness is disclosed when Anscombe takes Anselm's expression "*unum argumentum*," in the *Proslogion* Preface, as meaning "single argument." "We know," she proclaims, that Anselm "wanted to give a very short single argument. And this he did."<sup>66</sup> Since this knowledge can be gleaned only from Anselm's Preface, we may presume that Anscombe's words "single argument" are a rendering of Anselm's "*unum argumentum*." If this presumption is correct, as it appears to be, then Anscombe has once again propounded a falsehood. For Anselm aims to find "*unum argumentum quod nullo alio ad se probandum quam se solo indigeret, et solum ad astruendum quia deus vere est, et quia est summum bonum nullo alio indigens, et quo omnia indigent ut sint et ut bene sint, et quaecumque de divina credimus substantia, sufficeret*." And, assuredly, the very short single argument of *Proslogion* 2 does not suffice to do all of this.

In retrospect, Anscombe's article betrays a certain unfamiliarity not only with Anselm's texts and with the manuscript tradition but also with the secondary literature of the past fifteen years. This unfamiliarity partly occasions her scholarly sins—of omission and of commission—in promulgating a *reconstruction-of-Anselm's-reasoning* under the guise of a textually more accurate *interpretation*. But her shortcomings also partly proceed from too sympathetic an appreciation of the mind of St. Anselm. Recognizing, as she must, the problematical features of an ontological argument, and admiring, as she does, the genius of Anselm's intellect, she charitably devises a way—by expunging a single comma—to transform the dubious argument into a *prima facie* more powerful proof.

## ABBREVIATIONS

### ABBREVIATIONS IN THE BIBLIOGRAPHY AND THE ENGLISH NOTES

<i>M</i>	<i>Monologion</i>
<i>P</i>	<i>Proslogion</i>
<i>S</i>	<i>Sancti Anselmi Opera Omnia</i> (ed. F. S. Schmitt). E.g., 'S I, 237:7' indicates Vol. I, p. 237, line 7.
<i>DT</i>	<i>De Trinitate</i> (Augustine).
<i>PF</i>	<i>Ein neues unvollendetes Werk des hl. Anselm von Canterbury</i> , edited by F. S. Schmitt ( <i>Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie und Theologie des Mittelalters</i> , 33/3). Münster, Germany: Aschendorff Press, 1936.
<i>PL</i>	<i>Patrologia Latina</i> , ed. J.-P. Migne. Series published in Paris.
<i>SB II</i>	Raymond Foreville, editor. <i>Spicilegium Beccense II: Actes du colloque international du CNRS: Études anselmiennes IV<sup>e</sup> Session: Les mutations socio-culturelles au tournant des XI<sup>e</sup> – XII<sup>e</sup> siècles</i> . Paris: Éditions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1984.
<i>CCSL</i>	<i>Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina</i> . Series published in Turnhout, Belgium.

The standard abbreviations are used for books of the Bible.

All references to the Latin text of the *Monologion*, the *Proslogion*, and the *Debate with Gaunilo* are given in terms of the chapter and line numbers of the present volume of translations. E.g., '*M* 3:4' stands for '*Monologion*, Chap. 3, line 4. (of the Latin text)'

## NOTES

45. This article is to be published in Vol. 16, Nos. 3-4 of *The Thoreau Quarterly*, whose actual appearance (as distinguished from its publication date) will be during the summer of 1986—a time that postdates the deadline for my own manuscript. I am immensely grateful to the editors and the staff of *The Thoreau Quarterly*—especially John M. Dolan, Sandra Menssen, and Pat Kaluza—for making available to me a copy of the final corrected proofs of Professor Anscombe’s article and for permitting me to quote from these proofs. Although, under the circumstances, I am able to furnish for the citations only the typescript page numbers, I am certain that readers will have little trouble in locating the cited passages in the published form of Anscombe’s relatively brief article. [**An on-line addition:** I supply, in brackets, the page numbers that correspond to Anscombe’s article as actually published.]

{**An on-line addition:** the English version was published as: “Why Anselm’s Proof in the *Proslogion* Is Not an Ontological Argument,” *The Thoreau Quarterly*, 17 (winter-spring, 1985), 32-40. See also the Portuguese version: G.E.M. Anscombe, “Por qué la prueba de Anselmo en el ‘Proslogion’ non es un argumento ontológico,” *Anuario Filosófico* (Pamplona), 15 (1982), Issue 2, pp. 9-18. Note, as well, the repetition (of Anscombe’s basic idea) in her “Descartes and Anselm,” pp. 15-18 in Jerzy Perzanowski, editor, *Essays on Philosophy and Logic*. Cracow: Jagellonian University Press, 1987.}

46. Typescript p. 9 [published article, p. 37].

47. I here deliberately leave this Latin sentence unpunctuated in order not to beg any questions. This Latin sentence is a prime instance of how an editor's interpretation of a text is oftentimes inherent in his very punctuation decisions.

48. Typescript pp. 11-12 [published article, p. 39].

49. I myself prefer to render it as a contrary-to-fact conditional statement: "For if it were only in the understanding, it could be thought to exist also in reality—something which is greater [than existing only in the understanding]." Anselm avoids the subjunctive in order to keep his Latin style simple. As in *M* (= *Monologion*), so in *P* (= *Proslogion*) he aims at unembellished style and uncomplicated disputation. (See *M*, prologue, lines 8-9.) Yet, the logic of his argument is best expressed in English by use of the subjunctive. Cf. n. 87 below [p. 87 not included here on-line].

50. Typescript pp. 8-9 [published article, p. 37]. [**An on-line addition:** in her footnote 2, on p. 40 of the published article, Anscombe states: "Since writing this I have seen a dot in this place in one MS."]

51. In the present edition I have omitted this repetition of *P* 2-4, which is found in Latin Ms. Bodley 271 immediately before Gaunilo's *On Behalf of the Fool*. Except for minor differences of punctuation, this repeated segment is exactly the same as the earlier segment. See "*Sumptum ex eodem libello*" (S I, 123-124).

52. Typescript p. 8 [published article, p. 37].

53. Perhaps in comparison with Gaunilo, Anselm does appear to some readers to have written beautiful Latin. Certainly, he does say some beautiful things—as, for example, in *P* 1. But all things considered—including the prefaces to *M* and *P*—there are good grounds for qualifying the claim "Anselm wrote beautiful Latin."

54. Typescript p. 12 [published article, p. 39].

55. Typescript p. 8 [published article, p. 36].

56. See my rendering in the translation part of the present work. Note also *Reply to Gaunilo* 5:17-19: "Therefore, it is evident that [that than which a greater cannot be thought] neither (1) fails to exist nor (2) is able not to exist nor (3) is able to be thought not to exist. For otherwise [i.e., were it able not to exist or able to be thought not to exist], if it exists it is not what it is said to be; and if it were to exist it would not be [what it is said to be]."

57. The last sentence means something like: "For if it were only in the understanding, could it not be thought to exist also in reality?"

58. Anscombe does not mention any of the other manuscript-traditions with regard to the sentence in question. For example, a number of mss., including Latin Ms. Paris 2700, at the Bibliothèque Nationale, have "*Quidquid enim*", or an orthographic variant thereof, in place of "*Si enim*". In particular, the sentence in Paris 2700 reads: "*Quicquid enim solo intellectu est potest cogitari et in re esse quod maius est.*" And this sentence does not admit of Anscombe's translation of "*quod maius est.*" Instead, it coheres with

understanding “*quod*” as “which,” in the sentence “*Si enim vel in solo intellectu est potest cogitari esse et in re quod maius est.*” Although in Paris 2700 the section of the manuscript that contains *P* was copied during the 13th century, it is remotely cognate with Vaticanus Latinus 532, which Schmitt judges to have been copied during the first half of the twelfth century and probably to have come from Bec. Schmitt supposes the text in 532 to be a version of *P* that reflects a recension which is earlier than is Bodley 271. None of these considerations show that Anscombe’s reading is wrong. But once the wrongness of her reading has been demonstrated on other textual grounds, as was just done in the main exposition, then these present considerations may acceptably be viewed as corroborating evidence (whether or not Vaticanus Latinus 532 stems from a *prior recensio*).

59. *P* 3:13-15 reads: “*Solus igitur verissime omnium, et ideo maxime omnium, habes esse—quia quidquid aliud est, non sic vere, et idcirco minus, habet esse.*”

60. N.B. *M* 2:7-9.

61. *M* 31. Cf. *M* 34.

62. I am not here ascribing to Anscombe this reason for repudiating the traditional interpretation of *P* 2.

63. Richard Campbell, *From Belief to Understanding: A Study of Anselm’s Proslogion Argument on the Existence of God* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1976).

64. Richard La Croix, *Proslogion II and III: A Third Interpretation of Anselm’s Argument* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1972), pp. 14-16 and p. 36.

65. Campbell, *ibid.*, pp. 27-28. Anscombe calls Anselm’s formula a *definition* on typescript p. 1: “Descartes defines God as supremely perfect being. Anselm, as: that than which nothing greater can be conceived” [published article, p. 32].

66. **An on-line addition:** published article, p. 38.