

# God Proofs



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# 1

## Introduction

This book is about logical demonstrations that there is a God. It is not a book which aims to convert atheists or agnostics into believers—still less does it aim to win them over to Christianity, or to any other particular religion. Many thinkers who have been actively involved in developing and studying God proofs are (or were) believers, but many are not, and it seems unlikely that logical proofs have ever been an important factor in persuading people to become churchgoers (or synagogue-goers, or equivalent). The interest of God proofs lies in the astonishing claim that pure logic alone might be able to provide an answer to any question about an issue as dramatic and humanly significant as whether God exists, rather than in potential use as missionary-fuel.

The claim is a remarkable one, yet it has been made repeatedly over almost a millennium, and never more actively than today. This intellectual journey has been described by the literary critic George Steiner as “among the strangest in the history of thought”—and also “deep fun”.\* As Steiner adds: “How Borges would have rejoiced in these dreams of reason.”

“Proof” is a difficult word. In the first place, it means something entirely different in a court of law from what it means to a mathematician or philosopher. If a prisoner is on trial for murder, and the prosecution show that witnesses saw the prisoner take a revolver from a drawer before the killing and return it afterwards, and a lab has

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\* Details of sources quoted or referred to in the text are given in the Notes, beginning on p. 205. Where I quote directly from originals in other languages, the translations are my own. I have occasionally corrected obvious misprints in quoted texts, without drawing attention to the fact.

found that the rifling marks on the fatal bullet match the barrel of that weapon, this may count as proving the prisoner guilty. But the proof is wholly empirical—it depends on observations, by witnesses and lab workers, while logic is scarcely relevant. “God proofs” are proofs or would-be proofs in the mathematical sense, where logic matters and observation does not. When we say that Euclid proved that the angles of a triangle add up to two right-angles (that is, 180 degrees), we do not mean that he measured a lot of triangles, did the sums, and found that the formula always worked. For all I know Euclid may have begun by doing that, and it might have encouraged him to look for a proof—but, to a mathematician, it would not begin to *be* a proof. A geometrical proof is a deduction which derives a conclusion by purely logical steps from agreed, uncontroversial definitions and axioms, independent of observational evidence. Euclid’s theorem shows not that many triangles do as a matter of observable fact conform to the rule, but that *any* triangle *must* conform to it. “God proofs” are discourses which claim to show by logical argument that there *must* be a God, in that sense of “must”.

But even after we exclude the “law court” sense of proof, the term is still problematic. We are brought up to think there is a sharp distinction between facts that we have good reason to believe, but could possibly turn out to be wrong, and facts that have been *proved* true, so that it is pointless even to consider whether they might be wrong. However, this distinction is one of more versus less, not an absolute divide. Even the theorems of geometry are ultimately vulnerable to challenge—as shown for instance in Imre Lakatos’s *Proofs and Refutations*. But, by contrast with proofs in a law-court, mathematical proofs are arguments in which the heavy lifting is done by logical deduction, while such premisses as the arguments draw on are barely noticeable, being very general matters obvious to everybody and entirely uncontroversial.

When I say that proofs can be open to challenge, I do not mean to imply any truck with post-modernist concepts of “my truth” versus

“your truth” or the like. The world is what it is independently of us, there is only one truth. But our knowledge of it is another matter. To use a metaphor of Sir Karl Popper’s, human knowledge is an edifice built on piles driven into a swamp. Nowhere do the piles reach firm bedrock—nothing is ever definitively established beyond any possibility of challenge. But if any particular pile proves unsteady, it can always be driven in deeper.

Arguments that we call “proofs” occupy different points on a scale, from observation-heavy at the law-court end to logic-heavy at the mathematical end. “God proofs”, for the purposes of this book, are arguments for the existence of God that are located towards the logic-heavy end of the scale. The fact that the man Jesus, who claimed to be divine during his lifetime, was publicly tortured to death and buried, then on the third day rose from the dead and walked and talked with his disciples, showing Doubting Thomas the wounds of the nails, may be a good reason for belief in God, if one accepts the gospels as accurate reportage—but it is wholly empirical rather than logical. It might have weight in a court of law, if Thomas and the other witnesses were available to be summonsed, but it is not the kind of “proof” we shall be concerned with. The “God proofs” discussed in the following pages will be much more like Euclid’s theorem about the angles of a triangle (though as far as possible, which is quite far, I shall avoid burdening readers with logical or mathematical technicalities). In many of these proofs there will be some reliance on matters of observation, but the interest of the proofs will lie in their logic. Any empirical content will be minimal and uncontroversial.

There are two words in English to refer to belief in the existence of God: theism and deism. Theism is the “ordinary” word, opposite of atheism, and meaning belief in a God, commonly a God of the kind envisaged by the main monotheistic religions such as Christianity. Deism is a more specialized word: a deist rejects beliefs based on revelation, such as the gospel accounts in the New Testament, and recognizes a

Supreme Being exclusively on the basis of rational, scientific argument, often conceiving that Supreme Being as someone who created the universe and set it going, but thereafter has scarcely or never interacted with their creation. Deism was a position held by many thinkers in the supremely rational eighteenth century, though by fewer since then. (Unlike the atheistic Russian Revolution of 1917, the eighteenth-century French Revolution was deistic; one of its less successful elements was an attempt to replace Christianity with the cult of an abstract Supreme Being.) Since logical proofs are a clear case of rational argument, it is no surprise that some of the figures discussed in this book could be described as deists. But I introduce the distinction only in order to explain that I shall not be using it. “Theism”, in these pages, will simply mean belief in the existence of a God of some kind, irrespective of whether that is the triune, miracle-working God of traditional Christianity, or an abstract, *fainéant* Supreme Being, or something else again. I shall not be using the word deism.

Some people who write about God like to show their respect by capitalizing pronouns: He, Him for the Almighty, he, him for mortal men. Others who may be equally respectful stick to lower-case pronouns. Since I shall be quoting remarks by many authors and would not presume to modify their usage, it is inevitable that God in this book will sometimes be He and sometimes he. I have no strong feeling that the word “ought” to be capitalized, but in practice complicated statements that relate God to men are sometimes clearer when capital versus lower-case helps to show which pronoun refers to God and which to a man; so my own prose will be inconsistent in this respect, on occasion using “He” for clarity. (And in case it seems important to mention that “he” is often shorthand for “he or she”—and perhaps “He” for “He and/or She”—I mention it.)

Another tricky linguistic point we need to sort out at the outset concerns the name of God. In a monotheistic or post-monotheistic culture like that of the West, we normally have no reason to ask

ourselves whether “God” is a proper name, comparable to “Isaac Newton” or “Albert Einstein”, or a descriptive word or term, like “mathematician” or “discoverer of the laws of motion”. If there is a God, there is only one, so it makes no difference in practice. But in the study of logic the distinction between proper name and descriptive term is crucial. English orthography normally marks that distinction using capitalization, but that would be misleading in this instance: the lower-case form “god” commonly refers to a pagan “false god”, or to one of the multiple beings worshipped by a polytheistic religion such as Hinduism, so to use it to describe the being worshipped by Christians or Jews would lead to misunderstandings.

Although Christians do not think of God as having an individual personal name, the Israelites of the early parts of the Old Testament, for whom their tribal God was a rival to the gods of other tribes, did have a personal name for him, which he had announced in chapter 3 of Exodus: that was the “tetragrammaton”, four letters of the vowel-less Hebrew alphabet. The four letters are thought to have had the pronounceable form “Yahweh”, though this is theoretical since Jews are forbidden to utter the name aloud. (In Christian bibles the tetragrammaton is conventionally rendered—for philological reasons that would be tedious to explain—as Jehovah.) In this book, the word “God”, although capitalized, will never be used as a proper name but always as a descriptive term, meaning “one possessing the properties associated with a supreme being—having created the universe, being omnipotent and omniscient, and so forth”. Think of “God” as a title, like “The Queen”, rather than a name like “Elizabeth”. When, occasionally, I need to use a true proper name for God, I shall write “Jehovah” or “Yahweh”.

Precisely what properties should be regarded as definitive of “God” taken as a title or descriptive term is itself a large question. (And that is not a special problem about the term “God”: for instance, there is plenty of room for debate about precisely what facts about her role or status make it correct to identify Elizabeth II as “The Queen”.) There might be

little point in a proof that “God” exists, if the proof assumed a sense of “God” that had little in common with most people’s everyday understanding of the word. Philosophers of religion sometimes imply surprising God definitions. The standard academic monograph on God proofs (and God disproofs—proofs that God *cannot* exist are interesting too, and will also be examined in the coming pages) is the book *Logic and Theism*, by Howard Sobel (himself a non-believer). For Sobel, the central, definitive property of “God” is that he is the “one and only *proper* object of worship” (Sobel’s italics). Sobel quotes many authorities, including the Oxford English Dictionary, to support his definition of God as a being worthy of worship, yet to me it seems to get things backwards. Surely, if we worship God, that is because of what he is, or does, or has done: things like creating the universe, having some kind of continuing control over it, or forgiving the sins of those who repent. The worshipping is a secondary consideration; it is the reasons why we worship (if we do) that are central to what we mean by “God”. Before they were converted to Christianity by Winfrid (or “Boniface”) of Crediton, one of the Germanic tribes worshipped an individual oak tree, and presumably they saw it as proper to do so. But I think few even of those pagan Saxons, let alone ourselves, would find much interest in a proof that this tree existed before Winfrid felled it in about the year 723. I do not doubt that it existed, but so what?

Some of those who discuss God proofs do define “God” in ways that closely match the everyday understanding of the word. For instance, Richard Swinburne gives the definition “a person without a body (i.e. a spirit) who is eternal, is perfectly free, omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good, and the creator of all things.” But the more a God proof is constructed in terms of pure abstract logic, the more abstract its God definition itself naturally has to be—pure logic alone cannot do much with ideas like “object of worship”, “forgiver of sins”, or “without a body”. The God proofs we shall examine tend to work with God definitions such as René Descartes’ “supremely perfect Being”, and some

of their authors do more than others to persuade us that we should identify the entity concerned in their proofs with “God” as we ordinarily understand the word.

So readers should bear two questions in mind, in connexion with the various God proofs we shall examine. We must ask, first, whether a given proof is valid—whether its conclusion truly follows from its premisses, and whether we accept those premisses; but also, whether we are willing to see the entity whose existence the proof claims to establish as, indeed, God. And if a reader finds a proof valid, but disagrees with its God definition, for him or her matters will not rest there: there would then be the question of how the very special yet seemingly non-divine being whose existence has been logically demonstrated fits into the reader’s overall picture of the universe.

The beginning of a book is the place for the author to acknowledge his intellectual debts. In this case, my chief debt is to two German academics at Bonn University, Joachim Bromand and Guido Kreis, who published a book on the same subject in 2011. For an English-speaking audience, I have aimed to offer an account which is shorter and less relentlessly technical than theirs, and which pays more attention to the human aspects of this “strange intellectual journey” than Bromand and Kreis preferred to do. Furthermore my view of which people and which ideas deserve coverage is sometimes different from theirs. But I have gained greatly from reading Bromand and Kreis’s book. And I have shamelessly purloined their title, *Gottesbeweise*, in order to Anglicize it into a title for this book.

The following chapters are arranged in broadly chronological order. I was not able to be rigorously consistent about this, because relationships between the ideas of thinkers living at very different dates sometimes demanded that they be treated together. But I have at least set out to ensure that the exposition makes sense if read in the order the chapters are printed, beginning in the next chapter with the earliest known logical proof of God’s existence.

## 2

## The Debate Begins

The earliest known attempt to prove the existence of God through pure logic was in a little booklet (24 pages in one modern edition of the Latin original) with the dull title *Proslogion*, “Discourse”, written some time in the years 1077–8 by a man called Anselm—now Saint Anselm. While it attracted only limited attention at the time, in succeeding centuries Anselm’s proof became the subject of intense study and controversy among philosophers, and never more so than today. The present-day philosopher Alvin Plantinga has written that, although Anselm’s argument “looks, at first sight, like a verbal sleight of hand or a piece of word magic, it has fascinated philosophers ever since St Anselm had the good fortune to formulate it. Nearly every major philosopher from [Anselm’s] time to this has had his say about it.” The dustjacket of a 1987 book entitled *Anselmian Explorations* quotes another philosopher, Norman Kretzmann, as writing that “philosophical theology is now being done by more people at a higher level of sophistication than at any other time since the seventeenth century”, and that has not ceased to be true in the subsequent decades. Not all the God proofs to be discussed in this book are development’s of Anselm’s, but many of them are.

Some readers may be surprised to hear that an idea emerging from the early Middle Ages is taken at all seriously by modern intellectuals. That period has a reputation as ignorant and obscurantist, a regrettable, priest-ridden dark gulf of mindlessness between the intellectual achievements of classical Greece and Rome, and the great strides in the sciences and in other departments of knowledge since the European Renaissance. But that just demonstrates the success of the propaganda disseminated by Renaissance “humanists”, who wanted to reach back

behind the Christian Church to become successors to the intellects of classical antiquity. In reality, much high-level thinking went on in the Middle Ages. Yes, scholars knew fewer facts than were known later—that is inevitable, scholarship and exploration are cumulative endeavours. Yes, the Catholic Church was the chief patron of scholarship in Western Europe, and like any powerful institution it had its own agenda; but that does not mean that it behaved like Stalin’s Soviet Union, forcing intellectuals to churn out traditional misinformation and support for the régime while persecuting original thought. As James Hannam points out, “contrary to popular belief, the Church never supported the idea that the earth is flat, never banned human dissection, never banned zero and certainly never burnt anyone at the stake for scientific ideas”.

Anselm was born into a decayed noble family some time in 1033 or 1034, in the Aosta area, the corner of the Alps where, today, Italy, Switzerland, and France meet. There was no Italian Republic then; Aosta was in the far south of Burgundy and on the frontier of Lombardy, where his father came from. Aged 23 Anselm left home and spent several *Wanderjahre* in Burgundy and France. (Anselm’s mother had died while he was in his teens, and he had a bad relationship with his father; after he left home he never revisited Aosta, even when his travels took him in that direction.) At 27 he entered the Benedictine abbey of Bec in Normandy as a novice, and in 1063 he was elected its prior.

Soon after the *Proslogion* was written, in 1078 the founder Abbott of Bec died and—to his horror—Anselm was unanimously elected to succeed him. This gave him heavy administrative responsibilities, a kind of activity he disliked. Nevertheless, according to the 1911 “scholars’ edition” of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Anselm turned Bec into “the first seat of learning in Europe”.

After the Norman Conquest of England, which happened when Anselm was in his early thirties, Bec was granted extensive lands there; as Abbott, Anselm would sometimes cross the Channel to look after Abbey property and to pay his respects to King William, who remained

Duke of Normandy after becoming King of England and hence was sovereign over Bec. As a result, Anselm became known to the Canterbury cathedral chapter, and in 1093 he was made Archbishop of Canterbury, again with great reluctance. (The king—by then William Rufus, the Conqueror’s son—thrust the archbishop’s crozier into his hand, and when he clenched his fist to avoid accepting it, the assembled bishops pried his fingers apart and closed them round the crozier.) He held this post until his death in 1109, and history books often call him “Anselm of Canterbury”. But when he wrote the *Proslogion*, all that lay in the future.

One thing about Anselm which, unusually for the time, comes across rather clearly from the records is that he was a likeable man. This was unusual, in the sense that such information as survives about individuals in the eleventh century usually gives too little personal detail to judge whether one would enjoy having them as friends. But also, whatever I said earlier about intellectual advances in the Middle Ages, there is no gainsaying that in many ways it was a harsh time. Teachers and rulers tended to use sticks as much or more than carrots. Noblewomen were treated as currency to be disposed of by their fathers for political ends. In the mediaeval context, Anselm stands out as humane and decent. He was not a weak man; while archbishop he did his duty as he saw it by defending the rights of his See vigorously against king and pope—at one point he threatened King Henry I with excommunication (and Henry backed down). He spoke out sternly to condemn slavery, which at the time still existed in England, and although he had no authority to end it, his attacks are thought to have been influential in the practice fading away in the following decades. But despite his ability to be tough where circumstances required toughness, as one reviewer of Richard Southern’s modern Anselm biography puts it: “Anselm is incredibly [*sic*] warm, emotional, tranquil, gentle and thoughtful, a compelling character both now and to his contemporaries”.

The *Proslogion* was actually the second book Anselm wrote to prove the existence of God. Immediately before, in 1075–6, he had written the

*Monologion*, “Soliloquy”, which attempted to do the same thing using longer and more complex arguments which were also more empirical—they depended on contingent facts about the way the world is.

*Monologion* and *Proslogion* both represented a very new way of discussing theology, basing their arguments on the pure power of reason with no appeals to authority—no quotations from the Bible or the Fathers of the Church. When Anselm submitted his *Monologion* for approval to Lanfranc, his teacher in Anselm’s early years at Bec (and later to be his predecessor in the See of Canterbury), Lanfranc criticized it accordingly; but it was what a new generation of students wanted. Quoting Richard Southern, Anselm’s method

appeared [to Lanfranc] misguided, freeing the subject from the authorities which were the proper guides both to the questions to be asked and the answers to be given. But the younger men were ready for free and natural debate: they laid down that nothing was to be taboo. ... Lanfranc’s criticism did not cause Anselm to budge an inch.

Nevertheless, Anselm was not entirely satisfied by his *Monologion* (and probably few today find it convincing). Anselm wanted a simple proof based on pure logic alone. In the *Proslogion* he produced one.

Anselm’s aim was not to convert unbelievers. There were few to convert. Virtually everyone in that society believed in God; what Anselm wanted to do was to integrate that faith into the fabric of intellectual, logical enquiry which was beginning to take off in Western Europe—his original title for the *Proslogion* was *Fides Quaerens Intellectum*, “Faith Seeking Understanding”. For an example of someone who actually disbelieved, Anselm had to reach back to the Book of Psalms in the Old Testament: Psalms 14 and 53 each begin “The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God.” Debates about Anselm’s proof standardly use “the Fool” to stand for a hypothetical unbeliever.

So what was Anselm’s proof? (It is usually referred to nowadays as the “ontological proof” of God’s existence, a name bestowed on it

centuries later by Immanuel Kant—Anselm himself did not use it.) The kernel of the proof is in chapter 2 of the *Proslogion*. I show it here in the translation by Sidney Norton Deane, before going on to restate it in 21st-century terms:

And so, Lord, do thou, who dost give understanding to faith, give me, so far as thou knowest it to be profitable, to understand that thou art as we believe; and that thou art that which we believe. And indeed, we believe that thou art a being than which nothing greater can be conceived. Or is there no such nature, since the fool hath said in his heart, there is no God? But, at any rate, this very fool, when he hears of this being of which I speak—a being than which nothing greater can be conceived—understands what he hears, and what he understands is in his understanding; although he does not understand it to exist.

For, it is one thing for an object to be in the understanding, and another to understand that the object exists. When a painter first conceives of what he will afterwards perform, he has it in his understanding, but he does not yet understand it to be, because he has not yet performed it. But after he has made the painting, he both has it in his understanding, and he understands that it exists, because he has made it. Hence, even the fool is convinced that something exists in the understanding, at least, than which nothing greater can be conceived. For, when he hears of this, he understands it. And whatever is understood, exists in the understanding. And assuredly that, than which nothing greater can be conceived, cannot exist in the understanding alone. For, suppose it exists in the understanding alone: then it can be conceived to exist in reality; which is greater. Therefore, if that, than which nothing greater can be conceived, exists in the understanding alone, the very being, than which nothing greater can be conceived, is one, than which a greater can be conceived. But obviously this is impossible. Hence, there is no doubt that there exists a being, than which nothing greater can be conceived, and it exists both in the understanding and in reality.

With this proof Anselm was very happy. He wrote in chapter 4:

I thank thee, gracious Lord, I thank thee; because what I formerly believed by thy bounty, I now so understand by thine illumination, that if I were unwilling to believe that thou dost exist, I should not be able not to understand this to be true.

Formerly, he believed mainly as a matter of faith; now, God has shown him that logic guarantees the truth of his belief, so that even if he wanted to disbelieve, he couldn't. (Not that he does want to disbelieve.)

The proof needs glossing for a present-day audience. And, first, a linguistic point. The paragraphs I have quoted purport to prove the existence of a being “than which nothing greater can be conceived”—the Latin verb, *cogitari*, would more obviously be translated “thought” rather than “conceived”, but this translator preferred “conceived” probably because it takes a direct object, whereas in English we “think *about* (or *of*) a thing” rather than “think a thing”. The clause “than which nothing greater can be conceived” is a cumbersome piece of wording, and it is a clause that is going to crop up a lot in discussions of the ontological proof, often embedded within sentences that are themselves complicated. In the original Latin, *quo maius nihil cogitari potest*, it is less cumbersome—Latin grammar has machinery lacking in English that makes logical relationships among words explicit. (That is one reason why good schools have continued to teach Latin long after it ceased to be the international language of scholarship: writing in Latin forces one to be clear about just what one is saying, English makes it easy to get away with woolly thinking.) Discussion of Anselm's proof will be easier to follow if we invent a single word, “unoutthinkable”, to stand for that cumbersome piece of wording. “Unoutthinkable” is intended purely as an abbreviation, with no connotations of its own; if I call something unoutthinkable, it will mean nothing more and nothing less than calling it something than which nothing greater can be thought, or conceived.

The part of Anselm's argument I have quoted, then, is intended to prove that there exists something unoutthinkable, and that thing, Anselm says, is God. Believers will surely agree that nothing greater than

God can be conceived. They might well add “but there’s more to God than that”—being “unoutthinkable” does not look like a *definition* of God. However, in later chapters of the *Proslogion* Anselm goes on to argue that, if there is an unoutthinkable being, then that being must have the other, perhaps more obvious properties that Christianity and other monotheistic religions ascribe to God, such as omnipotence, mercifulness, and so forth. I shall not discuss those parts of the *Proslogion* in detail—they are less logically interesting. The heart of the proof relates to Anselm’s demonstration that something unoutthinkable exists, and the interesting question is whether that demonstration is sound.

In essence the structure of Anselm’s proof is what logicians call a *reductio ad absurdum*: one first assumes the converse of what one aims to demonstrate, one shows that making that assumption leads to contradiction, and one concludes that the assumption therefore has to be wrong, in which case its converse must be right; Q.E.D. In this case, Anselm begins by pointing out that even the “Fool” understands the idea of something unoutthinkable—it is not because he does not understand what “God” means that he denies the existence of God, he does understand the word and he believes it does not stand for anything real. So the Fool has the idea of God in his “understanding” or his mind (*intellectus*). Then, for the *reductio*, Anselm assumes the premiss “Something unoutthinkable exists only in the understanding and not in reality”. But in that case one could conceive of something like it but that exists both in the understanding and in reality, which would surely be greater. So the unoutthinkable is outthinkable—something greater can be thought than that than which nothing greater can be thought. That is a contradiction, so the premiss must be wrong: it is not true that something unoutthinkable exists only in the understanding and not in reality. Dropping the double negative, something unoutthinkable exists *both* in the understanding *and in reality*. There is a God.

I wonder what the reader’s immediate reaction to this will be. But if anyone is inclined to dismiss the argument as silly logic-chopping, let me

for instance quote Bertrand Russell's verdict on it. Russell was no enthusiast for religious belief or faith, but about Anselm's proof he wrote "it is easier to feel convinced that it must be fallacious than it is to find out precisely where the fallacy lies". (Indeed, in his student days Russell tells us that, walking back to college from a tobacconist's one day, he found himself exclaiming "Great God in boots!—the ontological argument is sound!"—though later he retreated from that assessment.)

Anyone who wants to reject Anselm's conclusion about the existence of God does need to identify a specific fallacy in Anselm's logic. It isn't enough just to dismiss his proof as playing with words, as the well-known atheist Richard Dawkins did when he called the ontological proof "a remarkable example of the elevation of words above their station. ... God ... is too big a theory to be proved or disproved by word-games." Dawkins is a natural scientist (his "selfish gene" concept has transformed the world's understanding of biological evolution), and in the sciences no theoretical conclusion is ever logically "proved" – it is quite reasonable to reject a theory because it fits in less well than alternatives with the rest of what we know about reality. But to reject a *proof* on those grounds would be like rejecting Euclid's demonstration that the angles of a triangle always total  $180^\circ$  because "things in real life are never that neat". Logic has an iron force which cannot be escaped so easily. If you want to disagree with Euclid, you have to show that some step in his reasoning fails to follow from what preceded, or that it silently takes for granted some questionable assumption. (It is true that triangles on the Earth's surface do not precisely conform to Euclid's theorem, because Euclid assumed a flat surface but the Earth is round.)

Many philosophers have believed they have identified a fallacy in Anselm's proof, as we shall see, but often they have done that in order to say that while Anselm may not have made his argument quite watertight, with a small modification or addition they themselves have perfected the argument so that it really is irrefutable.

Anselm himself held that he had done even better than merely prove God's existence: in chapter 3 of the *Proslogion* he pointed out that, by the same logic, it would be not just false but inconceivable that the unout-thinkable should not exist.

For, it is possible to conceive of a being which cannot be conceived not to exist; and this is greater than one which can be conceived not to exist. Hence if that, than which nothing greater can be conceived, can be conceived not to exist, it is not that, than which nothing greater can be conceived. [That is, if the unout-thinkable can be thought not to exist, it is not unout-thinkable.] But this is an irreconcilable contradiction. ... Why, then has the fool said in his heart, there is no God, since it is so evident, to a rational mind, that thou dost exist in the highest degree of all? Why, except that he is dull and a fool?

God does not just happen to exist, as you or I happen to exist but might easily not have existed, if for instance our parents had never met. Unlike you and me, God *must* exist—he exists “necessarily” rather than “contingently”, as logicians put it. Even the Fool cannot actually believe there is no God, because it is not rationally believable—but the Fool is such a muddlehead that he doesn't really know what he believes.

As in the 21st century so in the eleventh, it does not take long after one scholar publishes a novel idea before another scholar produces an objection. In this case, a man called Gaunilo produced his objection so promptly, under the title “On Behalf of the Fool”, that Anselm included it, together with his reply to the objection, in the final version of his manuscript. Modern editions normally include all three pieces.

All we know about Gaunilo is that he was a monk at the abbey of Marmoutier near Tours. (Confusingly, there are two Marmoutier Abbeys, the other being near Strasbourg.) Since Gaunilo was a monk it is a safe bet that he believed in God just as Anselm did, but he did not see Anselm's *Proslogion* as offering any fresh reason for belief. And for Gaunilo the problem lay in just those early chapters which I described as

the kernel of Anselm's argument. "On Behalf of the Fool" closes with wording that takes more pains to smooth ruffled feathers than we commonly encounter in present-day scholarly controversies:

The other parts of [Anselm's *Proslogion*] are argued with such truth, such brilliancy, such grandeur; and are so replete with usefulness, so fragrant with a certain perfume of devout and holy feeling, that though there are matters at the beginning which, however rightly sensed, are weakly presented, the rest of the work should not be rejected on this account.

The brilliant and fragrant parts of the *Proslogion* are the parts I passed over as not meriting detailed attention. The parts Gaunilo found "weak" are chapters 2 and 3; without them, no-one would be interested in Anselm's *Proslogion* today.

Gaunilo's basic objection is that Anselm's reasoning, if accepted as valid, would prove far too much—not just the existence of God, but the existence of many other things that we know to be merely imaginary.

His chief example is a traveller's tall tale about a lush island at some lost location: "they say that this island has an inestimable wealth of all manner of riches and delicacies in greater abundance than is told of the Islands of the Blest ... it is more excellent than all other countries".

Now if some one should tell me that there is such an island, I should easily understand his words, in which there is no difficulty. But suppose that he went on to say, as if by a logical inference: "You can no longer doubt that this island which is more excellent than all lands exists somewhere, since you have no doubt that it is in your understanding. And since it is more excellent not to be in the understanding alone, but to exist both in the understanding and in reality, for this reason it must exist. For if it does not exist, any land which really exists will be more excellent than it; and so the island already understood by you to be more excellent will not be more excellent."

If a man should try to prove to me by such reasoning that this island truly exists, and that its existence should no longer be doubted, either I

should believe that he was jesting, or I know not which I ought to regard as the greater fool: myself, supposing that I should allow this proof; or him, if he should suppose that he had established with any certainty the existence of this island.

The first thing to say about Gaunilo is that he was plainly not as bright as Anselm. He talks about his hypothetical lost island as “more excellent than all other countries”, and similarly in recounting Anselm’s argument in order to refute it he repeatedly uses the phrase “that which is greater than all” as if this were just a shorter, clearer equivalent to “that than which nothing greater can be thought”. But the phrases do not mean the same thing. Substituting “greater than all” for “unoutthinkable” would destroy Anselm’s proof. There is no contradiction between “Something which is greater than all exists only in the understanding and not in reality”, and “One could conceive of something like it but that exists in both”, so the argument leads nowhere. Anselm points this out in his reply.

Still, if Gaunilo had been more careful about how he phrased his Lost Island parody, perhaps his objection might have worked. Suppose his hypothetical traveller’s tale had referred to an island so desirable that no island could be more desired. One might well want to say that a real island is (much) more desirable than a merely imaginary island, no matter how lush its land or how beautiful its beaches. (And to imagine a desirable thing is presumably to desire it.) So the un-outdesirable island must exist, if only some sailor could find it.

There are many further ways in which one might try to refute Anselm. What, for instance, is meant by “great” in Anselm’s proof? Not physical size, certainly; but unless “great” can be given some definite meaning, the proof is empty. And what does it mean to say that God exists in the Fool’s understanding—or in a believer’s understanding? It surely cannot mean that the person is fully familiar with all aspects of God’s nature: Christians are quick to say that no human being can possibly have that degree of knowledge of God, or anything close to it,

and (whether or not one is a believer) it does seem that a God who was as knowable as that would be something infinitely less than the God of Old or New Testaments. Admittedly, Anselm requires only that “something unout-thinkable” should be in a person’s understanding, but it is not clear that this answers the question. (The beginnings of an answer might draw on a point made in Anselm’s response to Gaunilo, “if you say that [the unout-thinkable] is not understood and is not in the mind, because it is not thoroughly understood, you should say that a man who cannot face the direct rays of the sun does not see the light of day, which is none other than the sunlight.”)

And there are plenty of other points at which various writers have tried inserting a knife into Anselm’s edifice of logic. One influential objection, for instance, is by Graham Oppy, who asserted that Anselm’s proof seems valid only because one of its premisses is ambiguous: it is open to either of what logicians call *de dicto* and *de re* interpretations.

This logical distinction is easy to illustrate using a more ordinary example. Suppose a young man, Bob, says “I want to marry an Italian woman”. The words are simple, but they can be taken two ways. Bob might be thinking of a particular woman, Chiara, who as it happens is Italian, and saying that he wants to marry Chiara. (He does not name her, because his hearers do not know her.) Alternatively, Bob might have no specific woman in mind, but whoever he marries, he wants her to be Italian—perhaps he is hoping for a life of eating saltimbocca and osso buco. The former is the *de re* interpretation, the latter *de dicto* (“about the thing”, versus “about the wording”). If Bob intends his statement in the *de re* sense, he is implying that Chiara does exist. The *de dicto* sense, though, says nothing about whether there are any Italian women (though obviously in this case Bob, and we, know from independent information that there are many).

According to Oppy, Anselm slid in his proof between two corresponding interpretations of the premiss “the Fool has something unout-thinkable in his understanding”. (Oppy uses the terms

“ontologically neutral” and “ontologically committing” for the standard terms *de dicto* and *de re*.) On the *de re* interpretation, there exists a particular being, which is in the Fool’s understanding and which, incidentally, is unoutthinkable. If the premiss is interpreted that way, then it certainly follows that something unoutthinkable exists—but the so-called “proof” would be circular, because the premiss itself implies that something unoutthinkable exists (and so an unbeliever ought not to grant that premiss). The premiss looked harmless because it could be interpreted in the *de dicto* sense, in which case it says nothing about whether the idea in the Fool’s mind corresponds to anything real—but in that case Oppy thinks that the desired conclusion will not follow.

But all the objections, without exception so far as I know, have been rebutted by other writers. I do not mean by that to commit myself to the position that Anselm’s proof is certainly successful. Many objections to it are impressive—but many of the rebuttals are impressive also, and more of each continue to be produced year by year. It would be far beyond the scope of this book to provide a comprehensive survey of all the arguments and counter-arguments on record, and to draw up a definitive balance. What I shall do is look at cases where subsequent thinkers have moved the debate forward in significant ways, often by developing new versions of the proof which escape at least some of the problems arising with Anselm’s original version. (And we shall also look at some God proofs quite separate from the ontological argument.)

For churchmen, it is fair to say that Anselm’s proof ceased to be a live issue after the work of Thomas Aquinas. Thomas, who lived from ca 1225 to 1274, was the youngest son of the count of Aquino, some 55 miles south-east of Rome, and became a Dominican friar while studying at the University of Naples. His family objected so strongly to this move that they kidnapped him and held him prisoner for at least a year, trying to persuade him to give that career up. At one point, to tempt him away from his life of piety, they sent a harlot in to him—but Thomas seized a burning brand from the fireplace and chased her away waving it.

Eventually the family gave up and released him, whereupon he went back to the Dominicans. Over his lifetime Thomas Aquinas produced a large quantity of very influential theological writings, and repeatedly he urged that Anselm's God proof based on pure logic was unsatisfactory—Aquinas believed that one needs to base proofs of God's existence on empirical facts, logic alone was not enough. Aquinas himself put forward five arguments for God's existence, known as the Five Ways.

Although Aquinas is clear that he does not accept Anselm's proof, his explanations of what he sees as wrong with it are less explicit. Modern commentators have sometimes read Aquinas as simply asserting that Anselm's conclusion does not follow from his premisses, without explaining why it fails to follow. But this may be unfair. Part of Aquinas's problem with Anselm's proof seems to relate to the issue about human beings not being able to know God's nature. Anselm claimed to show that God's existence is self-evidently true, but Aquinas wrote "A thing can be self-evident in either of two ways: on the one hand, self-evident in itself, though not to us; on the other, self-evident in itself, and to us." If we fully understood what "God" refers to, we could see that "God exists" is self-evidently true, but since we have limited knowledge of God, we can rationally ask whether God does indeed exist.

I am not sure whether logicians impressed by Anselm's proof would see this as a convincing objection. But they might be more worried by a point made by Gareth Matthews, who claimed, on the basis of close reading of Aquinas's writings, that he felt the Fool could short-circuit the ontological proof by saying "For any given thing, a greater thing can always be conceived". This might be objectionable to believers, since it implies that if there is a God, one can conceive something greater than God—but it is surely not self-contradictory, and if not then it becomes impossible to state Anselm's *reductio*: nothing can be unout-thinkable.

Be that as it may, after Aquinas it was his Five Ways which were seen by the Church as significant arguments in support of faith, while Anselm's proof was neglected in religious contexts.

Aquinas's Five Ways are empirical, but the empirical facts to which they appeal are everyday, universal facts. Most of the "Ways" have essentially the same structure: they argue that the God hypothesis is needed to avoid some infinite regress. For instance, the second Way is about causation. We see that everything that happens in the world has a cause. Rivers are high because snow is melting; snow is melting because the weather is warmer; the weather is warmer because in spring the sun gets higher in the sky; and so on. To Aquinas it was impossible to think that this kind of causal chain could continue back and back for ever—it must begin somewhere. So, according to him, there must be a first cause which is not itself caused, and "this everyone understands to be God".

Although this and Aquinas's other Ways have been much more influential than Anselm's proof in the history of the Western Church, from a philosophical point of view the Five Ways seem less cogent. The present-day philosopher of religion Richard Swinburne comments that the Five Ways, or most of them, "seem to me to be one of [Aquinas's] least successful pieces of philosophy." In the case of the second Way, how do we know that a chain of causation cannot have infinitely many links? That may well be a hard idea to get one's mind round, but then no one takes God to be an easy idea either; and many people, myself included, find Aquinas's own explanation for why chains of causation cannot run infinitely far backwards incomprehensible. (Interestingly, Robert Meyer has suggested that Aquinas's problem here was that he didn't know about negative numbers—they hadn't been invented yet. So, if he thought of the present time as time  $n$ , he could imagine an everlasting future of times  $n + 1$ ,  $n + 2$ , and so on indefinitely, but when he looked back at the past, time  $n - 1$ , time  $n - 2$ , and so forth must sooner or later reach time zero, where the chain—Aquinas supposed—must end.)

Furthermore, if one is not persuaded by the second Way, it is unlikely that most of the other Ways will appear more convincing—their problems are very comparable. In the history of philosophy it is

Anselm's ontological proof that continues to be a focus of debate. Aquinas's ideas have been seen as lacking much philosophical interest, and philosophers who have discussed them have often regarded them as plain wrong.

That may be too dismissive. Edward Feser is an American philosopher of politics and of religion, who describes the usual objections to the Five Ways as taking for granted a set of intellectual principles which are so widely shared by modern thinkers that they are not perceived to be assumptions; but they are not logical truisms, Aquinas and many of his contemporaries made different assumptions, and we cannot merely dismiss these assumptions as self-evidently mistaken: "In rejecting [arguments such as the Five Ways], as contemporary philosophers tend to do, they do not realize that what they are rejecting is a mere distortion or caricature of Aquinas's position rather than the real McCoy." Feser regards the Five Ways as good arguments.

To pursue this would take us into deeper philosophical waters than I am prepared to swim in—my own intellectual outlook is thoroughly imbued with the assumptions of the modern era. Whether or not Feser's defence of Aquinas has merit, though, we saw that Richard Swinburne exempted one of the Five Ways from his negative assessment. The exception was the fifth Way, which was in essence a mediaeval version of the "argument from design"—a form of God proof which for most of history, independently of Aquinas, has seemed a powerful argument that the world must have had an intelligent Creator. David Hume was a leader of the Scottish Enlightenment, best known for his empiricist account of human psychology, but he has also been described as the founder of philosophy of religion in its modern form. Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (published in 1779 but written in about 1750) are soaked in the argument from design, as for instance in this passage:

Look round the world ... You will find it to be nothing but one great machine, subdivided into an infinite number of lesser machines, which again admit of subdivisions, to a degree beyond what human senses and

faculties can trace and explain. All these various machines, and even their most minute parts, are adjusted to each other with an accuracy, which ravishes into admiration all men, who have ever contemplated them. The curious adapting of means to ends, throughout all nature, resembles exactly, though it much exceeds, the productions of human contrivance; of human design, thought, wisdom, and intelligence. Since therefore the effects resemble each other, we are led to infer, by all the rules of analogy, that the causes also resemble; and that the Author of nature is somewhat similar to the mind of man; though possessed of much larger faculties, proportioned to the grandeur of the work, which he has executed.

These are words which Hume puts in the mouth of one of the fictional participants in his *Dialogues*, and Hume avoids making clear what he himself believes—quite possibly Hume did not believe in God. But others who appealed to the argument from design certainly did. The man whose writings were required reading for undergraduates at Cambridge University in the nineteenth century, to fortify them against the danger of losing their Christian faith, was William Paley. Paley was son of the headmaster of a school in the Yorkshire Dales, who became a cleric and eventually Archdeacon of Carlisle. (He was an outspoken opponent of slavery and the slave trade—he actively supported the rebels in the American War of Independence, not on the grounds that they were entitled to govern themselves but because he thought independence would lead to the end of slavery in America—an odd miscalculation.) Paley's *Natural Theology* of 1802 begins:

In crossing a heath, suppose I pitched my foot against a *stone*, and were asked how the stone came to be there: I might possibly answer, that, for any thing I knew to the contrary, it had lain there for ever; ... But suppose I had found a *watch* upon the ground, and it should be inquired how the watch happened to be in that place; I should hardly think of the answer which I had before given ... Yet why should not this answer serve for the watch as well as for the stone? ... For this reason, and for no other, viz.