

The Myth of the Eleventh Century

Hans Blumenberg's Anselm

Introduction

In the German-speaking world, Hans Blumenberg (1920–1996) is generally considered to have been one of the most brilliant, universally learned and prolific interpreters of Western intellectual history. Several of his many books have been translated into a variety of languages, seven of them into English.¹ His philosophical thinking may be portrayed as a large-scale criticism of the Platonic-Christian heritage, very much in the tradition of Nietzsche and Freud.² Not surprisingly then, the philosophy and theology of the Latin middle ages have an important part to play in Blumenberg's criticism of religion and metaphysics.

This is true in particular of some mainstream theological doctrines of the *later* Middle Ages. Blumenberg comments upon them in a whole series of books and articles. The philosophical theology of the *early* Latin Middle Ages, by con-

1 Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999) [orig.: *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1966)]; *Work on Myth* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990) [orig.: *Arbeit am Mythos* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1979)]; *The Genesis of the Copernican World* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000) [orig.: *Die Genesis der kopernikanischen Welt*, 3 vols. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1981)]; *Shipwreck with Spectator: Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997) [orig.: *Schiffbruch mit Zuschauer: Paradigma einer Daseinsmetapher* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1979)]; *Die Sorge geht über den Fluss* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003) [orig.: Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1987)]; *Matthäuspasion* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003) [orig.: Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1988)]; and *Paradigms for a Metaphorology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010) [orig.: *Paradigmen zu einer Metaphorologie* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1960)]. All translations are, however, my own.

2 See my "Nach der Apokalypse der Vernunft: Hans Blumenbergs Kritik der Apokalyptik im Rahmen seines philosophischen Programms," in *Kritik der postmodernen Vernunft: Über Derrida, Foucault und andere zeitgenössische Denker*, ed. Bernd Goebel and Fernando Suárez Müller (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2007), 177–202.

trast, is much less lengthily dealt with. Still, Blumenberg is far from simply passing over it. Origen and Augustine figure more than once in his writings. And so does Saint Anselm (1033–1109), whom he takes to be “next to Origen the greatest thinker in the first millennium of the Christian tradition.”³ His scattered and usually very dismissive remarks on Anselm continue to shape the Anselm image of many of his readers. While Blumenberg’s interpretation of later medieval theology focussing on the concept of God in nominalism has been under fire since it was brought forward in the 1960s,⁴ his interpretation of early medieval theology focussing on Anselm has not often, if ever, been put to the test.

Blumenberg chiefly comments on Anselm in three of his books, *Arbeit am Mythos* (1979), *Matthäuspasion* (1988) and the posthumously arranged *Beschreibung des Menschen* (2006),⁵ as well as in an earlier entry on “Transzendenz und Immanenz” in the dictionary *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (1962).⁶ His Anselm interpretation does not seem to have evolved over this whole period. He is mainly concerned with three points Anselm makes: (a) the concept of God and the so-called ontological argument in Anselm’s *Proslogion* (in particular with a supposed conflict between the concept of God as *id quo maius cogitari nequit* in *Proslogion* 2, and the concept of God as *quiddam maius quam cogitari possit*, in *Proslogion* 15); and two issues that, according to him, betray the “mythological” character of Anselm’s theology – (b) Anselm’s theory of salvation, and (c) a piece of theological anthropology in the *Cur Deus homo*, namely his discussion of

3 Blumenberg, *Matthäuspasion*, 298. We need to understand “millennium” as a rough approximation to make sense of this, though.

4 See, for example, Wolfgang Hübener, “Die Nominalismus-Legende: Über das Missverhältnis zwischen Dichtung und Wahrheit in der Deutung der Wirkungsgeschichte des Ockhamismus,” in *Spiegel und Gleichnis: Festschrift für Jacob Taubes*, ed. Norbert Bolz and Wolfgang Hübener (Würzburg: Königshausen and Neumann, 1983), 87–111; Wolfhart Pannenberg, “Die christliche Legitimität der Neuzeit: Gedanken zu einem Buch von Hans Blumenberg,” in his *Gottesgedanke und menschliche Freiheit*, Sammlung Vandenkoeck (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1978), 114–128.

5 Blumenberg, *Beschreibung des Menschen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2006).

6 Blumenberg, “Transzendenz und Immanenz,” in *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, ed. Friedrich Michael Schiele, Hermann Gunkel, Otto Scheel and Leopold Zscharnack, 7 vols. (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1957–1965), 6: 989–997. There is another, less important reference to Anselm in an early study, *Paradigmen zu einer Metaphorologie*, Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte 6 (Bonn: Bouvier, 1960): Blumenberg relates Anselm’s account of how he came to discover the Ontological Argument with the metaphor of “the mighty truth,” although Anselm never uses the terms “true” or “truth” in this account.

Augustine's claim that some humans make up for the fallen angels and reconstitute the perfect number of rational creatures who contemplate God. For this third point, Blumenberg takes Anselm to be holding that humans would not have been part of creation at all if all the angels had kept their integrity: that humanity, in other terms, is a mere *ersatz*.

The following is an assessment of two of the three pieces of criticism which Blumenberg levels against Anselm. In the first part, I will have a look at Blumenberg's objections to Anselm's ontological argument (or arguments). In the second part, I will turn to his interpretation of Anselm's theological anthropology and examine Blumenberg's claim that humanity, for Anselm, owes its very existence to the fall of the angels. I will not be able to discuss Blumenberg's objections to Anselm's theory of salvation. In the last part I will touch upon Blumenberg's further claim that Anselm's *Cur Deus homo* is an example of early medieval mythology rather than of philosophical theology. Although I will not be able to go into Blumenberg's theory of mythology, I will argue that we should reject this peculiar suggestion altogether.

But am I doing justice to Blumenberg when I take him to be a *critic* of Saint Anselm? Is he really concerned with the value of Anselm's rational theology? Is he not better understood as a detached spectator of the theatre of human thought whose only aspiration is "to observe, to listen, and to recount"?⁷ The answer to this query is that Blumenberg is indeed a critic of Anselm in the strict sense of the word. In view of his epic works on the history of ideas, his method has sometimes been misread as purely descriptive. Blumenberg's *œuvre* does not merely consist of studies in the history of ideas; but even in these studies, he incessantly judges and values, criticizes and commends. We have already come across his assessment of Origen as a "greater" thinker than was Anselm, and the assessment of both as "greater" than all other figures in the first millennium of the history of Christian theology (such as Augustine). His many – and only occasionally indignant –⁸ judgements concerning Anselm make it plain that Blumenberg is entertaining a *philosophical* discussion guided by rational argument. This remains true even if his procedure may be described as monologic rather than dialogic.⁹ Blumenberg's objections often come down to convicting Anselm

7 Ingrid Breuer, Peter Leusch and Dieter Mersch, "Von Geschichte zu Geschichten: Zu Hans Blumenbergs Metaphorologie," in their *Welten im Kopf: Profile der Gegenwartssphilosophie*, vol. 1: *Deutschland* (Berlin: Rotbuch, 1996), 68: "Weder urteilt noch bewertet er: er schaut lediglich hin, hört zu, erzählt nach."

8 See, for example, Blumenberg, *Arbeit am Mythos*, 278: "Es ist beinahe unfassbar, dass ein Mann wie Anselm"

9 Goebel, "Nach der Apokalypse," 200–202.

of some logical inconsistency or other. As early as in his dictionary entry mentioned above, Blumenberg engages – if only timidly – in immediate philosophical argument, rather than merely reporting the arguments of others.

1. Blumenberg's Critique of Anselm's Ontological Argument

1.1 The Ontological Argument as a Proof of the Existence of God

Anselm is best known for his argument which Kant called the “ontological proof.” Modern theology, especially in the wake of Karl Barth’s Anselm interpretation, has often come to doubt its being a proof of the existence of God at all.¹⁰ Again, it is controversial whether the reasoning in *Proslogion* 2 and the reasoning in *Proslogion* 3 make up one single argument or two numerically different arguments. Contemporary philosophers of religion mostly agree in distinguishing at least two basic forms of the ontological argument (henceforth: the OA), one of which makes use of modal logic while the other does not. (One may, of course, continue to speak of “the” OA as a generic term.) In *Proslogion* 2, Anselm develops a version of the *non-modal* OA; but he also puts forward the first version of the *modal* argument, if not already in *Proslogion* 3, so at least in his response to his critic who writes “on behalf of the fool.” The former aims at establishing the logical necessity of God’s *real*, rather than merely possible or imaginary, existence; the latter aims at establishing the logical necessity of God’s *necessary* existence.¹¹

Blumenberg does not differentiate the modal from the non-modal OA. He seems to suppose that Anselm has propounded just one single (non-modal) OA. Thus, Blumenberg invariably talks of “the” OA in Anselm, of “Anselm’s ontological proof.” While this was all but common usage at the time he was writing, it is none the less unfortunate. For the purpose of this essay I will, however, follow him here and refer to the non-modal OA in *Proslogion* 2 as “Anselm’s OA” (or “proof,” meaning “proof of God’s real existence”), as if this were all there is to it

¹⁰ See Karl Barth, *Fides quaerens intellectum: Anselm's Proof of the Existence of God in the Context of his Theological Scheme* (London: SCM Press, 1960).

¹¹ See Brian Leftow, “The Ontological Argument,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*, ed. William Wainwright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 80–116; Bernd Goebel, “Nachdenken über den ontologischen Gottesbeweis: Eine Diskussion philosophischer Einwände gegen seine beiden Grundformen mit einem Blick auf die zeitgenössische Theologie,” *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 51 (2009): 105–144; Goebel, “Anselm’s Elusive Argument: Ian Logan Reading the *Proslogion*,” *The Saint Anselm Journal* 7 (2009): 75–96, §5.

in Anselm. As a matter of fact, Blumenberg takes it for granted that Anselm's intention really *was* to prove the real existence of God. This at least seems to be not only the most obvious but also the most reasonable reading of *Proslogion* 2–4, although the aspiration of the *Proslogion* as a whole is to establish the identity of the Christian God with the most perfect being (which one might dub the “philosophers’ God”).¹² It is, however, ill-defined to characterize the ontological proof with Blumenberg as an argument “that rests upon the definition of a perfect being as that than which a greater cannot be thought.”¹³ Rather, the proof rests upon the definition of *God* as that (or something) than which a greater cannot be thought – *which amounts to saying that* it rests upon the definition of God as a most perfect being.

Blumenberg also takes it for granted that “the” OA, in Anselm and elsewhere, is doomed to fail. He does not doubt that it has been successfully refuted;¹⁴ he calls Anselm the “inventor of this God from the concept”¹⁵ and regards the ontological proof as a figment born from an “overestimation of the conceptual,”¹⁶ as an “escalation of the concept of God into the epitome of his demonstrable existence.”¹⁷ *Who* has, in Blumenberg’s estimation, successfully refuted Anselm’s OA? In the German speaking-world, the philosopher most often credited with this accomplishment is Kant; and Blumenberg indeed holds Kant to have “unhinged this whole complex” by showing that being is no “real predicate.”¹⁸ I will revisit these objections in a moment. For the time being, let me only remark that, paradoxically, Blumenberg advanced his refutation claim at a moment in the history of the philosophy of religion when the ontological proof was experiencing its most spectacular renaissance since the seventeenth century.¹⁹ Fifty years ago, Dieter Henrich observed that the OA “is being rejected

12 Ibid., §6. “A most perfect being” is a being that is perfect in every respect. I take this expression to be equivalent to Anselm’s term *aliquid quo maius cogitari nequit*. Anselm apparently thinks that there can only be one such being and exchanges this indefinite description with the definite description *id quo maius cogitari nequit* (my “the most perfect being”) without further ado. I will not discuss whether this move is justified and simply follow Anselm here.

13 Blumenberg, *Beschreibung des Menschen*, 235.

14 Blumenberg, *Arbeit am Mythos*, 279: “erfolgreichen Widerlegung”; and *Matthäuspasion*, 298: “Widerlegungen.”

15 Blumenberg, *Gottesgedanke und menschliche Freiheit*, 379.

16 Blumenberg, *Arbeit am Mythos*, 279.

17 Blumenberg, *Matthäuspasion*, 298.

18 Blumenberg, *Beschreibung des Menschen*, 646.

19 The manuscripts edited as *Beschreibung des Menschen* mostly date back to the 1970s; see the editor’s epilogue in *Beschreibung des Menschen*, 904–911.

with a rare unanimity, or is not even taken seriously.”²⁰ This has ceased to be true for almost forty-five years now.

1.2 Two Incompatible “Definitions” of God

Blumenberg’s principal worry regarding Anselm’s OA, however, is not drawn from Kant. For Blumenberg, the OA in the *Proslogion* founders on the incompatibility between the concept of God as the most perfect being in *Proslogion* 2 and the concept of God as “something greater than can be thought” in *Proslogion* 15. In *Proslogion* 15, Anselm writes: “Therefore, Lord, not only are You that than which a greater cannot be thought, but You are something greater than can be thought.”²¹

Blumenberg takes these to be “two definitions”²² of God. On other occasions he speaks of two “concepts of God, a rational ... and a transcendent one.”²³ The former Blumenberg also calls the “God of the philosophers,” the latter concept the “God of faith”²⁴ and Anselm’s tribute to the tradition of negative theology.²⁵ Now these two concepts, in his eyes, simply cannot be reconciled. They exclude each other and, consequently, define two different things: “The necessarily existing being, a greater than which cannot be thought, is not yet God, if God must be greater than anything that can be thought.”²⁶ From this, Blumenberg concludes that, by introducing the concept of God as *quiddam maius quam cogitari possit*, Anselm “destroys”²⁷ and implicitly “revokes”²⁸ his OA. In *Proslogion* 15, Anselm, ironically, furnishes nothing less than a “proof” that his own definition of God as a most perfect being is quite inept for the purposes of a proof of God’s existence, and hence furnishes nothing short of a disproof of the OA.²⁹

But this seems too rash. Given Anselm’s presupposition that something is more perfect if it transcends our thinking than if it does not, the concept of God as something greater than can be thought, clearly, is *implied* by the concept of a

20 Dieter Henrich, *Der ontologische Gottesbeweis*, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1967), v.

21 Anselm, *Proslogion*, 112.

22 Blumenberg, *Matthäuspasion*, 101.

23 Blumenberg, “Transzendenz und Immanenz,” 992f.

24 Blumenberg, *Beschreibung des Menschen*, 379.

25 Blumenberg, *Matthäuspasion*, 299.

26 Blumenberg, *Beschreibung des Menschen*, 379, n. 1. Cf. *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 993: “Das bedeutet: der Gott, der bewiesen werden konnte, ist noch nicht der Gott, an den sich der gläubige Sinn hier in betender Anrede wendet.”

27 Cf. Blumenberg, *Matthäuspasion*, 298f.

28 Blumenberg, *Beschreibung des Menschen*, 379.

29 Cf. Blumenberg, *Matthäuspasion*, 298.

most perfect being (*id quo maius cogitari nequit*, henceforth IQM); and Blumenberg does not question this presupposition of Anselm's but seems to share it. The reason why God, for Anselm, is "something greater than can be thought" is, precisely, his being IQM – as is plain from *Proslogion* 15 where he deduces the property of being "greater than can be thought" from the concept of God as a most perfect being by way of a *reductio* argument. In order to demonstrate Blumenberg's claim that the second concept of God is at odds with the first one, one would need to attack Anselm's premise according to which it is a perfection to be greater than can be thought; or to show that the *first* concept, the concept of God as a most perfect being (IQM) is incoherent (or do both). For if we can conclusively deduce concept B from concept A under premise c, although A and B exclude each other, then either premise c is false, or the conflict must have already been hidden in A (or, again, both). Blumenberg does neither; and the reason why he fails to do so is most probably his disregard of the *derivative* nature of the second concept. He erroneously takes it to be a second *definition* of God; two definitions may of course conflict with each other without further ado. The truth is, however, that Anselm only proposes one definition of God in the *Proslogion*, by means of the famous description IQM, whereby God is defined as the most perfect being. Strictly speaking, "God is IQM" is a mere description, not a definition, because a definition in the traditional Aristotelian-Boethian sense is always generic and, arguably, God does not belong to any genus.³⁰ It may still be regarded as a definition in a loose and popular sense. From this unique concept of God he then deduces God's real and necessary existence as well as a couple of other predicates – thus the property of being greater than can be thought.

The question remains: Is there really a conflict between the concept of IQM and the concept of "something greater than can be thought"? This is certainly debatable.³¹ The first thing to note here is that there is no *obvious* conflict between the concept of IQM and the concept of "something greater than can be thought." Why should "something a greater than which cannot be thought" not be "greater than can be thought"? Surely, the meaning of IQM alone does not rule this out. On the other hand, if IQM is to be a concept at all, the expression IQM, by which it is signified, must be understandable. And in that respect at least, the concept signified by this expression must be capable of being thought. Understanding something, according to Anselm, implies thinking it (though not vice versa, as *Proslogion* 4 shows). In its first step, the ontological proof in

30 Cf. Ian Logan, *Reading Anselm's Proslogion: The History of Anselm's Argument and its Significance Today* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 187.

31 For the remainder of this chapter, see my "Anselm's Elusive Argument," §7.

Proslogion 2 explicitly presupposes that the definition of God as IQM can be understood – and that in that respect, the most perfect being can indeed be thought.

The author of the *Pro insipiente* seems to have been the first to deny that the most perfect being is such that it can be thought and understood at all. For, says Gaunilo (or whoever he was), the most perfect being is certainly very different from anything we know, so that we cannot even make conjectures (*conicere*) as to what it is like.³² This he regards as a fatal objection against Anselm's ontological argument. According to Gaunilo, God is not capable of being thought in the way Anselm's ontological arguments require God to be thinkable. Against Gaunilo, Anselm insists that conjectures concerning the nature of God can indeed be made: thus, a higher good known to us will be more similar to the most perfect being than a lower good.³³ To refute the claim that the most perfect being must be inconceivable and hence unthinkable, Anselm proposes the following distinction:

But even if it were true that [IQM] cannot be thought nor understood, it would not, however, be false that [IQM] cannot be thought and understood. For just as ... one can think “unthinkable,” although that to which it corresponds to be called unthinkable cannot be thought, so also, when it is said: [IQM], there is no doubt at all that what is heard can be thought and understood, even if the thing “than which a greater cannot be thought” cannot be thought or understood.³⁴

According to Anselm, then, there is a difference between “thinking the concept” of a thing and “thinking the thing” conceived of “itself.” However, Anselm does not say much more about the nature of this difference. We can, perhaps, understand his distinction in the following manner: “to think the concept” of a thing means to understand its definition (or a description of it that captures something essential); “to think the thing itself” means to understand its definition *and* to seize all its essential properties.

Does this make sense? It seems that it does. Consider, first, the well-known definition of a “person” by Boethius. To understand this expression is not only to “think the concept” of a person, but also “to think” and to understand – sup-

32 Cf. Anselm, *Pro insipiente* 4.126–127.

33 Cf. Anselm, *Responsio editoris* 8.137–138.

34 Ibid., 9.138.

posing the definition is true – “the thing itself.” This is because the definition contains all the essential properties of a person: its individuality, substantiality and rationality. Now consider the expression “the entire set of Anselm’s writings.” Whoever understands this expression, “thinks the concept” of this set, but normally does not “think the thing itself,” even if he might do so with the help of a complete list of Anselm’s writings. Finally, consider the expression “the set of all prime numbers” (a set being such that all its elements are essential to it). To understand this expression, for us, is “to think the concept” of this infinite set. But it is never “to think the thing itself,” because a finite mind is incapable of thinking it thus. And the same holds true of God as IQM: one can understand the formula “that than which a greater cannot be thought” and therefore think God according to his concept, as is presupposed by the ontological proof. However, God cannot be “thought himself”; God is greater than can be thought.

I can think of at least two possible reasons why this is so. (1) The ontological argument takes as its starting point the description of God as a most perfect being (IQM). By this description, we can grasp something essential of God, and of God alone. To this extent, God can be conceived of and thought by us. But it does not allow us to grasp the entire essence of God. The whole essence of God cannot be grasped by any description. God, that is, cannot be defined. And in that respect, God is inconceivable and unthinkable. If we know that there is (one single) most perfect being, then we know that God exists. But we do not fathom entirely what it means that God exists if we know that a most perfect being exists. (2) Here is another way of reconciling the conclusion of *Proslogion* 15 (that God is “greater than can be thought”) with the ontological proof: the description of God as a most perfect being *is* a complete essential definition of God, albeit not a generic one. God is not essentially a most perfect being *and something else*. In that respect, God can be thought. Yet we cannot wholly understand God’s essence, because there are perfections of which we may now not have a notion, or because there are infinitely many perfections so that we cannot form a concept of them all. We cannot hence grasp all of God’s essential properties. And in that respect, God is inconceivable and unthinkable. Again, If we know that there is (one single) most perfect being, we know that God exists. But we do not fathom entirely what it means that God exists if we know that a most perfect being exists.

There may be other reasons why God as IQM is “greater than can be thought” that do not affect the meaningfulness of the proposition “God is IQM.” But these two – and especially the second, I should say – are rather promising candidates. Like others (John Marenbon and Jules Vuillemin, for instan-

ce),³⁵ Blumenberg has failed to distinguish the property referred to by Anselm when calling God something “greater than can be thought” from the property of being altogether unthinkable. Unlike the latter notion, the former does not exclude God’s being able to be thought in the weak sense of God’s being thinkable according to his concept. And this alone seems to be the sense required by the ontological argument. I conclude that the conflict, evoked by Blumenberg, between the God of the philosopher and the God of faith does not really obtain in Anselm.

1.3 Other Objections Against Anselm’s Ontological Argument

Blumenberg adopts three more objections against Anselm’s OA.

(a) The first is the one put forward by Kant to the effect that existence is no “real predicate.”³⁶ This is the semantic version of an ontological objection raised already by Gassendi against Descartes’ ontological argument and which states that existence is no *property*.³⁷ In his proof in *Proslogion* 2, Anselm compares the concept of a being that contains all perfections except for real existence with that of a being that contains all perfections including real existence. Blumenberg sounds very much like Kant in his critique of Descartes’ ontological argument when he interprets the Anselmian proof thus: “Existence is something in addition to essence, something that distinguishes it from the merely possible. In short: being is a real predicate.”³⁸ Yet it seems that existence is not a property like most other properties. According to Kant, nothing is added to the concept of something possible, if we suppose that it is also real. A blue elephant in my imagination does not differ in conceptual content from a blue elephant which really exists and which exactly corresponds to how I have been imagining it. Anselm’s comparison does not seem to get off the ground.

35 See John Marenbon, *Medieval Philosophy: An Historical and Philosophical Introduction* (London; New York: Routledge, 2007), 128: “If being able to be thought – conceivability – is made equivalent to possibility, then God, being greater than can be thought and so not able to be thought, is impossible”; Jules Vuillemin, *Le Dieu d’Anselme et les apparences de la raison* (Paris: Aubier, 1971), 58–72, esp. 70.

36 Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Kants Werke, Akademie Textausgabe* vol. 3: *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1968), B626.

37 Cf. Pierre Gassendi, *Objectiones Quintae adversus Descartes Meditationes*, in Descartes, *Œuvres de Descartes*, ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, Édition du Jubilé (Paris: Vrin, 1996), 7: 323. For a slightly more thorough discussion of this objection, see Bernd Goebel, “Nachdenken über den ontologischen Gottesbeweis,” 125–128.

38 Blumenberg, *Beschreibung des Menschen*, 646.

But, as recent discussion has shown, Anselm's OA does not presuppose at all that existence is a property like most others. For Anselm's claim that a being with all perfections including real existence, is more perfect than a being with all perfections except for real existence, only implies that for this being, real existence is a perfection. It does not imply that existence is a property like most other properties (that it is a "first-order property") such as omnipotence and eternity.³⁹ Existence could be a unique kind of predicate and still be a perfection. Imagine a child who truthfully says, "My older brother cannot do tricks like Harry Potter," and then adds, "But at least my older brother really exists." Then we do not only know that the older brother is no great magician, but we also know that he is not merely a figment of this child's imagination.⁴⁰ This view is at odds with the so-called quantifier analysis of existence. But the quantifier analysis is inapt to explain, let alone to define the notion of existence, because – quite apart from its many other problems⁴¹ – an explanation or definition of existence in terms of the existential quantifier would inevitably be circular.⁴²

(b) The second objection concerns the coherence of Anselm's concept of God. Is a most perfect being really logically possible? To Blumenberg's understanding, this problem has first been posed "centuries later"⁴³ by John Duns Scotus. It is true that the logical possibility of a most perfect being is only being presupposed by Anselm. Leibniz, Gödel and others have thereupon attempted to bridge this gap.⁴⁴ One remark by Blumenberg is apparently designed to suggest that Scotus, at least, did not succeed in demonstrating the coherence of a most perfect being: "The possible is only possible through the subject God. ... Yet against Anselm, Scotus was the first to argue that his argument for existence from the concept would only be conclusive if the possibility, if the logical con-

39 See Alvin Plantinga's remark (*The Nature of Necessity*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974, repr. 2006), 196: "Kant never specified a sense of 'is a predicate' such that, in that sense, it is clear both that existence is not a predicate and that St Anselm's argument requires it to be one." See also Brian Davies: "Anselm and the Ontological Argument," in *The Cambridge Companion to Anselm*, ed. Brian Davies and Brian Leftow (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 160, 170.

40 Cf. Brian Leftow, "The Ontological Argument," 107f.

41 See Goebel, "Nachdenken über den ontologischen Gottesbeweis," 125–127.

42 Cf. E. Jonathan Lowe, "The Ontological Argument," in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Chad Meister and Paul Copan (London: Routledge, 2007), 307: "Far from serving to explain the notion of existence, this notion needs to be explained by appeal to that very notion. ... The Frege-Russell objection and the Kantian objection from which it descends is just a red herring with no real bearing on the soundness of the ontological argument."

43 Blumenberg, *Arbeit am Mythos*, 298.

44 See Goebel, "Nachdenken über den ontologischen Gottesbeweis," 138–143.

sistency of the elements fixed in the concept can be ascertained.”⁴⁵ What Blumenberg, apparently, is suggesting here is that any vindication of God’s logical possibility for the purposes of Anselm’s argument is doomed to be circular, since the OA for God’s existence presupposes the logical possibility of a most perfect being, while ontologically speaking, the logical possibility of a most perfect being presupposes the existence of God.

But even if this were true, it would not necessarily render the OA for God’s existence impossible; it only would if the logical possibility of a most perfect being could not be proved or justified independently of the assumption that it originates in the mind of God. What is more, Scotus’s doctrine of possible entities only concerns the possible existence (and the eidetic content) of creatures. It does not apply to God himself.⁴⁶ Thirdly, the question of how Scotus conceives of the relationship between these *possibilia* and the divine intellect is very much a matter of scholarly debate.⁴⁷ According to one interpretation, possible entities in Scotus do not depend on the divine intellect for their being *possible* but only for being *something* (i.e., for their eidetic content).⁴⁸

(c) Like many before him, Blumenberg finally blames the OA for deriving the real existence of a thing from its concept alone. Anselm has boldly ventured “to derive existence immediately from the concept, and only from this single one.”⁴⁹ This is a rather useful, albeit inaccurate description of Anselm’s procedure. It is useful, because Anselm is in fact trying to demonstrate that the proposition “God (necessarily) exists” is analytically true. It is inaccurate, because Anselm’s OA takes the form of a *reductio* argument in which the conclusion is not immediately derived from the premises, but through showing that its negation implies a contradiction. The ontological proof cannot do without premises such as the assumption that in the case of God, real (and necessary) existence is a perfection – even if, unlike in a syllogism for instance, the premises are not formal ones in this case. Anselm’s project was “to have the concept achieve what otherwise only perception in its contingency could yield,”⁵⁰ to warrant the real

45 Blumenberg, *Beschreibung des Menschen*, 401, n. 26.

46 Cf. Tobias Hoffmann, “Duns Scotus on the Origin of the Possibles in the Divine Intellect,” in *Philosophical Debates at Paris in the Early Fourteenth Century*, ed. Stephen F. Brown, Thomas Dewender and Theo Kobusch (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 359–379.

47 See Stanislav Sousedík, “Der Streit um den wahren Sinn der scotischen Possibilenlehre,” in *John Duns Scotus: Metaphysics and Ethics*, ed. Ludger Honnefelder, Rega Wood and Mechthild Dreyer (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 191–204.

48 See Hoffmann, “Duns Scotus on the Origin of the Possibles in the Divine Intellect.”

49 Cf. Blumenberg, *Matthäuspassion*, 298.

50 Ibid.

existence of the thing conceived of. But this is nothing but an idle dream.⁵¹ One cannot “go beyond the concept”⁵²; that much, Blumenberg takes for granted.

Amongst the current objections against the OA, this last one stands apart; for it neither attempts to demonstrate the falsity of one of its premises, nor does it challenge its soundness. “Real existence never follows from the concept alone,” then, is a principle that can only serve as an epitaph to the OA – for the simple reason that it already *presupposes* its demise. If it is to be more than a worthless promise, at least one fatal flaw of the OA must be laid open. For its defenders like Anselm, precisely, claim to have found an *a priori* proof to the effect that in the one exceptional case of the most perfect being, an analysis of the concept alone is sufficient to prove that it really exists. A popular and yet completely irrational line of argument has it that one may well accept the argument as is, while maintaining that it is an open question whether its conclusion is true. True, we cannot but think that God really exists, so the argument goes; yet all this shows is just that we cannot but think otherwise, not that God really exists.⁵³ But to put it like this is to accept a blatant contradiction:⁵⁴ it would then be at once true and false that we cannot but think that God really exists. Likewise, Kant’s assurance that the proposition “God is not [sc. real]” cannot imply a contradiction, because its subject is “suspended” –⁵⁵ that it is predicated as non-existent in reality – will not do. For the OA purports to show, precisely, that it is contradictory to predicate a most perfect being as non-existent in reality.⁵⁶

2. Blumenberg’s Critique of Anselm’s Theological Anthropology

2.1 Hans Blumenberg’s Anselm: Humanity as *Ersatz*

In two late works, Augustine claims that “elect” human individuals who come to enjoy the community with God in the heavenly city serve, as it were, a higher purpose: they restore the perfect number of rational creatures in the city of God,

51 Ibid.: “Ist dieses Muster den Träumen der Philosophie von ihren Gipfelersteigungen inhärent geblieben.”

52 Blumenberg, *Beschreibung des Menschen*, 826.

53 See, for example, John L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 53.

54 Cf. Friedrich Hermanni, “Der ontologische Gottesbeweis,” *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 44 (2002): 250: “Wenn Gott nur als existierend gedacht werden kann, dann kann nicht zugleich gedacht werden, dass er möglicherweise nicht existiert.”

55 Kant: *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, A 594f.

56 See also Goebel, “Nachdenken über den ontologischen Gottesbeweis,” 120–125.

following its diminution through the fall of one part of the angels (the only other rational creatures besides us humans). Since angels do not procreate and thereby add to their number, and were all created simultaneously, Augustine believes that fallen humans (who for him doubtlessly exist) will not be replaced by the members of any other species; and that these individual human beings, since God does not, after their death, restore them to their original state, cannot have been part of the elect right from the outset of their existence.

Now, is this to say that such a compensatory capacity is the only reason why God created humanity? Or would God have made the human race even without the occurrence of the fall of Satan and his cohorts? A reader of Augustine does not get an answer to this rather serious query. For Augustine deliberately leaves the question open, stating that apart from the human beings who replace the fallen angels, others, “perhaps” (*fortassis; fortasse*) count among the elect.⁵⁷ Anselm ponders this problem in his *Cur Deus homo* in a rather longish digression.⁵⁸ According to Blumenberg, it contains the very essence of his theological anthropology. The “divine interest” in humanity, says Blumenberg, consists for Anselm in

resetting, after the fall of the devil, the number of angels in the heavenly choir corresponding to the divine plan, to its *status quo ante* through promoting just members of the human race to their [sc. the fallen angels’] former ranks.⁵⁹

And Blumenberg takes Anselm to be saying that this is the one and only motive why God has created humanity, “that the human race *only* entered the scene as an ersatz for the devil,”⁶⁰ “that man was made *for no other reason than* to fill the vacancies in the heavenly choir,”⁶¹ and that the whole history of the human kind “should be *nothing else than* the inadequate attempt to restore the past splendour of the divine household.”⁶² He finds it “almost unbelievable”⁶³

57 Cf. Augustine, *De civitate dei*, ed. Bernard Dombart and Alfons Kalb, CCSL 47–48 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1955), 22.1; and *Enchiridion ad Laurentium de fide, spe et caritate*, ed. Ernest Evans, CCSL 46 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1969), 29.

58 The two interlocutors in *Cur Deus homo* leave little doubt that this topic is treated by way of digression and that its discussion is dispensable for the main argument of the dialogue; cf. Anselm, *Cur Deus homo* 1.16.

59 Blumenberg, *Arbeit am Mythos*, 276.

60 Ibid., 278 (my italics).

61 Blumenberg, *Matthäuspassion*, 119 (my italics).

62 Blumenberg, *Arbeit am Mythos*, 276 (my italics).

and calls it a “monstrosity”⁶⁴ that Anselm should say such a thing in a book dealing with the incarnation of God, a doctrine that most strongly suggests that humanity is the “Weltzweck.”⁶⁵ Blumenberg goes on to criticize Anselm for not taking seriously our individuality when developing his, as we might say, “*ersatz* anthropology”; he thinks that this failure is due to Anselm’s acceptance of a theory of individuation that regards the individual as nothing else than a “hyletically induced copy”⁶⁶ of the essence.

2.2 The Historical Anselm: Humanity as an End in Itself

Such are the disclosures of Hans Blumenberg’s Anselm. Is this also what the real Anselm holds? The answer is straightforward – it is not. The “*ersatz* anthropology” of Blumenberg’s Anselm has almost nothing in common with that of the historical Anselm. What is more, these differences do not only concern the quest for a *raison d’être* of humanity, but also the theory of individuation: Hans Blumenberg’s Anselm and the real Anselm not only disagree with each other as to their theological anthropology, but also with regard to their metaphysics. For Anselm never suggests that some metaphysical matter is the principle of individuation. Ontologically speaking, an individual is constituted for him by its “universal substance” (*substantia universalis*) – namely the species to which it belongs – and a specific “collection of properties” (*proprietas collectio*), a theory that can be traced back at least to Porphyry and that Anselm could find in Boethius.⁶⁷ Apart from that, it is certainly odd when Blumenberg says that in Anselm’s supposed “*ersatz* anthropology” the individual comes down to next to nothing while the nature is almost everything. Quite the contrary: if Blumenberg were right, then human nature had only been created so that human individuals substitute for the individuals of another nature to whose individual moral faults humanity owes its very existence.

As to the question for what reason humanity has been created, Anselm unambiguously denies the position that Blumenberg attributes to him:

64 Ibid., 276.

65 Ibid., 278.

66 Ibid.

67 See Christophe Erismann: “Proprietas collectio: Anselme de Canterbury et le problème de l’individuation,” *Mediaevalia: Textos e estudos* 22 (2003): 55–71; and Goebel, “Anselm’s Theory of Universals Reconsidered,” *Insights* 2 (2009): <http://www.dur.ac.uk/resources/ias/insights/Goebel6May2.pdf>.

It is necessary either that human nature was created for the completion of that perfection [sc. of creation], or that it is superfluous to it – something which we dare not say of the nature of the smallest worm. Consequently, the human race was created there for its own sake (*pro se ipsa*), and not just for the restoration of individuals of another nature. From this it is plain that, even if no angel had perished, humans would none the less have had their place in the heavenly city.⁶⁸

Anselm is thereby taking sides in what to all appearances was a major theological dispute in his lifetime. The parties involved in this dispute seem to have shared the following presuppositions: (1) that there is a *perfect number* of rational beings elected to the beatific vision of God; (2) that the creator in his wisdom had decreed this number before the first rational creatures fell from Him; (3) that we cannot possibly know the *perfect number* in this life; and (4) that those angels who excluded themselves from the community with God are replaced by human beings – which means that the number of humans amongst the elect must be at least as large as that of the lost angels. For Boso, Anselm's interlocutor in the *Cur Deus homo*, (4) is a tenet of the Christian faith (*hoc credimus*).⁶⁹ Still, Boso desires a rational argument for it, and Anselm provides him with one. In doing so, Anselm like Augustine takes it that there is no third species of rational beings that might make up for the fallen angels.

The debate focussed on the problem whether the number of human beings in the countable set of the elect is superior to the number of lost angels, or whether their numbers are equal.⁷⁰ If the elect human beings outnumber the lost angels, then humanity cannot have been created only in order that the lost angels be replaced. If, on the other hand, the number of human beings amongst the elect were equal to that of the lost angels – it cannot be smaller due to presupposition (4) – it would follow that humanity has been created exclusively in view of their replacement. The angels would have constituted the *perfect number* by themselves. No human individual would have been part of it right from the outset. But this, observes Anselm, is an awkward admission. For if we suppose that the perfect number is equal to the number of the angels and that all rational creatures were made simultaneously, it would then follow that either some angels or some human beings have sinned out of necessity, since it would only

⁶⁸ Anselm, *Cur Deus homo* 1.18.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 1.16.

⁷⁰ Cf. the heading of *Cur Deus homo* 1.18: "Utrum plures futuri sint sancti homines quam sint mali angeli." Anselm simply seems to presuppose that there cannot be two equally perfect numbers of the elect, and that the number of the elect is finite.

be through their sin that the *perfect number* is reached.⁷¹ Yet the idea that a rational being sins out of necessity is according to Anselm irreconcilable with God's goodness; it is also incompatible with God's punishing that rational being. What is more, the elect human beings would then have reason to rejoice over the fall of the angels; this would be at odds not only with the goodness of their creator, but also with their own justice. Anselm thus comes to favour the view that the number of elect human beings is indeed greater than the number of lost angels – which is to say that humanity is no mere ersatz. We encounter the same sentiment in Gilbert Crispin (1045/46–1117) and in the school of Anselm of Laon (ca. 1050–1117), while Ralph of Battle (1040–1124), amongst others, seems to side with Hans Blumenberg's Anselm.⁷²

Gregory the Great interpreted Dt 32:8b (“Statuit terminos gentium secundum numerum angelorum Dei”) as revealing that angels and human beings form two equipotent subsets within the entire set of the elect.⁷³ After a thorough exegesis, comparing different Latin renditions of this verse, Anselm concurs with Gregory.⁷⁴ However, he hastens to explain that this is a far cry from saying that as many angels have fallen as have remained steadfast.⁷⁵ The reason for this clarification is the following: If it were true that as many angels have fallen as have remained steadfast, and if it were further true that angels and human beings form two equipotent subsets within the set of all the elect, it would follow that the number of elect human beings is not greater than, but equivalent to, the number of fallen angels. For in that case the number of elect angels (NEA) would be identical to the number of lost angels (NLA), and likewise be identical to the number of elect human beings (NEH); and the number of elect human beings would, consequently, be equivalent to the number of lost angels:

71 Cf. Anselm, *Cur Deus homo* 1.18.

72 Cf. Gilbert Crispin, *De angelo perduto* 63, in *The Works of Gilbert Crispin, Abbot of Westminster*, ed. Anna Sapir Abulafia and Gillian R. Evans (London: Oxford University Press, 1986), 112; and Anselm of Laon (School), *Antequam quicquam fieret, Deus erat* 4 (*De creatione hominis*), in *Psychologie et morale aux XIIe et XIIIe siècles*, vol. 5: *Problèmes d'histoire littéraire: L'école d'Anselme de Laon et de Guillaume de Champeaux*, ed. Odon Lottin (Gembloux: J. Duculot, 1959), 335; and Ralph of Battle, *Meditatio cuiusdam christiani de fide et quia quae secundum fidem credimus etiam secundum rationem intelligimus*, Oxford Bodleian MS Laud Misc. 363, 38v–39r: “De his autem duabus opinionibus ... ista quae dicit quia nisi angelus peccasset homo non fieret libentius audio et plus se concordat cum meo animo.”

73 Gregory the Great, *Homilia in Evangelia*, ed. Raymond Etaix, CCSL 141 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1999), 34.11.

74 Anselm, *Cur Deus homo* 1.18.

75 Ibid.

NEA = NLA

NEA = NEH

 NEH = NLA.

Under such premises, then, the human kind would after all turn out to be a mere substitute, just as holds Hans Blumenberg's Anselm. But this is precisely not the role of humanity in the eyes of the historical Anselm. We do not need to rehearse the historical Anselm's entire reasoning in support of his view that there are to be more elect humans than fallen angels: Desmond Paul Henry did that thoroughly over forty years ago.⁷⁶ The anthropology of Hans Blumenberg's Anselm is merely a straw man.

2.3 Rational Theology

Blumenberg has further suggested that Anselm's *Cur Deus homo* is an example of mythical rather than of rational theology.⁷⁷ Let me finally indicate two features of its method that in my eyes strongly point in the opposite direction.

First, Anselm's reasoning hinges on a fundamental principle upon which Anselm and Boso have explicitly agreed at the outset of their colloquy: namely, that not even the slightest "impropriety" (*inconvenientia*) be allowed in theology. By that they mean that anything inconsistent and hence unreasonable ought to be banned from it. This is why any theory concerning the preservation of the *perfect number* is unacceptable to both interlocutors unless it is in keeping with the divine attributes of "that a greater than which cannot be thought," most importantly with its perfect goodness. If such a theory comes to saying that some angels or human beings have sinned by necessity, or if it implies that one part of the elect knowingly profits from the fall of those who are lost and therefore has reason to rejoice over their misfortune, it will have to be discarded. Provided that there is a more innocuous alternative, it would run counter to God's per-

⁷⁶ See Desmond P. Henry, *The Logic of Saint Anselm* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 222–229 ("Numerically Definite Reasoning").

⁷⁷ Cf. Blumenberg, *Matthäuspassion*, 119: "Der Grundmythos des Anselm von Canterbury, ... dass der Mensch nur geschaffen worden sei, um die durch Engelverderbnis vakanten Sitze im Himmelschor wieder aufzufüllen"; and *Arbeit am Mythos*, 274–281, at 280: "Anselm löst endgültig den gnostischen Grundmythos vom Freikauf der Menschen aus dem Gewahrsam des Weltherrschers ab durch den neuen von der unendlichen Genugtuung des Sohns gegenüber dem Vater."

fect goodness to allow for this sort of *perversa gratulatio*.⁷⁸ *Cur Deus homo* is an exercise in rational theology. Thus, when Anselm tries to settle the question what human nature was made for, he refers to his method as “proving by reason” (*ratione probare*) in the ambit of a problem left open by Christian authorities.⁷⁹

Secondly, the dispute over the anthropological implications of Augustine’s eschatology was at once a dispute about how to interpret the biblical narrative of creation. Are we to understand the statement that God created the “light” on “the first day” and everything else on the subsequent “days of creation” as meaning that God first created the angels and in doing so created time, and at a later moment in time created the material world including human beings (even if “day” can hardly be taken to refer to a solar day before the sun was made)? Or should we rather interpret all indications of time – and everything else implying the idea of a process – allegorically, to the effect that everything was really created simultaneously? Augustine seems to prefer the second reading.⁸⁰ And so does Anselm; although he is speaking in the conditional, he obviously favours the idea that “these days in which Moses appears to say this universe was created, not all of it simultaneously, are to be understood otherwise than how we see those days in which we live.”⁸¹

This is just one example in this dialogue bearing witness of a general endeavour to arrive at a rational interpretation of Holy Scripture – an interpretation compatible not with mythical thought but with the findings of a rational theology.

Anselm contrasts his exegesis of Genesis 1 with the opinion of “certain people” (*quidam*) who gather from it that human nature was created only “after the fall of the bad angels.”⁸² But even if they were right, he observes, this would not necessarily mean that humanity was only created as some kind of substitutes bench for an initial team of angels, as Hans Blumenberg’s Anselm has it. It only would if the *perfect number* were originally made up of angels alone. But according to Anselm there is strong reason to suppose that the angels fell short of this number.⁸³ For the most part, Blumenberg’s strictures against Anselm’s anthropology do not concern Anselm’s anthropology at all – neither with regard to its method nor to its chief contents.

78 See Anselm, *Cur Deus homo* 1.18.

79 Ibid.

80 See Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram liber imperfectus*, ed. Joseph Zycha, CSEL 28.1 (Vienna: F. Tempsky, 1894), 9.31; and *De civitate dei* 11.9.

81 Anselm, *Cur Deus homo* 1.18.

82 Ibid.

83 Ibid.