

Reply to Gerard Loughlin

Brian Davies OP

I am grateful to Dr Gerard Loughlin for his comments on my paper '*Quod Vere Sit Deus: Why Anselm Thought that God Truly Exists*'.¹ Here are the main points I would wish to make in response to what he has written.

1. Dr Loughlin (in his fifth paragraph) states that, in terms of my exposition, Anselm holds that 'being in reality is greater than being in the mind only'. As I pointed out, however, '*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*' can be rendered: 'And for sure that than which a greater cannot be thought cannot be solely in the intellect. For if it is solely in the intellect it can be thought that there is in reality something which is greater'. We are not obliged to translate Anselm as holding that existence *in re* is a great-making property or perfection.

2. Dr Loughlin (paragraphs nine to eleven) insists that we make sense of Anselm's notion of God existing *in intellectu* by saying that God exists in the mind figuratively, that we may take 'existing in the mind' as a figure of speech. Why? Dr Loughlin's argument seems to be: Because thoughts are not 'things' which exist. But what is a 'thing'? 'Thing' is not a term which introduces a subject capable of being individuated. It is a word which we use to signify the possibility of making assertions about genuine logical subjects. On this understanding, however, Anselm's thought of God *is* a thing. It is a logical subject with respect to which we can predicate at first-level (as Frege would have put it). The same is true of Gaunilo's thought of God and of the Fool's thought of God. And this, I take it, is what Anselm means by saying that God exists *in intellectu*. His question, then, is whether we should say that there is something greater than anyone's thought of God. Since his answer is affirmative, he concludes that it cannot be that 'God exists' is true just because someone has the thought of God. In other words, the argument is: (a) God exists in the sense that someone (the Fool, at least, but also Gaunilo and Anselm) conceives the thought of something than which nothing greater can be conceived; (b) It cannot be true of something than which nothing greater can be conceived that all that can truly be said of it is that it exists as thought about, for we can think of something greater than this; (c) God is something greater than which nothing greater can be conceived; (d) It cannot be true of God that all that can truly be said of

him is that he exists as thought about.

3. Dr. Loughlin renders my exposition of Anselm as ascribing to him the view that ‘no-thing can be that than which no greater can be thought’ (paragraph fourteen). I can make no logical sense of Dr Loughlin’s separation of ‘no’ and ‘thing’, and of his emphasizing ‘thing’. Here I would repeat my above comments on the word ‘thing’. Anselm would say that it is, in fact, false that nothing can be that than which no greater can be thought. He would say that God actually is that than which nothing greater can be thought. And I would agree with him. Something is such that it is that than which nothing greater can be thought. We call it God.

4. Dr Loughlin’s main objection to what I wrote is that ‘While one can think of “that than which nothing greater can be thought”, that than which greater can be thought cannot be thought, God cannot be thought, God cannot be in any mind’. Why not? Dr Loughlin’s argument seems to be that to say that something is that than which nothing greater can be thought is not to say anything positive about it. The expression ‘that than which nothing greater can be thought’ is ‘not a description but a purely formal notion’. But seems to me of little force against what I take to be Anselm’s argument. There is no reason to suppose that he thought of himself as describing God in saying that God is that than which nothing greater can be thought. But he obviously thought, and was right to think, that ‘God is that than which nothing greater can be thought’ is true, and that this truth has implications. For him, it implies, for example: (i) God cannot be something existing only in the mind; (ii) God cannot be such that he might not exist; and (iii) God cannot be confined in a time or a place. If it does imply all this, then, of course, the Fool is wrong. Dr Loughlin might say that (i)-(iii) tell us nothing about God. Yet, even if they do not predicate positive properties of God, they are true, they are true propositions. And that is all Anselm’s argument requires. (One may, in any case, doubt whether they fail to predicate positive properties of God. (i) can be re-written ‘God is ubiquitous’. (ii) can be re-written ‘God is eternal and self-existent’. (iii) can be re-written ‘God is eternal and ubiquitous’.)

5. Towards the end of his article Dr Loughlin tells us that believers take ‘God’s reality’ to be ‘more real than the reality of the world, ultimately the only real reality’. This strikes me as confused. Does it mean that God exists more, or more intensively, than the world? If so, Dr Loughlin appears to be construing ‘—exist(s)’ as first-level predicable signifying an activity, and, so I have argued elsewhere, we have strong reasons for not doing that.² Perhaps it means that there is no world but there is a God. Yet that, of course, is false. There is a world, and God created it. If Dr Loughlin only means that God is radically different from creatures, then why not simply say so and, as, for example, Aquinas does, spell out some of the differences?

6. Also towards the end of his article Dr Loughlin explains that we

cannot have thoughts about God. We can only think about the word 'God'. This also strikes me as confused. If God exists and we make true statements concerning him, we are thinking of him, not of a word. We are thinking of him when we say, for example, that God created the heavens and the earth. A word did not create the heavens and the earth. God did. And to say so is to say something about him.

In short, I do not feel that Dr Loughlin has effectively undermined either me or Anselm. Our knot, as Dr Loughlin calls it, may be less than firm, but I do not see that his tugging at it has done much to unravel it.

- 1 Dr Loughlin's article, 'Thinking of that than which nothing greater can be thought', appeared in *New Blackfriars* in September 1991. My article appeared in *New Blackfriars* in May 1991.
- 2 See my 'Does God Create Existence?', *International Philosophical Quarterly* (June 1990).

January the First

Rachel Blake

Belief, I thought,
the train sliding, the sun orangng
over lean meadows with ragged horses,
is leaflike, dropping
in oddly, there is no feel of
a light pile accumulating

The vibrant rails
may have started it, the cleared day —
a swerve solidier than crystal moved
into the fields
elongating them beyond the known
melding what's seen in its wayward quiver