

*Journal of the History of Philosophy* 61 (2023): 373-396.

## **Anselm and the Problem of Ostending God**

Chad Engelland

Abstract: Kripke raises the question concerning how the reference to God might be fixed, and Augustine makes it the leading question of the *Confessions*: How can I call upon God and not someone else instead? In this paper, I argue that this question is the central concern of Anselm's *Proslogion*, which explicitly adopts the dialogical form of Augustine's *Confessions*. Anselm does not define God but instead fixes the reference to God through an ostension or indexical description. The same linguistic formulation, "God is that than which nothing greater can be thought," has three functions: as an ostension, it points out God as that being and not another; as a criterion for selection, it ostensibly picks out a referent that exists rather than not; finally, as a rule for analysis, it provides a principle to clarify the necessary properties of the God that has been so ostended.

Keywords: Reference, ostensive definition, theism, atheism, Anselm, Augustine, Kripke

"Aiming a finger is certainly not the wall.  
Instead, through aiming a finger a sign is  
given by means of which the wall may be  
seen."

—Augustine (*Teacher*, 3.6.)

On a walk in the woods, Jill spots a falcon high up in the tree. She knows Jack has never seen a falcon before; nudging him, she might say, "Look up toward the top of the pine tree. Do you see it? That's a falcon." In this way, Jill does not define 'falcon' for Jack. Instead, she points out a present sample and thereby affords Jack the occasion to register for himself just what a falcon is. And he will not be successful if he thinks of the falcon as something high up in a pine tree, for when it flies away or alights on an oak, it is still the falcon that it was. One gets what a falcon is by understanding its detachability from the context in which it was pointed out. This manner of sharing signification with another by making something conspicuous for understanding, an understanding that transcends the accidentals of the situation, is called *ostension*.

Anselm gives himself the task of pointing God out, but he has to cope with the obvious challenge that God is not a perceptual object and so cannot be pointed out perceptually. Indeed, at the start of the *Proslogion*, Anselm discusses the radical absence of God, who is believed to be everywhere but is perceived to be nowhere. Though absent, he is very much desired, hence the question: How can such a God be sought? Anselm asks, “*Who will lead me into it, so that I can see you in it? And by what signs am I to seek you? Under what aspect?*” (1, 98/97, added emphasis).<sup>1</sup> He gives the answer in the second chapter. The sign or aspect for seeking Anselm’s divine interlocutor is the characteristic formula: God is *that than which nothing greater can be thought*. This formula does not define or describe its referent; it does not tell us *what* it is. Rather, the formula shows *where* to look for the referent in the context of our thoughts, namely by thinking the thought that exceeds them; it then equips us to sort our present thoughts and thereby settle the question whether the ostended referent is fantastical or factual.<sup>2</sup> According to Anselm, thinking of God as real is the only thought that truly fulfills the ostension, that follows its directive for searching. Addressing God but letting the reader eavesdrop on the address, Anselm makes the identification of his addressee and his ostension plain: “And this is you, O Lord our God” (3, 103/101).<sup>3</sup>

That Anselm’s argument in *Proslogion* is not an ontological one is a position that has attracted recent support from such eminent interpreters as G. E. M. Anscombe, Brian Davies,

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<sup>1</sup> References to the *Proslogion* will first list the pagination of Schmitt’s *S. Anselmi Cantuariensis archiepiscopi opera omnia*, vol. 1, followed by that of the English translation by Thomas Williams in *Monologion and Proslogion*.

<sup>2</sup> Definition communicates an understanding of what something is. Description provides an account of what something looks like, of its identifying features. Ostension provides clues for finding the sample of a thing, leaving it up to the interlocutor to determine what something is and what it looks like, based on past conversation or fresh inquiry.

<sup>3</sup> Note that while ‘this’ may function as an anaphoric rather than a demonstrative pronoun, what it would then refer to would be the ostensive formula. Anselm lets the reader know that his addressee, God, is pointed out by the ostension.

Jean-Luc Marion, Sandra Visser, and Thomas Williams.<sup>4</sup> On this interpretation, Anselm does not say we can know God's essence, and he does not treat existence as a perfection of that essence. For these interpreters, Anselm does still offer an argument; he does move from thought to existence. But because Anselm was elliptical in the all-important *Proslogion* 2, exactly how this move takes place is a bit obscure. Perhaps it is an implied modal argument that the idea of God entails perfections such as necessity and omnipresence that require his existence.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps it is a transcendental argument dealing with the condition for the possibility of the finite mind's transcending itself to a reality so great it cannot be comprehended by that mind.<sup>6</sup> Peter King rightly describes the argument as an intentional rather than ontological argument, but he does not recognize the type of intention at work and hence misses the argument's force.<sup>7</sup>

Several commentators recognize that Anselm's nonontological argument is a semantic one. Gyula Klima recognizes the force of the reference-fixing but distinguishes between *parasitic* uses of a word, in which one accepts the reference established by another while denying that person's description of it, and *constitutive* uses of a word, in which one accepts the same reference and description for oneself. In this way, the atheist, Klima thinks, can parasitically refer to the theist's God while denying that the theist's description latches on to anything that exists.<sup>8</sup> However, Klima misses the specific character of the way that Anselm fixes the reference to God: it is not by describing him, but instead by pointing him out. And that, as we will see, eliminates the weakness that Klima identifies within the argument. Wolfgang Gombocz notes that the power of the proof comes from Anselm's logical-semantic analysis; he shows how

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<sup>4</sup> Anscombe, "Russell or Anselm?" and "Why Anselm's Proof in the *Proslogion* Is Not an Ontological Argument"; Davies, "Anselm and the Ontological Argument"; Marion, "Is the Ontological Argument Ontological?"; Visser and Williams, *Anselm*, 84.

<sup>5</sup> See Visser and Williams, *Anselm*, 91–92.

<sup>6</sup> Marion, "Is the Ontological Argument Ontological?," 212.

<sup>7</sup> King, "Anselm's Intentional Argument."

<sup>8</sup> Klima, "Saint Anselm's Proof."

the semantic structure of the *Proslogion* mirrors that of *De Grammatico* and the Lambeth fragments in distinguishing something like intension and extension.<sup>9</sup> While he mentions the role of ostension in *De Grammatico*, he does not apply it to the *Proslogion*; hence the precise use that Anselm makes of his semantic resources remains obscure. As Ian Logan puts it, Anselm argues that “the possession of the concept (*rem esse in intellectu*) in this instance at least is dependent on the act of judgement concerning the existence of its referent (*intelligere rem esse*).”<sup>10</sup> Why would Anselm insist that the existence of its referent is the condition for the possibility of having the right concept? This turns out to be the necessary but heretofore unanswered question for the semantic reading of Anselm’s *Proslogion*.

In this paper, I make the case that Anselm’s nonontological argument is a very specific kind of intentional argument that fixes the reference to God through a linguistic ostension. Anselm provides the occasion and the means for his interlocutor to identify God: God is *that* than which nothing greater can be thought. As with any ostension, the interlocutor can prematurely rest content with the linguistic pointer and merely have it in mind, or the interlocutor can press forward to discern the target of the pointing.<sup>11</sup> The only way to make the identification and thus fulfill the force of the ostension is to look and see what shows up there where the interlocutor is invited to look.<sup>12</sup> Yet Anselm’s ostension takes the negative moment intrinsic to every ostension, namely that it only directs but does not inform, and intensifies it: God is not the

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<sup>9</sup> Gombocz, “Anselm über Sinn und Bedeutung.”

<sup>10</sup> Logan, *Reading Anselm’s Proslogion*, 94.

<sup>11</sup> At the very start of *De Doctrina Christiana*, Augustine observes that when pointing something out it is not enough to notice the gesture; one must follow it to discern its target: when you point out the moon, the fool stares at your hand.

<sup>12</sup> In keeping with the Augustinian character of the *Proslogion* as well as the evocative language of the scriptures, Anselm’s strategy is to induce the turn inward and to adopt a widened experiential register able to make sense of the new fields of exploration thereby opened: “‘Enter into the chamber’ (Matthew 6:6) of your mind, shut out everything but God and whatever helps you to seek him, and seek him ‘behind closed doors’ (Matthew 6:6)” (*Proslogion* 1, 97/97).

greatest thing thinkable; he is that than which *nothing greater* can be thought.<sup>13</sup> This is a challenge, a provocation, to turn upward and search for the heights. There is no description or implicit definition concerning what is to be found there.

### 1. Ostension and the Form of the *Confessions*

Augustine makes the problem of referring to God—the very God that is his interlocutor—the central philosophical question of the *Confessions*. In the opening paragraph, he points out that “an ignorant person might call upon someone else instead of the right one” (1.1.1). Accordingly, in the second paragraph, he asks, “How shall I call upon my God, my God and Lord?” (1.2.2). This, in turn, relates intimately to two other questions, which he formulates in the following two paragraphs, one concerning *where* God is and another concerning *what* God is, observing that God is “deeply hidden yet most intimately present” (1.4.4). The question of rightly referring to God is bound up with his inconspicuous mode of presence. Augustine answers the question of addressing God by identifying God as the creator, the continual source of being of the soul: “Accordingly, my God, I would have no being, I would not have any existence, unless you were in me” (1.2.2). That is, as the source of being, God is intimately present to his creatures. In fact, as every reader of the *Confessions* knows, Augustine finds the creator to be more inward than his inmost part and higher than his highest part (3.6.11).

Augustine works out his account of ostending God against the backdrop of a general account of learning one’s mother tongue via ostension.<sup>14</sup> Infants cease to be infants by eavesdropping on the conversation of caregivers and by paying attention to how referents show

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<sup>13</sup> On this negativity—although he does not properly characterize it in terms of ostension—see Fulmer, “Anselm and the Apophatic.”

<sup>14</sup> For an explication and defense of Augustine’s account of first-word learning, see Chad Engelland, *Ostension: Word Learning and the Embodied Mind* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2014), 85-105.

up thanks to acts of ostension: “My grasp made use of memory: when people named something and when, following the sound, they moved their body towards something, I would see and retain the fact that that thing received from them this sound which they pronounced when they intended to point it out [*ostendere*]” (1.8.13, translation modified). A purposive act of ostension can be understood because any purposive bodily movement, whether enacted with a communicative intention or not, betrays our affective engagement with things; the contagion of bodily affectivity spreads through animate movement: “Moreover, their intention was disclosed from the movement of their body, as it were, the natural words of all peoples, occurring in the face and the inclination of the eyes and the movements of other parts of the body, and by the tone of voice which indicates whether the mind’s affections are to seek and possess or to reject and avoid” (1.8.13). Augustine does not make explicit his strategy for ostending God, which is unfortunate, because obvious difficulties arise. He might be able to learn the word ‘milk’ by paying attention to caregivers as they go about the world, but he cannot learn the meaning of the word ‘God’ in the same way. Nor can one point to God with one’s finger as one might point to a wall.

Indeed, Augustine is aware of the difficulties regarding the ostension of God. In response to the question of Psalm 4, “Who will show us good?” he writes, “If only they could see the eternal to be inward! I had tasted this, but was enraged that I was unable to show [*ostendere*] it to them, even if they were to bring their heart to me, though their eyes are turned away from you towards external things, and if they were to say ‘Who will show us good?’” (9.4.10). This inability to ostend God is a cause of great concern. In order to cope with it, Augustine thrice sketches an upward movement through the soul to that which is above it.<sup>15</sup> In this context, he

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<sup>15</sup> These three are the Neoplatonic solitary ascent of *Confessions* 7, the Christian ascent with Monica of book 9, and the ascent through creation and the soul on behalf of all his readers in book 10.

approaches Anselm's linguistic formula by mentioning a consideration that led him to the conclusion that God is incorruptible: "Nor could there have been or be any soul capable of conceiving that which is better than you, who are the supreme and highest good" (7.4.6). This echoes a thought he had expressed at greater length in the earlier *On Christian Teaching*: "Those who strive to behold the nature of God through their intellect place him above all visible and corporeal beings, indeed above all intelligible and spiritual beings, and above all beings that are subject to change. But they all vigorously contend for the excellence of God; it is impossible to find anyone who believes that God is a thing than which there exists something better" (1, p. 11).<sup>16</sup> But Augustine does not make this consideration into a linguistic ostension of God. Instead, he invites his readers to shift from eavesdroppers on his conversation with God to interlocutors with God by means of looking above themselves to find God as the truth and the source of being.

Anselm says that although Augustine is unnamed in the *Monologion*, it was inspired by and coheres with his thought (*Monologion* prologue 8/3).<sup>17</sup> In that text, Anselm addresses an agnostic, someone who either has not heard of God and the things of God or does not believe what he has heard. Rather than dialogue with the agnostic, Anselm sets the agnostic free to dialogue with himself, having reason as his guide, and provides a pattern of reasoning that the agnostic might follow in order to cease to be an agnostic (1, 13–15/10). That pattern involves,

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<sup>16</sup> This text may have drawn from Seneca and Cicero, both of whom are possible sources for Anselm's formula. See Logan, *Reading Anselm's Proslogion*, 92–93.

<sup>17</sup> References to the *Monologion* will first list the pagination of Schmitt's *S. Anselmi Cantuariensis archiepiscopi opera omnia*, vol. 1, followed by that of the English translation by Thomas Williams in *Monologion and Proslogion*. Southern details the many stylistic and conceptual influences of Augustine on Anselm (*Saint Anselm*, 71–87). Yet he says that while the *Monologion* follows Augustine, and in particular, his *De Trinitate*, the *Proslogion* has Anselm strike out on his own (*Saint Anselm*, 127). The *Proslogion* shifts from Augustine's *De Trinitate* to his *Confessions* and *De Doctrina Christiana*. In truth, Anselm goes beyond Augustine with his signature ostensive formula, but even this formula draws its power from Augustine's own thoughts about reference. Nonetheless, Southern's caution on a different question of influence is worth noting: "Anselm could have found all this in Augustine. To say that he did find it in Augustine is of course to go beyond the evidence, for Anselm (who alone could know) never wrote a history of his mind" (*Saint Anselm*, 79). What we do know is that Anselm counted Augustine as his principal precursor and spent years studying his writings between 1063 and 1070 before writing either the *Monologion* or the *Proslogion*.

among other things, considerations that aim to prove that God is the highest good and the cause of existence. In the prologue to the *Proslogion*, Anselm tells us that he ardently sought to condense the pattern of reasoning developed in the *Monologion* and, having first despaired of doing so, at last arrived at an insight of how this might be done. He tells us that he wrote the *Proslogion* “in the role” (*sub persona*) of a believer seeking to contemplate and understand; by implication, the reader is in the position of eavesdropper on the linguistic performance.<sup>18</sup> The *Monologion* is a soliloquy, but the *Proslogion* is “an address, *alloquium*” (*Proslogion* prologue, 94/94), and the entire *Proslogion* unfolds with God as his interlocutor: “Come now, *O Lord my God*” (1, 98/97).

Anselm had already written powerful prayers addressed to God, but the *Proslogion* is not a devotional work. Rather, like the *Confessions*, it deploys the rare and provocative dialogical form in order to pursue the problem of reference more pointedly.<sup>19</sup> The reader naturally wonders, “Who are you talking to, Anselm?” And he responds by making the addressee of speech explicit: “I am talking to *that* being there—can’t you understand which one?” He makes the fixing of the addressee the central question of the treatise: “Teach my heart where and how to seek you, where and how to find you” (1, 98/97). On the one hand, this shift in strategy, situating itself as it does within faith, seems to be a retreat from the strategy of the *Monologion* that opens itself to those

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<sup>18</sup> On the difference between Anselm and the literary figure presented in the *Proslogion*, see McMahon, *Understanding the Medieval Meditative Ascent*, 159–61.

<sup>19</sup> Augustine tells us in the *Retractions* that the books of the *Confessions* “lift up the understanding and affection of men to Him [*in eum excitant humanum intellectum et affectum*]” (2.32). An older contemporary of Anselm, John of Fécamp, also adopted the form but for a purely devotional or affective purpose. See Ward, “Introduction,” 47–50. Prior to writing both the *Monologion* and the *Proslogion*, Anselm similarly adopted the form for a devotional purpose, namely “to arouse” (*ad excitandam*) the mind of the reader to affective engagement with God or study of self (3.3). The title of the *Proslogion*’s first chapter connects the treatise to this tradition: “A rousing [*Excitatio*] of the mind to the contemplation of God” (97/97). The *Proslogion* appears to be without precedent for adopting the *confessio* form in order to pursue with Augustine the problem of referring to God, who is one’s interlocutor in prayer and the source of one’s being. The *Proslogion* has the same form as Anselm’s *Prayers* and the same content as the *Monologion*: like the *Confessions*, it arouses the affects in order to lift up the *understanding* of the reader to God.



without faith in a gesture perhaps not of dialogue but at least of encounter; on the other hand, this shift in strategy makes explicit what is at stake in the discussion: the very God that theists address in their lives of prayer. *That* God is the one whose existence is denied by atheists.

Anselm, working within the form of the *Confessions*, converts Augustine's *description* of what people do who successfully refer to God into a *linguistic prescription* of what someone must do in order to refer successfully to God. In this way, he arrives at a novel solution to Augustine's vexing problem concerning the right strategy for pointing out God to others. Now what the prescription must do is to provide a criterion to distinguish two possibilities, namely whether God is something real or something imaginary.

## 2. Ostension and Reference

In Lambeth MS. 59, Anselm distinguishes four ways in which the word 'something' (*aliquid*) may be said (336–37). In the first place, something may be said of that which has a name, is understood, and exists. He gives the example of a stone or a tree. In the second place, something may be said of that which has a name, is understood, and yet does not exist. He gives the example of "chimera," which is understood to be an animal but is nonetheless fictional. In the third place, something may be said of that which has a name but is not understood and does not exist in any way; unlike the fictional object, this sort of thing "is without being at all [*est absque omni essentia*]" (336). He has in mind here negations, which signify the removal of something but do not posit something in their own right. He gives the examples of in-justice, no-thing, and not-man. In the fourth place, something may be said of that which does not have a name, is not understood, and does not exist. He gives the example of calling not-being something, as when we say the sun's not-being-risen is the cause of its not-being-day. There is a cause and an effect but

no name, no understanding, and no existence. Anselm concludes that although we speak of “something” in four modes, the only one that is proper is the one in which we have a name, an understanding, and an existent. The others are “as-if” (*quasi*) something.

Anselm clearly distinguishes, then, between the nonimaginative existence of a thing, both named and understood, and the imaginative existence of a thing, named and understood. That the imaginative existence is not nothing comes in the contrast between the second and third (and fourth) cases. The third is “without being at all” with no appropriate understanding and the fourth does not even signify. Hence, Anselm recognizes that fictional objects are named and understood but, unlike real objects, are not understood to be.

Anselm needs to come up with a way to distinguish (1) God as something that is not only named and understood but also exists from (2) God as a supposed something named and understood but not truly existing.<sup>20</sup> A definition or description will not settle this. That a chimera is an animal with a lion’s head, a goat’s body, and a serpent’s tail or that an Okapi is half zebra and half giraffe tells us nothing concerning their existence. ‘God’ could name either something real or something imaginary. Which is it? Anselm’s answer, we will see, is to fix the reference to *that* thing via an act of ostension; only one of the possibilities satisfies the condition set by the linguistic pointer.

In the dialogue *De Grammatico*, Anselm notes that logicians tend to write things as logicians that they would be ashamed to hold in everyday conversation (11, 156/137; 18, 164/146).<sup>21</sup> He thereby alerts us to the possibility of a flexibility in conversational reference fixing that defies tidy logical schematization. In particular, he reveals a keen awareness of the

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<sup>20</sup> See Logan, *Reading Anselm’s Proslogion*, 92.

<sup>21</sup> References to *De Grammatico* will first list the pagination of Schmitt’s *S. Anselmi Cantuariensis archiepiscopi opera omnia*, vol. 1, followed by that of the English translation by D. P. Henry in *Major Works*.

difference between naming via definition or fixed description and naming via ostension and an accidental quality. The definition directly locates the term, for “the being [*esse*] of each and every thing is circumscribed [*consistat*] by its definition” (8, 152/133). However, an ostension must be completed by an act of understanding. Anselm’s thesis in the dialogue is that a quality does not logically name a thing, although in a conversational setting a quality can be used to fix a reference to something present. That is, a quality will not be sufficient if the thing referred to is not present. To make this point plain, he contrasts a situation defined by absence with one defined by presence. In the case of something absent, no reference can be established via a quality: “Suppose that, unknown to you, a *white* horse were to be enclosed within some dwelling or other, and someone told you, ‘There’s a *white* in this building’; would that inform you that the horse is inside?” (14, 160/141). You would naturally wonder, a white *what*? There could be a lamb, a dog, a mouse, or something else. Anselm comments that in this situation, the reference remains unfixed: “And now I am waiting for you to show me what it does in fact signify [*ut ostendas quia significat*]” (14, 160/142). In the case of something present, however, a reference can be established via a quality:

TEACHER: Suppose you were confronted with a *white* horse and a black bull standing together, and someone issued the order, “Give it a thwack!” thereby meaning the horse, but without giving any indication [*non monstrans aliquo signo*] as to which he intended; would you then know that he was referring to the horse?

STUDENT: No.

TEACHER: But suppose, while still in ignorance, you were to ask “Which?,” and they were to reply, “The *white*!” would you then gather his reference?

STUDENT: I would gather from the name *white* that he meant the horse.  
(14, 160/141).

Because the item is present, the interlocutor can look and see what sort of thing is being referred to. The speaker provides a directive that occasions, but does not embody, the understanding. For

the understanding to occur, the interlocutor must turn and make the discovery independently:  
 “Oh, yes, the white *horse*.”

Anselm contrasts two ways of appellation or fixing the reference to something: *per se* and *per aliud*.<sup>22</sup> Ostension via a quality, as in the above example of *the white one*, counts as *per aliud* or accidental signification. The interlocutor can see that the quality, white, is the quality of the present horse, and this is possible due to the presence of the referent: “However, because I know, otherwise than by means of the name *white*—by sight, for example—that the whiteness is in the horse, then when whiteness has been thus conveyed by means of that name, I also gather the reference to the horse, because I know that the whiteness is in the horse. Nevertheless, this is otherwise than by means of the name *white*, even though that word is an appellative of the horse” (14, 160–61/142). Ostension via an essence, as in the example *horse*, would be a *per se* or *substantialis* appellation. Once one knows what a horse is, one can refer to it in its absence. While it is impossible to fix a reference to something absent via a quality, it is possible to fix a reference to something present via a quality, thanks to a concomitant act of showing. In this way, the linguistic formulation, *the white*, specifies which one *if* the horse is present in its unique whiteness. Anselm adds, incidentally, that the presence of a characteristic implies the presence of a substance (12, 156/138).

Anselm’s problem of ostending God is akin to but distinct from the above situations of presence and absence. In the *Monologion*, he tells us that all speaking and showing of God must happen *per aliud* (65, 76/79). Our terms and showings are appropriate to creatures and are therefore only indirectly appropriate to the creator. Like the situation of the *white* horse in the

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<sup>22</sup> Gombocz, mentioning *ostendere*, sees *per aliud* signification as a means of fixing a reference. “Anselm über Sinn und Bedeutung,” 135, 137. King sounds a note of caution; see “Anselm’s Philosophy of Language,” 92–94. For a reading of the whole, see McCord Adams, “Re-reading *De grammatico*” and Sweeney, *Anselm of Canterbury and the Desire for the Word*, 74–109.

barn, God is not directly exhibited. Unlike the situation of the white horse in the barn, Anselm wants to give enough information for his interlocutor to match his reference. In that respect, he must find something similar to the white horse and the black bull set before the interlocutor's very eyes: it is the white one—that is, of course, the horse—that I am referring to. The greatest anticipation of this comes again in the *Monologion*.

For all the words that seem applicable to that nature do not show [*ostendunt*] him to me through his distinctive character so much as they hint at him through some likeness [*per aliquam innuunt similitudinem*]. For when I think of the meanings of these words I more readily conceive in my mind (1) what I observe in created things than (2) *that* [*id*] which I understand to transcend all human understanding. For by their meaning they produce (1) *something* in my mind that is much *less than*—that is in fact vastly different from—(2) *that which my mind is trying to come to understand* through their tenuous signification. (65, 76/79, emphasis added).<sup>23</sup>

Anselm has yet to discover the way to answer the question, “Which one?” when it comes to discriminating (1) the lesser something in the understanding from (2) the greater something we are striving to reach. For that, he must happen upon the right formulation, the right way of ostending God, which comes from converting the very frame of the problem into the ostension: God is not had through this thought about some lesser thing but instead through this thought about something greater than can be thought. He is not the black bull but the white (horse). The account of *per aliud* reference fixing from the *De Grammatico* thus provides the means to sort the two possibilities offered by the Lambeth fragments and the *Monologion*: God is not an imaginary, creaturely being, but a real being that exceeds our understanding.

### 3. The Ostension

For Kripke, reference is fixed by a historical-causal chain originating in an action of ostension or a reference-fixing description. “When the name is ‘passed from link to link,’ the

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<sup>23</sup> Translation modified to render *id* as ‘that’ rather than ‘what.’

receiver of the name must, I think, intend when he learns it to use it with the same reference as the man from whom he heard it.”<sup>24</sup> For example, when one says, “Narwhal,” one intends to use it to name the same creature meant when it was first dubbed the “sea-unicorn” by English explorer Martin Frobisher in 1577 or that was fixed by someone else in direct contact with the creature. Putnam calls a reference-fixing description “indexical” and thereby connects ostension by an initial description to ostension by pointing.<sup>25</sup> Kripke and Putnam highlight two features of their accounts. First, the ostension or initial, indexical description is not synonymous with the named thing; it only fixes the reference without needing to preserve the “conceptual content.”<sup>26</sup> It does not matter, then, that it turns out that the Narwhal does not really have a horn at all but instead an elongated tooth; it is still the same referent. Second, the initial, indexical description can often be substituted with an ostensive act: “Usually a baptizer is acquainted in some sense with the object he names and is able to name it ostensively.”<sup>27</sup> That is, Martin Frobisher could have simply pointed to the creature to fix the reference: “*That* is a sea-unicorn.” He did not have to describe it as “one-horned.”

Might the semantic consideration outlined by Kripke and Putnam dovetail with the strategy that Anselm employs in the *Proslogion*?<sup>28</sup> When theists say “God,” they refer to *that*

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<sup>24</sup> Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, 96.

<sup>25</sup> Putnam, “Meaning, Other People, and the World,” 38.

<sup>26</sup> Putnam, “Meaning, Other People, and the World,” 38.

<sup>27</sup> Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, 96. The exception would be a case like that of Neptune in which, without being seen, it is named by its observed gravitational effects: “The planet that causes these observed effects is called *Neptune*.”

<sup>28</sup> Kripke, for his part, favors the view that the term ‘God’ is a name (“Vacuous Names and Fictional Entities,” 71n32). Tucker suggests that Kripke’s account of the fixing of reference via ostension may have been suggested to him by the Jewish medieval philosopher Judah Halevi, who apparently argues that the Sinai-event constitutes God’s self-ostension to the Jewish community; Tucker uses this connection to question the adequacy of historical transmission to guarantee the continuity of reference (“Kripke and Fixing the Reference of ‘God,’” 155–60). Anselm, one could say, formulates the argument of the *Proslogion* to cope with the problem of continuity: Anselm wants to fashion a way for each of us to baptize God as God and thereby avoid the question of the continuity of tradition. Anselm’s position similarly avoids the lack of a criterion in Kripke that Kirjavainen criticizes in “How Is God-Talk Logically Possible?,” 75–88.

*than which nothing greater can be thought*. The atheist, to be an atheist, must either deny the existence of *that being* or deny that there is a historical connection between ‘God’ and *that being*.<sup>29</sup> In his blistering reply to Gaunilo, Anselm underscores the unique character of his ostensive logic. Gaunilo had said that while someone might speak about a great island, that implies nothing concerning the existence of that island. Anselm responds by denying that the case of the island is analogous to his semantic analysis of God. Why not? On two occasions in his reply, he carefully construes Gaunilo as saying that one who has such an island “described in words” (*describitur verbis*) is then told to draw inferences about the existence of what is so described (“Reply to Gaunilo” 1 and 3, 130/129 and 133/132).<sup>30</sup> In fact, Gaunilo had used the verb *dicere* rather than *describere*. That Anselm should gloss *to say* as *to describe* in this context amounts to a helpful clarification on his part: Where Gaunilo goes wrong is in thinking that Anselm is making inferences about existence on the basis of a description.

At first Anselm introduces the ostension under the formula of ‘something’: God is “*something* than which nothing greater can be thought” (*aliquid quo maius nihil cogitari potest*), but at the very point in the argument when he wants to emphasize the reality of the ostended item, he heightens its ostensive character by shifting the formula to “*that* than which a greater cannot be thought” (*id quo maius cogitari nequit*) (*Proslogion* 2, 101/100, emphasis added). As we have seen, ‘something’ is ambiguous. The proper use relates to things that are not only understood but are understood to be; the shift to *that* alerts us that he is restricting ‘something’ to its proper use. Anselm thinks he is pointing out God as something real.

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<sup>29</sup> Regarding historical connection, Kripke gives the example of Santa Claus and doubts whether the reference to St. Nicholas has been preserved (*Naming and Necessity*, 93).

<sup>30</sup> References to the “Reply to Gaunilo” will first list the pagination of Schmitt’s *S. Anselmi Cantuariensis archiepiscopi opera omnia*, vol. 1, followed by that of the English translation by Thomas Williams in *Monologion and Proslogion*.

Pace Gaunilo but also Russell and Barnes, Anselm's formula does not function as a description, whether indefinite or definite.<sup>31</sup> Rather, the formula serves as what Kripke calls "an initial description" and Putnam "an indexical description," which fixes the reference and can be substituted with an act of pointing out.<sup>32</sup> An initial or indexical description differs from a Russellian description insofar as the former but not the latter can change while still locking onto the same referent; Robert Sokolowski appropriately calls it "a throwaway description."<sup>33</sup> Anselm, for example, can adjust the formula to say that God is *greater than* that than which nothing greater can be thought (*Proslogion* 15, 112/109). While the formulation changes, the referent remains the same. Anselm is trying to turn the attention of the atheist in the direction of the God proposed by the theist so that the atheist can see and register the referent that shows up there.

Anselm's prayer in *Proslogion* 1 provides crucial context for the proposed target of this ostensive act. Following Augustine, Anselm frames the discussion as the puzzle of how to find the hidden creator, who is unseen and yet present. "Lord, if you are not here, where shall I seek you, since you are absent? But if you are everywhere, why do I not see you, since you are present?" (1, 98/97).<sup>34</sup> To make headway on this project, he recognizes the need for a leader to specify a direction in which to seek: "Who will lead me into it, so that I can see you in it? And by what signs am I to seek you? Under what aspect? I have never seen you, O Lord my God; I do not know your face" (1, 98/ 97). Anselm cannot ostend God because God is not "there" to be ostended. God does not show up as something present about us. God the creator is not a thing

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<sup>31</sup> Barnes, *The Ontological Argument*, 2–15; Russell, "On Denoting," 491. For commentary, see Logan, *Reading Anselm's Proslogion*, 187–88.

<sup>32</sup> Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, 96; Putnam, "Meaning, Other People, and the World," 38.

<sup>33</sup> Sokolowski, "Referring," 28.

<sup>34</sup> On the importance of the opening prayer and the interplay of presence and hiddenness, see Sokolowski, *God of Faith and Reason*, 2–3.



among things. But God is also not simply absent. As the sustainer of our being, he remains rather more present to us than we are to ourselves. A later chapter puts it this way: “You are wholly present everywhere, and yet I do not see you. ‘In you I move and in you I have my being’ (Acts 17:28), and yet I cannot come into your presence. You are within me and all around me, and yet I do not perceive you” (16, 113/110). The task of ostending him, then, involves leading us beyond the normal objects of ostension to countenance the unique presence of the continual cause of being. It involves challenging and confronting the normal expectation for an object in space and time and a leading into another kind of presence, a different sort of domain: “And so he is properly said to exist in no place or time, since he is in no way contained by any other thing. And yet he can be said in his own way to exist in every place or time, since whatever else exists is sustained by his presence so that it does not fall into nothingness” (*Monologion* 22, 41/42). If the God we wish to refer to is indeed the creator, he is both absent and present; he is absent to all things, being none of them, but he is present to all things as their cause. Anselm’s ostension targets this necessarily absent God, the source of goodness for all good things, via the mediation of thought concerning grades of goodness and their terminus. The negative moment of the ostension, the “nothing greater” (*maius nihil*), tracks this retreating target. Indeed, Anselm tells us that Gaunilo butchered his linguistic ostension by rendering it statically as “that which is greater than everything else”; Anselm protests that this is not the same as the dynamic “that than which *nothing* greater *can be thought*” (“Reply to Gaunilo” 5, 134/134, emphasis added). Anselm’s ostension expresses the movement of thought necessary for keeping the ineffable God as its terminus.

#### 4. Ostension and Reality

For Kripke and Putnam, fixing the reference works independently of an adequate criterion for distinguishing and understanding the referenced item, and yet such an adequate criterion is organically connected to the fixing of the reference. Putnam says, “The chemist who knows that the atomic number of gold is 79 doesn’t have a better knowledge of the *meaning* of the word ‘gold,’ he simply knows more *about* gold.”<sup>35</sup> For example, one might point to a collection of yellow metal and say, “That is gold.” The reference sticks even if it turns out that a couple of the pieces were fool’s gold and the person fixing the reference did not know how to determine which was which. Now consider the metallurgist who has discovered and can apply the criterion for distinguishing fool’s gold from the real thing. On the basis of the expert’s insight, any language speaker can then say that some examples from the original sample were not really gold, were not really *that* kind of metal that was picked out at the naming baptism. In light of this conception of the relation of reference and knowledge, we can distinguish two moments in understanding. First, there is the fixing of the reference in terms of an indexical component: *that* sort of thing. Second, there is the deepening of the understanding of that thing that serves to show that some things that might have been originally indistinguishable from *that* sort of thing are in fact different from it. The indexical component establishes a rigid designation that admits of further understanding, an understanding that might show, after the fact, that some items heretofore indistinguishable from the original are in fact different.

Might Anselm conceive of the relation of expertise to the fixing of reference using a strategy similar to Putnam’s? After all, Anselm’s formula, “God is that than which nothing greater can be thought,” fixes the reference while allowing the development of expertise that

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<sup>35</sup> Putnam, “Meaning, Other People, and the World,” 23.

will, after the fact, discount some items from the original sample. “I was simply trying to prove something that was still in doubt, and for that it was enough for me [1] to show [*ostenderem*] that this being is understood, and exists in the understanding, *in some way or other*, since on that basis the argument would go on [2] to determine whether it exists only in the understanding, as a false thing, or also in reality, as a true thing” (“Reply to Gaunilo” 6, 136/135–36, emphasis in original).<sup>36</sup> It might appear to the inexpert (or, using Anselm’s language from the Psalms, the “fool”) that the formula “God is that than which nothing greater can be thought” picks out the sort of thing that may be only an imaginary being, like the inspiration for a painting or the description of a perfect island. But Anselm’s point is that the expert can identify the criterion that shows that the sort of thing picked out by the reference is in fact the sort of thing that must be concrete or really existent: “For the signification of this expression has such great force [*vim*] that the thing it expresses is, from the mere fact that it is understood or thought, necessarily proved both to exist in reality and to be whatever we ought to believe about the divine nature” (“Reply to Gaunilo” 10, 138–39/139). What is this mysterious *force* in question? The force is resident in the linguistic expression, and it is the force of an ostension. If you refer to *that* being (and not another) it is plain that *that* being is.

Ostension has two moments: elicitation and identification. The act of pointing elicits attention, but the act of identification involves following the elicitory movement to discern its target.

- (1) An elicitation: *something* than which nothing greater can be thought
- (2) An identification: *that* than which nothing greater can be thought

Anselm introduces the formula as a linguistic ostension or indexical description of God. It elicits the attention of the mind that receives it, but it still needs to be performed, or thought through, to

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<sup>36</sup> Correcting the translation, which had rendered *ut vera* as ‘like a real thing.’

reach its fulfillment. Anselm thinks that the fool must minimally grant an imaginary existence to God: “But when this same fool hears me say ‘something than which nothing greater can be thought,’ he surely understands what he hears; and what he understands exists in his understanding, even if he does not understand that it exists” (*Proslogion* 2, 101/99–100). He wants to lead beyond this as-if something to an actual something by introducing a relationship of fulfillment between thought and reality. To see this relation, it is crucial to understand the significance of his introduction of the painting analogy, which not only distinguishes thought and reality but also joins them: “When a painter, for example, thinks out in advance what he is going to paint, he has it in his understanding, but he does not yet understand that it exists, since he has not yet painted it. But once he has painted it, he both has it in his understanding and understands that it exists because he has now painted it” (2, 101/100). A painter has an inspiration for a painting that is only brought to completion in the production of his painting; his work, one could say, shows his thought, and his thought was for the sake of this showing. Michelangelo, for example, had the inspiration for the *Last Judgment*, but it is only in its execution on the rear wall of the Sistine Chapel that it achieves its fulfillment and is shown to be both for Michelangelo and for its viewers. There is not just a difference between thinking and being; there is, in the case of craft, an orientation toward fulfillment, toward a shared manifestation in reality. Thinking out in advance (*praecogitat*) what one is going to paint is ordered to painting *that* painting, the very one that one had thought about painting, which, when painted, can then be thought to be. Similarly, an ostension is ordered to fulfillment; the act of elicitation wants to yield to an act of identification or understanding.

Now, the act of identification or understanding is an act of cognition. A cognition, qua cognition, is not a superficial understanding of a thing; a cognition, qua cognition, is an

understanding that grasps what something is. In the *Monologion*, Anselm distinguishes between the conventional word, whether voiced or unvoiced, and the natural word, which is in the understanding. The natural word comes through either an image or an understanding of what something is. “For example, in one way I say a man when I signify him by the word ‘man,’ in another way when I think that same word silently, and in yet another way when my mind sees the man himself either through an image of a body (as when it imagines his sensible appearance) or through reason (as when it thinks his universal essence, which is rational, mortal animal)” (10, 25/23). There is thus a difference between (1) saying and thinking a conventional word and (2) fulfilling and grasping the underlying natural word that grounds it. Anselm wants his interlocutor to press through the conventional understanding to the explicit understanding of God.<sup>37</sup> To achieve the explicit understanding will be to see that God exists.

The task of *Proslogion 2* is to prod the interlocutor to think through the ostension of God and thereby convert it from a mere conventional formula to an explicated understanding. “So even the fool must admit that *something* than which nothing greater can be thought exists at least in his understanding, since he understands this when he hears it, and whatever is understood exists in the understanding. And surely *that* than which a greater cannot be thought cannot exist only in the understanding” (2, 101/100, emphases added). The crucial question, then, concerns the *something* understood and whether it is *that* thing or an *imaginary* thing, and this, as we have seen, is the question concerning the fulfillment of the ostension.

Anselm shifts from *something* to *that* in order to signal his taking the formula as an ostensive act. This involves the interlocutor’s looking or searching to see what corresponds to

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<sup>37</sup> Visser and Williams express this well: “He is not talking about someone’s understanding the verbal formula ‘that than which a greater cannot be thought’ and being able to do logical moves with it. He is talking about someone’s actually having that than which nothing greater can be thought before his mind: having a thought that does not, as it were, misfire, but is actually about that than which nothing greater can be thought” (*Anselm*, 83).

that indication. This momentum of seeking brings the interlocutor beyond a minimal thought of the thing to a greater thought of the thing. Imaginary things do not afford possibilities of great understanding. The thought of that which none can be greater would be the thought of something that offered the richest possibility of understanding. He expresses this insight as follows: “For if it exists only in the understanding, it can be thought to exist in reality as well, which is greater” (*Proslogion* 2, 101/100). There are two strange facts about this passage. First, Anselm says almost nothing about what “greater” means in this context. Second, he takes it for granted that it is obvious what he means. Hence it is incumbent on any reader to dig into Anselm’s background to see what sort of distinctions would have been so obvious to him that they would require little or no explanation and that would be consistent with what he does say. Now the main textual clue is the one clarifying example. The artist compares two thoughts, the thought of a painting not yet produced and the thought of a painting already produced. Both are thoughts, so what is the difference between them? In accord with the Lambeth fragments, one is imaginary, that is, in the mind alone, and the other is real, that is, in the mind and in reality. This much is firmly established by the plain sense of the text. The question then becomes: what makes the thought of something real greater than the thought of something imaginary? What is the difference between these two thoughts?

Anselm returns to the painting analogy at the start of the theological treatise *Cur Deus Homo* (4, 51–52/248).<sup>38</sup> He says that the unbeliever qua unbeliever regards the story of the incarnation as fiction and hence regards claims about its fittingness as so many beautiful pictures painted on clouds. However, a good painter will paint on something solid, not on a cloud. In the

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<sup>38</sup> References to the *Cur Deus Homo* will first list the pagination of Schmitt’s *S. Anselmi Cantuariensis archiepiscopi opera omnia*, vol. 2, followed by that of the English translation by Thomas Williams in *Basic Writings*.

same way, the believer must paint on wood for the unbeliever by exhibiting the true fittingness of God's incarnation. Thus, Anselm uses the same contrast between fact and fiction, here understood as the contrast between a real, solid painting and a shadowy image, in order to illuminate the contrast between a founded understanding and an unfounded one. Someone whose thoughts about God are founded is primed to think of that God as factual rather than fictive. Though we are apt to think of a painting as a work of fiction, Anselm calls attention to the fact that, unlike the mere thought of it, a painting is something real. We have, then, an echo of Anselm's strategy in the *Proslogion*. Where there is a dispute over whether some theological topic (God's existence or his incarnation) is a matter of fact or fiction, Anselm turns to the second-order question concerning the thought of that theological topic in order to establish whether, as a thought, it is factual or fictive, true or false. For if it should prove to have the force of the factual, that provides nonobvious evidence in favor of one of the two alternatives of the first-order question. If the *thought* about God is normative, God himself must be real.

The thought of something in existence is not greater because the thing it thinks about exists; it is greater because, being the thought of something real, there is much more there to be understood and investigated. The Lambeth fragments and the distinctions of *Cur Deus Homo* show that this distinction is ever present to Anselm's mind, and in his reply to Gaunilo he tells us that his ostension allows us to distinguish the thought of God as true (in both the mind and reality) from the thought of God as false (only in the mind, not in reality) ("Reply to Gaunilo" 6, 136/ 136). True or real things have thick identities that afford in-depth exploration; false or imaginary things do not (see figure 1).

Figure 1. Analogies of Greater and Lesser in Anselm

	<i>Lambeth fragments</i> <sup>39</sup>	<i>Cur Deus Homo</i> <sup>40</sup>	<i>Monologion</i> <sup>41</sup>	<i>Proslogion 2</i>	<i>Reply to Gaunilo</i>
Greater	Something named, understood, and in reality	Something painted on a sturdy surface, an actual fact ( <i>rem gestam</i> )	That which I understand to transcend ( <i>transcendere</i> ) all human understanding	The <i>thought</i> of something not-only-in-thought-but-also-in-reality	A <i>true</i> thing, which is both in the mind and in reality
Lesser	Something named, understood, but not in reality	Something painted on a cloud, a fiction ( <i>figmentum</i> )	What I understand in created things	The <i>thought</i> of something only-in-thought-and-not-in-reality	A <i>false</i> thing, which is in the mind alone

What kind of understanding can we have of a unicorn? Not much beyond its being understood to be a one-horned horse that makes various mythological appearances. But consider the kind of understanding we can have of the narwhal, which can be the object of a lifetime's pursuit of understanding: The narwhal or *monodon monoceros* is a whale whose males have a single horn that is in fact one of two teeth that grows up to 8.8 feet. Experts have figured out what they eat in the summer (mainly cod and halibut), their migratory behavior, their underwater click sounds, the males' aggressive tusk use (as indicated by scars on other males), and the biochemistry of their metabolic functioning. There is simply *more* to understand when it comes to understanding something that is real rather than fictive.

It is important to underscore that this "more" is not quantitative but qualitative; real beings, unlike imaginary ones, have a host of *normative* properties. Truth, as Anselm writes several years later, is the mind's perception of normativity, namely of something's signifying

<sup>39</sup> Anselm, "Anselmian Miscellany in Lambeth MS. 59," 336–37.

<sup>40</sup> *Cur Deus Homo* 1.4, 51–52/248.

<sup>41</sup> *Monologion* 65, 74–75/64.



“what it ought to” (*quod debet*), which he calls “rectitude” (*rectitudo*) (*On Truth* 2, 178/120, and 11, 191/135).<sup>42</sup> Anselm speaks about the oughtness inscribed into the nature of real things, even giving the example of the nature of the iron nails that pierced the natural body of the crucified one: in virtue of their nature, they *ought* to have pierced the flesh when pounded in, and in virtue of his nature, the flesh *ought* to have been pierced and he consequently *ought* to have suffered, even though, considering the moral action, neither the piercing nor the suffering ought to have occurred (8, 187–88/131). Real natures have causal properties that are normative. An artifact, as a likeness, has no such properties. Why do Hobbits have long hairy feet? It seemed fitting to J. R. R. Tolkien, the author of *The Hobbit*, for the sort of thing he had in mind, and it captures our fancy as readers; there is no further explanation, and any explanation that might be given can only have the status of a just-so story. Why do Giant Flemish Rabbits have the feet they do? Now we can make inquiries into natural necessity, into material causality, genealogy, and the marriage of form and function: their toes are webbed in order to keep them from spreading as they hop. There is a discoverable and normative explanation for why real things have the attributes they do.<sup>43</sup> By consequence, thinking about something having normative rather than arbitrary properties, that is, thinking about something real, affords greater opportunity for discovery, understanding, and truth.

Anselm’s idea is to fix the reference to God as real by means of showing how normative the attributes of *that* being turn out to be. Think about ‘God’ along these lines and find yourself overwhelmed with the reality or oughtness of the thought you have thought out to the end. Consider, by contrast, imaginary divinities such as Zeus or the Flying Spaghetti Monster. Poets

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<sup>42</sup> References to *On Truth* will first list the pagination of Schmitt’s *S. Anselmi Cantuariensis archiepiscopi opera omnia*, vol. 1, followed by that of the English translation by Thomas Williams in *Basic Writings*.

<sup>43</sup> On this difference, see Chad Engelland, “Deferred Ostension of Extinct and Fictive Kinds,” *Review of Metaphysics* 76 (2023): 507-40.

and playwrights can present various aspects of the dreamt-up creature, but the quantitative more they provide in stipulated properties always falls short of the qualitative more of the real and its discoverable normativity. Hence, if one wants to entertain the thought of that which none can be greater, it is going to have to be the thought of something that is rather than is not. “So if that than which a greater cannot be thought exists only in the understanding, then the very thing than which a greater *cannot* be thought is something than which a greater *can* be thought. But that is clearly impossible” (*Proslogion* 2, 101–2/100). Anselm not only points out God, but also formulates an argument for why his interlocutor should think that God can be so ostended.

In *Proslogion* 3, he amplifies the consideration of the referent’s reality: not only must that than which nothing greater can be thought, just to be that than which nothing greater can be thought, be real rather than fictive; it must also be thought of as necessarily real. For again the ostension might be taken to point out either something that is but does not have to be or something that is but has to be; however, the ostension is clearly of that which is superior, and that which must be is superior to that which happens to be. Again the sample is confused for the novice but not for the expert who has deeply considered what is ostended and who can see that what is picked out not only must be real but also must be necessarily so. What was ostended originally was not what the fool thought; what was ostended originally was something that, understood, is understood to be and, moreover, necessarily so.

Anselm’s reasoning in *Proslogion* 2 through 3 and in the “Reply to Gaunilo” converts the ostension to a criterion. First, one must attempt to follow the ostension to fix the reference to *that than which nothing greater can be thought*. One may still be thinking of something ambiguously as real or imaginary, such as a perfect island or a mythical beast. But in thinking of imaginary things as included in the sample, one is mistaken. That which is pointed out, if one seriously

meditates on the linguistic formula, is not the sort of thing that could be imaginary. It is the sort of thing that cannot fail to exist and still be that thing pointed out by the formula. Hence, it differs essentially from imaginary things, such as the perfect island, that can be thought not to exist and still be the thing pointed out. The expert, unlike the fool, can distinguish gold from fool's gold, distinguish God as *that than which nothing greater can be thought* from superficially similar but in fact different items in the sample. Anselm provides the criterion by which the expert can distinguish himself as expert from the fool as fool.

In this respect, there is a second reason why Gaunilo's perfect island objection misses the mark. Not only does it mistake Anselm's ostension for a description, it also mistakes the target of the linguistic act, and this for two reasons. First, unlike mythical and fictional creatures, God's reality is an attested option; indeed, the *Proslogion* unfolds as a kind of reflection on the condition for the possibility of the overheard dialogue with *God* that we call prayer. In this respect, the text constitutes a kind of witness to the real possibility of God, and by consequence the question of "God" has a status quite different from lost islands and other fictional entities that nobody has any reason to think are real. Second, there is something like a category mistake lurking in the objection, for though you can describe a perceptual object that is absent, you cannot ostend it. God alone is absent in such a way that ostension remains possible in terms of a thorough review of our thoughts. "I say quite confidently that if anyone can find for me something existing either in reality or only in thought to which he can apply this connection [*conexionem*] in my argument, besides that than which a greater cannot be thought, I will find and give to him that Lost Island, never to be lost again" ("Reply to Gaunilo" 3, 133/132).<sup>44</sup> If

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<sup>44</sup> Translation modified to render *conexionem* as 'connection' rather than 'inference.'

you want to find a Yeti or Atlantis or any other perceptual object, look outward. If you want to find God, look inward and lead your thoughts upward.

One minimal criterion for expert certification is that self-contradictory ostensions are nonstarters. For example, “that than which no greater prime number can be thought” is a contradiction in terms, as Euclid demonstrated, and therefore nothing can be found by following it. A similar linguistic ostension of any particular thing suffers from the same defect. For that than which no greater Yeti would be thinkable would be one that would be, among other things, rational and eternal, which is to say, no longer a Yeti but instead something more like God. By the same token, one way to undermine Anselm’s strategy would be to detect and exhibit some contradiction at work in “that than which nothing greater can be thought.” Part of Anselm’s heuristic strategy is to induce his interlocutor to search for just such a contradiction and thereby to countenance the thought of God.

In *Proslogion* 4, Anselm summarizes the accomplishments of the previous two chapters. First, *Proslogion* 2 fixed the reference to God by formulating a linguistic ostension. Second, it offered a consideration to think that to rightly understand the ostension is to understand that its referent is real: “In one way, to think a thing is to think the word that signifies that thing. But in another way, it is to understand what the thing is. God can be thought not to exist in the first way, but not at all in the second sense. No one who understands what God is can think that God does not exist, although he may say these words in his heart with no signification at all, or with some extraneous [*extranea*] signification” (4, 103/101).<sup>45</sup> As we have seen, *Proslogion* 3 repeated the same point with a slight variation by using the formula again as a criterion to distinguish expertise from folly in the identification of the ostended referent: not only is the

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<sup>45</sup> Translation modified to render *extranea* as ‘extraneous’ rather than ‘peculiar,’ which loses the normative dimension of meaning.

referent real, but it cannot fail to be so, just to be what it is. “For God is that than which a greater cannot be thought. Whoever understands this properly, understands that this being exists in such a way that he cannot, even in thought, fail to exist. So whoever understands that God exists in this way cannot think that he does not exist” (4, 104/101). After this summary, Anselm signals the close of his efforts to fix God’s reference by giving thanks to his primary interlocutor, God, for having converted his belief in him to an understanding.

In *Proslogion* 5 and following, Anselm turns from showing that God is to showing what the God who has been successfully pointed out must be. In doing so, the initial ostension that had been converted into an expert criterion for distinguishing the fool’s “God” from the real God now comes to serve a third function as a rule for thinking about what God must be. For God, just to be that than which nothing greater can be thought must now be thought to be “whatever it is better to be than not to be” (5, 104/102). He then employs this principle to argue that God has such attributes as the following: omniscience, omnipotence, justice, mercifulness, impassibility, life, eternity, and enduring mystery. The highpoint of the exercise comes when Anselm subverts the original linguistic ostension by means of a self-referential application: just in order to be that than which nothing greater can be thought, God must also be still greater than can be thought (15, 112/109). To think of God as the best possible is to think of him as beyond the best that we can fathom.

## **5. Replying to the Contemporary Gaunilo**

Anselm was not in the business of trying to conjure God into existence through description; instead, he was linguistically pointing him out as real. While this ostensive reading of Anselm, which integrates an array of Anselm’s texts, thus dodges Gaunilo’s central criticisms,

it nonetheless must confront two objections that a contemporary Gaunilo might raise on behalf of the fool. First, there is the problem of applicability: how can the appeal to ostension in the case of God be anything other than metaphorical? Ostension may have a role in first-word acquisition as Augustine relates in the *Confessions*, but how can it have a role in learning the meaning of the word ‘God’? After all, God is not available like a falcon or any other perceptual thing to be pointed out. Second, there is the problem of ambiguity: supposing God can be pointed out, how might Anselm handle the notorious problem that plagues every appeal to ostension? As Augustine observed in *The Teacher* (3.6), and Wittgenstein and Quine repeat more recently, pointing remains underdetermined; to use Augustine’s example, if you and I are walking, and I speed up to ostend ‘walking,’ how can I prevent you from thinking that I am ostending ‘hurrying’ instead? Or, in the case of the falcon, are you pointing to the tree or the bird? If the bird, in what way—qua species, qua colored, qua sitting, qua in a tree, or what?<sup>46</sup>

On behalf of Anselm, I might reply to the objections as follows.

To the worry about whether one can point out a nonperceptual object and do so through language alone, let us recall that ostension locates something for discovery in the field of experience. Now, we have a tendency to construe ostension too superficially, thinking it must be a matter of extending an index finger in the direction of something we would like to point out. Yet consider an everyday situation in which a gesture plays no role in an ostension. While working on a job, you are asked to retrieve an unknown tool. You are told, “It is the one in the top drawer of the gray cabinet in the garage.” Of course, it would be the same one it was even if it were in the bottom drawer or in no drawer at all. This is not a description of the thing, but a clarification of where to look to find it, and it is accomplished with words alone absent any

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<sup>46</sup> On the “qua-problem,” see Devitt and Stereln, *Language and Reality*, 90–93. {AQ: Please add this source to the bibliography}

accompanying gesture. Now, can one point out something invisible? Heraclitus says, “I went in search of myself.”<sup>47</sup> Augustine might say the self is that which shows up when you look within and not above, and God is that which shows up when you look within and then above. The very fact that self and God cannot be found without is crucial as a preliminary redirection. Anselm, for his part, points out God using a linguistic ostension that moves the interlocutor to turn from the world of perceptual objects to that hidden but sustaining presence which exceeds all other thinkable things in virtue of being the supereminent cause of all. At the start of the treatise, he writes, “Lord, I am bent double; I can only look down. Raise me so that I can turn my gaze upwards” (*Proslogion* 1, 100/99). After the central argument, he wonders, “Have you found what you were seeking, O my soul? You were seeking God, and you have found that he is something highest of all [*quiddam summum omnium*], than which nothing better can be thought” (14, 111/108).<sup>48</sup> The formula points God out so that he can be found within us as above us and everything else.

To the worry about disambiguating such an ostension, Anselm follows Augustine and appeals to the disambiguating function of the restless heart: God our creator is the only one that stills our otherwise endless striving. Anselm opens the *Proslogion* by noting that the ostension he seeks fulfills our natural but frustrated desire for God. We are not ostending perfect islands, Flying Spaghetti Monsters, or the greatest prime number; we are ostending that very thing which, as our origin, constitutes the fulfillment of our natural desire. By nature, we seek the face of God; that than which nothing greater can be thought is a linguistic pointer for indicating that which our very being seeks in all its seeking. The misery sounded in the opening chapter is answered by joy

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<sup>47</sup> Charles H. Kahn, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus: An Edition of the Fragments with Translation and Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 41.

<sup>48</sup> Translation slightly modified by suppressing Williams’s interpolation of “beings” after the phrase “highest of all.”

sounded in the closing chapters. Anselm thinks we should be motivated to search insofar as we are motivated to escape our misery, and he thinks the deepening joy discovered by thinking through the ostension of God confirms the efficacy of the ostension. Anselm offers a two-factor authentication for disambiguating ostension: God is found above all our thoughts as that which surprisingly fulfills our hearts and gives us joy; in the final chapter, he observes, “For I have found a joy that is full and more than full” (26, 120–21/117).<sup>49</sup>

I think it possible to understand further the significance of the dialectic of misery and joy by sketching some of the background from the *Monologion*. It belongs to the very essence of reason to discriminate the higher from the lower, and the will ought to love that which is judged to be higher more than that which is judged to be lower (68, 78–79/81, and 70, 80/83). Now this act of love can be performed well or poorly, and the fruit of performing it well is some share of happiness. Thus, to experience happiness certifies the love that confirms the adequacy of the rational discrimination. Not just any God will fulfill the demands of reason, afford a worthy object of love, and gladden the heart. Whether joy comes then constitutes an indication of whether God, the creator of this natural dynamism, has been properly targeted or not. In this way, Anselm has a sophisticated strategy, rooted in the hermeneutic of natural desire, for coping with the ambiguity intrinsic to ostension.

## Conclusion

The difficulty faced by Anselm was ably identified by Wittgenstein: “‘You can’t hear God speak to someone else, you can only hear him if you are being addressed.’—That is a grammatical remark.”<sup>50</sup> Anselm’s *Proslogion*, like Augustine’s *Confessions*, unfolds with God as

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<sup>49</sup> The argument itself came to Anselm accompanied by joy. See Southern, *Saint Anselm*, 128.

<sup>50</sup> Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, §717.



the interlocutor, letting the reader eavesdrop on the conversation. Such a form naturally raises the question of the speaker's addressee. Anselm ostends his addressee for his reader. His plan is that the reader should cease to be an eavesdropper by becoming an interlocutor, and thereby be able to say, with Anselm, "And this you are [*et hoc es tu*], O Lord our God" (3, 103/101).<sup>51</sup> As the reader is led to join the conversation as a result of the success of *Proslogion* 2 and 3, Anselm's opening Augustinian invocation of "my God" (*deus meus*) becomes now "our God" (*deus noster*). How did Anselm think he had achieved this transformation? After all, he does not think that God has audibly spoken to his readers or that God has suddenly appeared. Instead, Anselm ostends God in his absence by giving us the means to differentiate and transcend our present thoughts about him. It is by loving that which is so pointed out that we discover Anselm's addressee.<sup>52</sup>

In the prologue, Anselm assigns himself two tasks: to prove that God exists and to prove everything else we believe about the divine nature (93/93). These two more noticeable tasks presuppose that the reference to God has first been fixed via the signature linguistic ostension. Here are the three things that Anselm accomplishes:

- (1) Points out God as *that* than which nothing greater can be thought (c. 2)
- (2) Argues that God, to be *that* . . . , must be able to be identified as real rather than imaginary (cc. 2 and 3)
- (3) Argues that God, to be *that* . . . , must have certain supereminent attributes (cc. 5ff)

One and the same formula (God as *that* . . . ) therefore serves three interconnected purposes:

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<sup>51</sup> Translation modified to reflect the fact that the verb is in the second person.

<sup>52</sup> In the opening chapter, he writes, "Let me look up at your light, whether from afar or from the depths. [1] Teach me how to seek you, and [2] show yourself to me when I seek. [1] For I cannot seek you unless you teach me how, and [2] I cannot find you unless you show yourself to me. [1] Let me seek you in desiring you; let me desire you in seeking you. [2] Let me find you in loving you; let me love you in finding you" (*Proslogion* 1, 100/99, interpolations added). {AQ: Are the interpolations yours?, YES}

- (1) A linguistic pointer that fixes the reference
- (2) A criterion for expert certification of the sample
- (3) A rule for thinking about God

I have focused on the first two functions because they stood in the most need of clarification. Nonetheless, it is part of Anselm's strategy not to separate out these three functions but instead to have them lead organically into each other. The God who is this, the God who must therefore be real, is the God who must have this suite of attributes (*Proslogion* 5–26). In this way, the threefold formula fulfills Anselm's ambition to distill the sprawling *Monologion* into "a single argument" (*unum argumentum*) (*Proslogion* prologue, 93/93).<sup>53</sup>

At the outset, I noted how Klima rightly understood that the crucial task of the argument is to fix the reference to God, but that he thought, nonetheless, that Anselm's fool is not foolish to deny God's existence if he refers to God parasitically rather than constitutively, for when referring to God parasitically one accepts the reference of another while denying the other's description of that reference. The realization that Anselm is not fixing the reference via a description but instead via an ostension problematizes this defense. Ostension necessitates understanding something for oneself in order to follow the reference of another. Only if the interlocutors treat the ostension as a description can they rest content with a merely parasitic reference—"that is what so-and-so thinks"—but if they understand Anselm's ostension as an ostension, then they will have to look for themselves and see what the referent is just in order to know what so-and-so thinks.

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<sup>53</sup> Evans characterizes Anselm's one argument as an axiom that can be used as a premise in multiple arguments, much like an axiom in Euclidean geometry. Taking the formula as an axiom captures the second and third uses of the formula, but it misses the initial deployment of the formula as an ostension, with the unfortunate consequence of thinking Anselm offers an (unsuccessful) ontological argument, which, as I have argued, he does not. See *Anselm and Talking about God*, 44–48.

“God is an imaginary being,” says Anselm’s interlocutor. This supposedly imaginary being, Anselm clarifies, is that than which nothing greater can be thought. “Fine,” says the interlocutor. “‘That than which nothing greater can be thought’ is an imaginary being.” But that is foolish, protests Anselm, for it is greater to think of something real rather than something imaginary. An expert would not fail to distinguish that which is truly that than which nothing greater can be thought (namely something normative and *real*) from that which is not truly that than which nothing greater can be thought (namely something nonnormative and *merely imaginary*).

The atheist might nonetheless protest, “But this is not God.” And here Anselm has some explaining to do, for as Anselm says at the end of the *Monologion*, what people in general call “God” is just something worthy of worship due to preeminent dignity; there is no mention there of that than which nothing greater can be thought: “Surely everyone who says that God exists (whether one God or more than one) understands him to be nothing other than a substance that he thinks human beings ought to worship because of his preeminent dignity, and to entreat in any pressing need, beyond every nature that is not God” (80, 86/89). Yet Anselm is not committed to the idea that the *Proslogion* formula is known to natural reason or is common to religious sensibility in general, only that it is knowable to natural reason once it has been proposed by faith, and he thinks it is obvious that any committed theist would be convicted by conscience to hold as true that God is indeed that than which nothing greater can be thought (“Reply to Gaunilo” 1, 130/129). Hence, Anselm’s friendly clarification, God is that than which nothing greater can be thought, does not ostend just any god but specifically the God targeted by theism. An atheist, after all, is not one who denies the gods the theist, too, would deny, but one who denies the very God theists propose. And that is the God pointed out as that than which nothing

greater can be thought, one whose normativity or force resists efforts to assign it to the realm of the imagination

In this way, Anselm deploys a semantic strategy, well attested by his texts and carrying striking similarities to contemporary ostension theory, in order to lead from the imaginary and possibly existent “God,” which is denied by both the atheist and the theist, to the normative and real God, who is addressed by the theist in the *Proslogion*.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> I am grateful to Chris Mirus, Matthew Walz, Michael Vendsel, Lara M. Buchak, Jameson Cockerell, and several anonymous referees for their comments on earlier versions of this paper.

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