SAINT THOMAS ON THE ARGUMENT OF THE *PROSLOGION*

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Eager as Saint Thomas is to prove the existence of God, he cannot help finding fault with the argument of Saint Anselm's *Proslogion*. The disciples of Saint Thomas, like their master, have always rejected that argument and have given a variety of Thomistic reasons for doing so. What they have not done is to give a detailed exposition of Saint Thomas' own rejection of that argument. The present essay claims to be such an exposition.

This essay will explain Saint Thomas' rejection by answering the two fundamental questions which it raises. First, why does Saint Thomas reject even the conclusion of Saint Anselm's argument? Second, what fault does he find in the argument itself? We will find that Saint Thomas rejects the conclusion of the argument because it conflicts with our way of knowing God in this life. Afterwards, he rejects the argument itself because it makes a false assumption about the definition of God.

Saint Thomas' Analysis of Saint Anselm's Argument

It seems paradoxical to say that Saint Thomas rejects the conclusion of Saint Anselm's argument. After all, Saint Thomas does believe that God exists, and the argument simply tries to prove that fact. If we look carefully at his analysis, however, we find that the Angelic Doctor assigns a much different

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conclusion to the argument than we usually do. He believes that the argument concludes not simply that God exists, but that the existence of God is self-evident.

In the *Summa Theologica* Saint Thomas presents the argument as follows:

> Those things are called self-evident which, as soon as the terms are understood, are known, which the Philosopher attributes to the first principles of demonstration . . . But it being understood what this name God signifies, it is immediately had that God exists . . . Therefore, that God exists is self-evident.[1]

The conclusion which Saint Thomas assigns here, or something like it, is the common conclusion of all of his presentations of the ontological argument. He concludes his presentation in the same way in both the *Summa Contra Gentiles* and the *Commentary on the Sentences*. In the *Disputed Questions on Truth* he concludes the argument with, "Therefore, God cannot be thought not to be," and in the *Commentary on Boethius' De Trinitate* he concludes even more strongly, "Therefore, God is the first thing known by us."[2] Saint Thomas thinks that Saint Anselm's argument concludes not just that God exists, but that the existence of God is self-evident.

Since in the preface to the *Proslogion* Saint Anselm claims only that his argument proves the existence of God, we must justify Saint Thomas' interpretation. It would be best to begin by looking at what the Angelic Doctor understands 'self-

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[1] "Illa dicuntur esse per se nota quae, statim cognita terminis, cognoscuntur, quod Philosophus attribuit primis demonstrationis principiis. . . . Sed intellecto, quid significet hoc nomen, Deus, statim habetur, quod Deus est. . . . Ergo Deum esse, est per se notum." *STh* I, q. 2, a. 1. References to the works of Saint Thomas in this article follow the practice of the Marietti editors. Quotations from the two Summae are taken from the standard Leonine edition, those from the Sentences commentary are from the Parma, while the rest are from the Marietti editions. Translations of Saint Thomas are my own.

[2] *De Ver.*, q. 10, a. 12 and in Boët. *de Trinit.*, q. 1, a. 3.

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evident' to mean. Saint Thomas writes that a proposition is self-evident when the predicate is included in the definition of the subject.[3] For example, the proposition 'Man is an animal' is self-evident because 'animal' is part of the very definition of 'man': man is defined as the rational animal.

Two properties of the self-evident proposition follow from this definition. First, the self-evident is that which cannot be thought not to be true.[4] That is, the self-evident proposition commands assent in those who understand its terms. Since the predicate belongs to the very notion of the subject, whoever understands the terms of the proposition will know that the proposition is true. Second, the self-evident proposition is immediate.[5] Since every syllogism proceeds through a middle term connecting the subject and the predicate, every demonstrated conclusion is known through a middle term. But the self-evident proposition is opposed to the demonstrated conclusion. Hence, every self-evident proposition is immediate.

In the *Proslogion* itself, Saint Anselm acknowledges that the fact of God's existence possesses one property of the self-evident truth. Just after the conclusion of the ontological argument, he writes, "And certainly this being so truly exists that it cannot be even thought not to exist."[6] That is, anyone who really understands what the word 'God' means cannot deny that God exists. Therefore, the fact of God's existence in itself commands assent. Clearly, then, Saint Thomas can ascribe the first property of the self-evident to Saint Anselm's understanding of the proposition "God exists."

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[3] "Ex hoc enim aliqua propositio est per se nota, quod praedicatum includitur in ratione subjecti." *STh* I, q. 2, a. 1.

[4] "Praeterea, illud est per se notum quod non potest cogitari non esse." I *Sent.*, D. 3, q. 1, a. 2.

[5] "Unde intellectus respondet immediatae propositioni; scientia autem conclusioni, quae est propositio mediatae." I *Post. Anal.*, l. 36, n. 318.

[6] "Quod utique sic vere est, ut nec cogitari possit non esse." Saint Anselm, *Proslogion*, (trans. M. J. Charlesworth, [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978]), ch. 3.

Yet it seems contradictory to ascribe the second property, immediacy, to a proposition which is the conclusion of an argument. After all, a proof is a demonstration, and the conclusion of a demonstration is never immediate. If Saint Anselm is trying to prove God's existence, it seems that the conclusion cannot be immediate.

We can only solve this difficulty by looking at Saint Anselm's argument in detail. He begins his argument with a prayer, asking the Lord to give him an understanding of what he believes. Then he proposes a definition of the word 'God': "Now we believe that You [God] are something than which nothing greater can be thought."[7] He thinks, then, that the word 'God', when carefully considered, brings to mind an object which is the most that thought can conceive.

The Fool, that is, the atheist, may doubt that such a thing exists in reality, but he cannot deny that it exists in the mind. As Saint Anselm puts it:

> Or can it be that a thing of such a nature does not exist, since 'the Fool has said in his heart, there is no God'? But surely when this same Fool hears what I am speaking about, namely, something than which nothing greater can be thought, he understands what he hears, and what he understands is in his mind, even if he does not understand that it actually exists.[8]

Since the Fool denies that 'something than which nothing greater can be thought' exists, he must at least understand what that phrase means. Since to understand something is to have that thing exist in the mind, then that which is signified by the phrase 'something than which nothing greater can be

[7] "Et quidem credimus te esse aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari possit." Ibid., ch. 2.

[8] "An ergo non est aliqua talis natura, quia 'dixit insipiens in corde suo: non est deus'? Sed certe ipse idem insipiens, cum audit hoc ipsum quod dico: 'aliquid quo maius nihil cogitari potest', intelligit quod audit; et quod intelligit in intellectu eius est, etiam si non intelligat illud esse." Ibid.

thought' does exist in the mind of the Fool, even if he believes that it does not exist outside the mind.

Of course, Saint Anselm wishes to show us that such a thing exists outside the mind as well. He argues:

> And surely that than which a greater cannot be thought cannot exist in the mind alone. For if it exists solely in the mind even, it can be thought to exist in reality also, which is greater. If then that than which a greater cannot be thought exists in the mind alone, this same that than which a greater cannot be thought is that than which a greater can be thought. But this is obviously impossible. Therefore, there is absolutely no doubt that something than which a greater cannot be thought exists both in the mind and in reality.[9]

Saint Anselm argues first that to exist in the mind and in reality is greater than existing in the mind alone. Therefore, if God exists just in the mind, we can think of something greater, God existing in the mind and reality. But then we are thinking of something greater than the something than which a greater cannot be thought, which is contradictory. Therefore, God cannot exist in the mind alone, He must also exist in reality. This is the substance of Saint Anselm's argument.

The argument seems to be a syllogistic reduction to the absurd. It pairs a false premiss with a true one, and through these syllogizes to a self-contradictory conclusion. In that case the proposition "God exists" is demonstrated, not self-evident. Yet if we examine the argument step by step, it becomes obvious that it is not really a demonstration. Instead, it is a complex process of combining and comparing terms which tries to show that the denial of God's existence is self-evidently contradictory.

[9] "Et certe id quo maius cogitari nequit, non potest esse in solo intellectu. Si enim vel in solo intellectu est, potest cogitari esse et in re, quod maius est. Si ergo id quo maius cogitari non potest, est in solo intellectu: id ipsum quo maius cogitari non potest, est quo maius cogitari potest. Sed certe hoc esse non potest. Existit ergo procul dubio aliquid quo maius cogitari non valet, et in intellectu et in re." Ibid.

In order to see that this argument is not a demonstration, we must remember that a simple proposition can be changed to a term which combines the subject and predicate. For example, the proposition 'Some triangles are right' can be changed into the term 'right triangle'. The new term can then be used as the subject or predicate in some other proposition, as in 'All right triangles have the sum of the squares on their legs equal to the square on the hypotenuse'. This procedure does not require the use of a syllogism, and this is the procedure that Saint Anselm follows at the beginning of his argument. He first proposes the proposition to be reduced to absurdity, "God exists in the mind alone," then he turns that proposition into a term, 'God existing in the mind alone.' Instead of using the first proposition of the argument as an absurd premiss in a reductive syllogism, he turns it into a term which will be used in a later proposition.

The next step in the argument requires us to understand the relation between the axioms, or common conceptions, and the proper principles of each science. Saint Thomas himself explains this relation in his *Commentary on the Metaphysics*:

> And [Aristotle] explains which are the principles of demonstration. He says that the common conceptions of all are those from which every demonstration proceeds, insofar as each of the principles of the proper demonstrated conclusions have certainty by virtue of the common principles.[10]

As Aristotle makes clear in the *Posterior Analytics*, the demonstrative syllogism uses first principles which are self-evident and proper to that science. We could never understand those proper principles unless we understood more fundamental principles, common to all of the sciences. Thus, every sci-

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[10] "Et exponit quae sunt demonstrationis principia. Et dicit, quod sunt communes conceptiones omnium ex quibus procedunt omnes demonstrationes, inquantum scilicet singula principia propriarum conclusionum demonstratarum habent firmitatem virtute principiorum communium." III *Metaph.*, l. 5, n. 387.

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ence uses the common principles of all human knowledge, called axioms or common conceptions, to give light to its own first principles.

An example will clarify this relation. Euclid first uses the axiom "The whole is greater than the part" in Book I, Theorem 16, in which he proves that the exterior angle of a triangle is greater than either opposite interior angle.[11] He does not, however, use the axiom as a premiss in his demonstration, since demonstrations use only proper principles as premisses. Rather, he substitutes into the terms of the axiom more particular terms which are instances of the former. That is, he substitutes 'angle ECD' for 'whole', 'angle ECF' for 'part', and concludes that angle ECD is greater than angle ECF. This procedure is not syllogistic, since it uses four terms and a syllogism has only three. Instead, the conclusion is a self-evident proposition understood in the light of an axiom. It is then used as a proper principle in the demonstration which follows. Thus, the use of an axiom does not destroy the self-evident character of the proper principles, it merely sheds light upon them.

In the second step of his argument, Saint Anselm compares the first term, 'God existing in the mind only' to another, 'God existing in the mind and in reality.' He then makes the judgement that the second term is greater than the first. He justifies his claim through an implicit appeal to the axiom that the whole is greater than the part. Note that he does not claim that 'God existing in reality' is greater than 'God existing in the mind,' but rather that 'God existing both in the mind and in reality' is greater than 'God existing in the mind only.' Since 'God existing in the mind only' is part of 'God existing in the mind and in reality,' and the whole is greater than the part, the second thing is greater than the first. Recall that the geometer's use of the axioms to illuminate the proper principles does not destroy the principles' self-evidence. Similarly, Saint

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[11] Euclid, *Elements* I, prop. 16.

Anselm's use of an axiom to illuminate the statement 'God considered as existing in both the mind and reality is greater than God considered as existing only in the mind' does not destroy the self-evidence of that statement.

Saint Anselm's final step is to combine this comparison with a second proposition. He in effect asserts that God as existing both in the mind and in reality can be thought.[12] This proposition, combined with the previous one, produces the conclusion that God existing both in the mind and in reality (1) can be thought and (2) is greater than God existing in the mind alone. The meaning of the term 'God', however, is something than which a greater cannot be thought. Therefore, *something* (God existing in both the mind and reality) can be thought that is greater than something than which nothing greater can be thought. Or as Saint Anselm writes, "[T]his same that than which a greater *cannot* be thought is that than which a greater *can* be thought." [13] Since this proposition is self-contradictory and since it follows from the assertion that God can exist in the mind alone, it follows that God must also exist in reality.

Notice once again that Saint Anselm does not use a syllogism. Rather, he combines the predicate 'can be thought' with the term 'God existing in the mind and in reality' to produce a single term which happens to be greater than another term, 'God existing in the mind alone.' In fact, we have not discovered any syllogisms or middle terms in the whole argument. The entire argument proceeds by the combination of a subject and a predicate into one term, the comparison of one term to another, and the substitution of those terms into universal axioms. Saint Thomas, then, is correct in his claim that the argument is trying to show, not simply that God exists, but also that His existence is self-evident.

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12 ". . . potest cogitari esse et in re . . ." Anselm, ch. 2.

13 "[I]d ipsum quo maius cogitari non potest, est quo maius cogitari potest." Ibid.

Saint Thomas' Rejection of Saint Anselm's Argument

Now that we understand Saint Thomas' analysis of the conclusion of Saint Anselm's argument, we are prepared to see why he rejects it. He teaches that the conclusion of the argument cannot be absolutely true because it conflicts with the natural way in which men acquire knowledge.

As we saw before, the argument concludes that it is self-evident that God exists. We also saw that a proposition is self-evident because the predicate is contained in the very notion of the subject. This can happen, however, in two ways. Saint Thomas writes:

> If what the subject and predicate are should be known by all, it will be self-evident to all, just as is evident in the first principles of demonstration, whose terms are certain common things which none are ignorant of. . . . If what the subject is, or what the predicate is, should be unknown to some, it will be self-evident, not however to those who are ignorant of the subject and predicate of the proposition.[14]

Every proposition is self-evident if the predicate belongs to the essence of the subject, but if its subject or predicate, or both, are unknown to a particular knower, the proposition will not be self-evident to that knower. For example, it is self-evident to all that the whole is greater than the part because all men know what a part and a whole are. It is not self-evident to all, though, that incorporeal substances are not in a place, since most men have never really conceived of an incorporeal substance. Nevertheless, the latter proposition is self-evident in itself, and self-evident to those who know what an incorporeal substance is.

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14 "Si igitur notum sit omnibus de praedicato, et de subjecto quid sit, propositio illa erit omnibus per se nota, sicut patet in primis demonstrationum principiis, quorum termini sunt quaedam communia, quae nullus ignorat. . . . Si autem apud aliquos notum non sit de praedicato, et subjecto quid sit, propositio quidem, quantum in se est, erit per se nota, non tamen apud illos, qui praedicatum, et subjectum propositionis ignorant." *STh* I, q. 2, a. 1.

Saint Thomas applies this distinction to the case of God by saying that the existence of God is self-evident in itself, but not to men in this present life. He writes:

> I say, therefore, that this proposition, God exists, is self-evident in itself, since the predicate is identical to the subject. For God is His own existence, as will be shown below. But since we do not know what God is, it is not self-evident to us, but must be demonstrated from those things which are more known to us, and less known in themselves, namely through an effect.[15]

According to Saint Thomas, the existence of God is self-evident in itself because God is His own existence. Men in the present life do not see God's essence and thus His existence is not self-evident to us, but must be proven through His effects. Since Saint Anselm clearly means for his argument to apply to men in the present life, Saint Thomas must reject the conclusion of the ontological argument.

Truth and Falsity in Definitions

Having seen why Saint Thomas believes that Saint Anselm's conclusion is wrong, we should now examine his analysis of the argument in order to understand the errors hidden in it. At first glance the argument seems to work, since it both invokes a sound principle to show that the denial of God's existence is self-contradictory and commits no logical errors. Any defect in it must come at the beginning, in the very definition of God which Saint Anselm offers. Although the definition seems reasonable, Saint Thomas sees two defects in it. In order to see these defects, we need to look at Saint Thomas' understanding of definition.

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[15] "Dico ergo, quod haec propositio, Deus est, quantum in se est, per se nota est: quia praedicatum est idem cum subjecto. Deus enim est suum esse, ut infra patebit. Sed quia nos non scimus de Deo, quid est, non est nobis per se nota, sed indiget demonstrari per ea, quae sunt magis nota quoad nos, et minus nota quad naturam, scilicet per effectus." Ibid.

In his *Disputed Questions on Truth*, Saint Thomas discusses truth and falsity in definitions. He points out that while truth and falsity occur in the acts of the composing and dividing intellect first, in a later and secondary sense they also apply to the act of simple apprehension. Truth and falsity occur in grasping what something is because that act is perfected by the act of defining. A definition, however, implies two kinds of composition and therefore admits of truth and falsity in two ways. Saint Thomas explains:

> [T]hus, a definition is said to be true or false because of the true and false in composition, as when, namely, something is said to be the definition of another when it is not . . . or even when the parts of a definition are not able to be composed with each other.[16]

According to Saint Thomas, every definition can be judged true or false for one of two reasons. First, since the definition can be composed with the subject defined, if that composition is true, the defining proposition is true, and if false, the defining proposition is false. For example, the definition 'plane figure bounded by three straight lines' is the true definition of the triangle, and implies a true defining proposition, 'every triangle is bounded by three straight lines'. If one were to say that the definition of a circle was 'plane figure bounded by three straight lines', that definition would be false because it would imply a false proposition, 'a circle is bounded by three straight lines'. Therefore, every true definition must be composed with its proper subject.

Second, since every definition is composed of parts, the parts of the definition must be able to be combined with each other, that is, they must not make up a self-contradictory phrase. For example, the phrase 'rational animal' can be a true

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[16] ". . . unde definitio dicitur vera vel falsa, ratione compositionis verae vel falsae, ut quando scilicet dicitur esse definitio eius cuius non est . . . vel etiam quando partes definitionis non possunt componi ad invicem." *De Ver.* q. 1, a. 3.

definition because the genus and difference are not contradictory. The phrase 'square circle,' however, cannot be a true definition because the two parts contradict each other, the first implying boundaries which are straight, the second implying boundaries which are not straight. The true definition must be combined with the proper subject and must have parts which are not self-contradictory.

In a different passage, Saint Thomas explains how we judge the truth and falsity of definitions with respect to the composition of subject and definition: we judge it according to the usage of the terms. He writes:

> For the definition is the notion which a name signifies, as is stated in the *Metaphysics* IV. But the signification of a name must be based upon what is generally meant by those who employ the name. Hence it is said in the *Topics* II that names must be used as the majority of people use them.[17]

The spoken word is significant by convention, so its use is not natural, but governed by its users. For most names, this means that the true definition of a word must express the meaning used by the majority. For example, the definition of 'horse' must in some way correspond to what ordinary people mean when they use that word. To say that one means something else by 'horse' is to have a false definition. One must also define less common words so that they correspond to what is meant by those who use them. The physicist means something by 'electron' and unless the definition expresses that meaning, the definition is false. We judge the truth and falsity of a definition in its application to a subject by its usage.

As we saw above, we also judge the definition according to the compatibility of its parts. In the simplest cases, such

as those of the fundamental notions used in geometry, the circle, the straight line, etc., the compatibility of the parts of the definition are self-evident. In some cases, such as that of the square circle, the self-contradictory nature of the parts of the definition is self-evident. In most cases, however, it is not immediately clear whether or not the parts of a definition are self-contradictory. Saint Thomas points out:

> The terms, that is, the defining notions, do not reveal that the thing to which they are assigned either is or is possible. Rather, whenever such notions are assigned, we must still ask why such a thing must exist.[18]

Except in the simplest cases, we cannot assume that the parts of a proposed definition are compatible. There might be some contradiction hidden within the definition which would only be revealed by a demonstration. For example, when we begin the study of number theory, it is not obvious that the definition 'greatest prime number' is self-contradictory. We might be tempted to think that it can be a true definition. Later on, however, we demonstrate that there is an infinite multitude of prime numbers, and this could not be true if one were greatest.[19] Thus, the definition 'greatest prime number' is self-contradictory, but in a hidden way. Its incoherent nature is proved by a syllogism. Therefore, we cannot assume that a contradiction in a definition does not exist just because we do not immediately see one.

Furthermore, a limited inquiry into the consequences of the definition cannot definitively prove that the definition is consistent with itself. There might be an infinite number of such consequences, and not all can be explored. Therefore, we cannot infer a lack of contradiction in a definition from

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[17] "Definitio enim est ratio, quam significat nomen, ut dicitur in IV *Metaphysicae*; significatio autem nominis accipienda est ab eo, quod intendunt communiter loquentes per illud nomen significare: unde et in II *Topicorum* dicitur quod nominibus utendum est, ut plures utuntur." I *Post. Anal.*, l. 4, n. 33.

[18] "Et hoc ideo quia termini, idest rationes definitivae, non declarant quod illud de quo assignantur, aut sit aut possibile sit esse; sed semper, assignata tali ratione, licet quaerere quare oporteat tale aliquid esse." II *Post. Anal.*, l. 6, n. 464.
[19] *Elements* IX, 20.

our failure to see it. We can only infer it from the actual existence of the thing defined, since nothing which is contradictory actually exists. And so Saint Thomas states that after we have assigned a definition to a thing, our next task is to seek "why such a thing must exist."[20]

An example of such a procedure occurs in Euclid's *Elements*. He defines the equilateral triangle as a triangle "which has its three sides equal."[21] The definition seems simple enough, yet Euclid does not assume that its parts are compatible. Rather, he constructs the equilateral triangle, that is, he proves that the definition is coherent by making the thing defined actual. This illustrates that the only way to show that a complex definition is not self-contradictory is to show that the thing defined in some way exists or has existed.

Saint Thomas' teaching on truth in definition can be summed up in two rules. First, a definition must be assigned to a subject only if it corresponds to the meaning assigned by those who name that thing. Second, a complex definition cannot be known to be true unless the thing defined is known to actually exist. What we will find, when we apply this to Saint Anselm's argument, is that his definition of God violates both rules.

The Error in Saint Anselm's Argument

In the *Proslogion* Saint Anselm is trying to show that the existence of God is self-evident because the very definition of God includes His existence. His argument will only work if the definition which he assigns to God, something than which a greater cannot be thought, is self-evident. That is, it is not enough that this definition can be truly attributed to God and is internally coherent, it must also be self-evidently attributed to God and self-evidently coherent. Saint Thomas claims that the definition fails in both respects. We are now

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[20] II *Post. Anal.*, l. 6, n. 464.
[21] *Elements* I, definition 20.

prepared to examine his claims. Since his explanation of these failures is most detailed in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, we will rely primarily on that text to interpret Saint Thomas' analysis.

First, Saint Thomas denies that Saint Anselm's definition can be self-evidently attributed to God. He gives two arguments to support this point. He writes:

> First, because it is not known to all, even those conceding that God exists, that God is something than which a greater cannot be thought. For many of the ancients said that this world is God. Also, we are not given such an understanding by the interpretations of this name 'God' which Damascene proposes.[22]

As we saw before, usage is the measure of whether a definition truly belongs to its subject. If it is self-evident to all men that God is something than which a greater cannot be thought, then everyone who uses the word 'God' with understanding must concede that He is such. Yet some of the ancients, understanding what the word meant, predicated it of this universe, which is clearly a limited being. Therefore, they must have thought that God was limited as well, that God was something than which a greater can be thought, though perhaps they would admit that nothing greater actually existed. Clearly, then, it is not self-evident to all men that Saint Anselm's definition is truly attributed to God.

Saint Thomas also points out that it is not even self-evident to some men, the wise, that Saint Anselm's definition is truly attributed to God. If the meaning of the word 'God' is only understood by the theologians, their usage of that word still determines the truth of the definition. Practicing theologians, however, do not use this definition, or anything like it, in their

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[22] "Primo quidem, quia non omnibus notum est, etiam concedentibus Deum esse, quod Deus sit id quo maius cogitari non possit: cum multi antiquorum mundum istum dixerint Deum esse. Nec etiam ex interpretationibus huius nominis Deus, quas Damascenus ponit [De Fid. Orth., I, IX], aliquid huiusmodi intelligi datur." *C. G.* I, c. 11.

interpretations of the name 'God'. As evidence for the latter assertion, Saint Thomas refers to the collection of the names or definitions of God made by Saint John Damascene in his book, *On the Orthodox Faith*. Not one of those definitions has a resemblance to Saint Anselm's. Hence, it is not self-evident to any man, simple or learned, that this definition can be truly attributed to God.

A defender of Saint Anselm is likely to accuse Saint Thomas of quibbling about words here. He might grant that the word 'God' has not always meant 'something than which nothing greater can be thought.' Nevertheless, he could argue that Saint Anselm has proven that something than which a greater cannot be thought must exist and that it has all of the attributes which we traditionally assign to God. It may not be self-evident, then, that God exists, but it is self-evident that something than which nothing greater can be thought exists, and it can easily be shown that something than which nothing greater can be thought must be God.

Saint Thomas responds that even granting that God means 'something than which a greater cannot be thought,' the argument still fails because it is not self-evident that Saint Anselm's definition is internally coherent. Since it is harder to see this second error, Saint Thomas discusses it at greater length. He begins, as did Saint Anselm, by distinguishing existence in the mind from existence in reality:

> Even if we grant that all understand by this name 'God' something than which a greater cannot be thought, it will not be necessary that something than which a greater cannot be thought exists in the nature of things. For a thing must be proposed in the same manner as the meaning of the name. From this, that the intellect conceives what is referred to by this name 'God,' however, it does not follow that God exists, except in the intellect. In the same way, neither will it be necessary that something than which a greater cannot be thought exists, except in the intellect.[23]

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[23] "Deinde quia, dato quod ab omnibus per hoc nomen Deus intel-

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Here Saint Thomas distinguishes two kinds of existence: existence in the intellect and existence in reality. Granting that Saint Anselm's definition of God is understood, we can conclude that God exists in the intellect, because everything understood exists in the intellect. And, since a thing and its definition are posited in the same way, we must also grant that something than which a greater cannot be thought exists in the intellect. Saint Thomas points out, however, that we are not yet able to affirm, either of God or His proposed definition, existence in reality.

In fact, if we were to rely entirely on Saint Anselm's definition, we could never conclude that God exists in reality. Saint Thomas writes:

> And from this it does not follow that there is in the nature of things something than which a greater cannot be thought. So nothing absurd happens to those proposing that God does not exist.[24]

Unsurprisingly, Saint Thomas claims that those who deny the existence of God do not run into the absurdity Saint Anselm attributes to them. They can deny the existence of something than which a greater cannot be thought with perfect consistency.

Of course, up to this point Saint Thomas simply seems to be making the counter claim that the argument does not work. It is in the next sentence that he gives the reason. There he claims that only those who concede the existence in reality

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ligatur aliquid quo maius cogitari non possit, non necesse erit aliquid esse quo maius cogitari non potest in rerum natura. Eodem enim modo necesse est poni rem, et nominis rationem. Ex hoc autem quod mente concipitur quod profertur hoc nomine Deus, non sequitur Deum esse nisi in intellectu. Unde nec oportebit id quo maius cogitari non potest esse nisi in intellectu." Ibid.

[24] "Et ex hoc non sequitur quod sit aliquid in rerum natura quo maius cogitari non possit. Et sic nihil inconveniens accidit ponentibus Deum non esse." Ibid.

of something than which a greater cannot be thought are reduced to an absurdity if they later try to deny it. He writes:

> For it is not absurd that something can be thought greater than anything given in the reality or in the intellect, unless for him who concedes that there exists in the nature of things something than which a greater cannot be thought.[25]

It might seem here that Saint Thomas is merely pointing out the obvious, that someone who both affirms and denies the existence of such a thing is being self-contradictory.

Such a reading of the passage fails, however, because it renders Saint Anselm's argument irrelevant. The one who affirms and denies the same thing always runs into a contradiction, argument or no argument. What Saint Thomas actually means is that the argument implicitly assumes as a premiss that something than which a greater cannot be thought exists in reality, and because of this begs the question. He makes this same point more clearly in his *Commentary on the Sentences*, explaining:

> From this it does not follow that no one can deny [God's existence] or think that He does not exist. For he can think that there is no such thing existing than which a greater cannot be thought. And therefore, his argument proceeds from this supposition, namely, that something than which a greater cannot be thought exists.[26]

According to Saint Thomas, Saint Anselm's argument simply assumes the existence of something than which a greater

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[25] "[N]on enim inconveniens est quolibet dato vel in re vel in intellectu aliquid maius cogitari posse, nisi ei qui concedit esse aliquid quo maius cogitari non possit in rerum natura." Ibid.

[26] "Sed tamen ex hoc non sequitur quod aliquis non possit negare vel cogitare, Deum non esse; potest enim cogitare nihil huiusmodi esse quo maius cogitari non possit; et ideo ratio sua procedit ex hac suppositione, quod supponatur aliquid esse quo maius cogitari non potest." I *Sent.*, D. 3, q. 1, a. 2.

cannot be thought and can only proceed on that assumption. Saint Thomas makes this claim because Saint Anselm assumes that his definition of God is not self-contradictory. As we saw before, we can only claim to know that a definition is not self-contradictory, if we know that the thing defined exists. Consequently, if Saint Anselm assumes the compatibility of the parts of his definition of God, he implicitly assumes that God exists at the very beginning of his argument.

Saint Thomas has found two crucial errors in Saint Anselm's argument. First, it falsely assumes that the proposed definition self-evidently belongs to God. In fact that definition is self-evident neither to all nor to the wise. Second, it assumes that the proposed definition is internally coherent. This amounts to using the existence of God as a hidden premiss in the argument for God's existence. Therefore, the argument of Saint Anselm both makes a false assumption and begs the question.

Conclusion

It is now clear why Saint Thomas rejects the argument of the *Proslogion*. That argument really concludes that the existence of God is self-evident, and Saint Thomas, following Aristotle's doctrine on the nature of the human intellect, knows that this conclusion must be false. When he examines the argument itself, he finds two errors in it. It assumes that the definition offered by Saint Anselm is both truly attributed to God and internally coherent. Neither assumption is warranted. Does this mean that Saint Thomas entirely rejects the argument of Saint Anselm's *Proslogion*?

When we examine each of Saint Thomas' encounters with that argument, it becomes clear that he does not wish to reject it entirely. In each place, he takes pains to point out not only what is wrong with the argument, but what is right with it. He argues that it has a place in theology, not as a proof for the wayfarer of the existence of God, but as a way for us to

see how the blessed in heaven know His existence. They see God's essence, and for them the proposition "God exists" is self-evident. Thus, Saint Anselm's error provides an opportunity for Saint Thomas to find the truth.

Quodlibeta

THE WONDROUS LEARNING OF BLESSED THOMAS

Fr. Thomas McGovern, S.J.

We are come together here at the holy sacrifice of the Mass this afternoon to commemorate the death of this school's patron. The death of so great, so holy a man, who served the Church of Christ in so signal a fashion is indeed an occasion not only to commemorate, but even more to celebrate. For it marks the occasion of the saint's hearing from the lips of Him whom he had so loved and served: "Well done, thou good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of the Lord." "The Lord has loved him and adorned him, and laid on him a stole of glory." (Alleluia, Mass: *In medio*)

According to the second nocturne of the old office of Saint Thomas, he did indeed die on the seventh of March, in 1274. Pope Gregory X had sent him as theologian to the Council of Lyons. But the Council had to face and solve its problems without him, at least without his actual physical presence. En route, his final illness laid hold of him, and he died among the Cistercian monks in their monastery at Fossa Nova.

It is symbolic of the indefatigable industry that characterized his entire life that, ill though he was, he spent his last days at work—on the Canticle of Canticles. These final labors are indicative still more of the depth of the love of God which moved him, even then in those days of failing energies, to

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Rev. Thomas A. McGovern, S.J. was a member of the faculty of Thomas Aquinas College from 1972 until his death in 1985. He preached this sermon on the 7th of March (year unknown) at the yearly mass on campus commemorating the death of Saint Thomas, the patron of the College. (The sermon was untitled; the title is my own.—ED.)