

# **St. Anselm: Basic Writings Study Guide**

**St. Anselm: Basic Writings by St. Anselm**

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# Plot Summary

St. Anselm of Canterbury (1033 - 1109) is one of the most important philosophers in history, and among the five most prominent medieval philosophers, which also include (at least) St. Augustine, Duns Scotus, St. Thomas Aquinas and William of Ockham. Anselm's Basic Writings is a book which purports to prove the most basic doctrines of Christianity - the God exists, that He is a Trinity, that He is omnibenevolent, omniscient and omnipotent, that He sent His son Jesus Christ to die for the sins of humanity and thereby reconcile fallen humanity to eternal life in God's Kingdom. Anselm wrote several books on these matters and the most important three are reproduced here.

Anselm first wrote the Monologium (also known as Monologion) in order to prove not only the God exists, but that He has all the properties Christians attribute to Him, in particular that He is a trinity. The argument proceeds in great detail, but later, Anselm found himself dissatisfied with the complexity of the argument. Following Psalm 14, v. 1, which says, "The fool says in his heart 'There is no God'," Anselm believed that it should be a simple matter to demonstrate God's existence. He wrote the Proslogium (also known as Proslogion) for this reason. In it, he gives one of the most famous arguments in the history of philosophy - the ontological argument for God's existence. Anselm's argument is complex and is often misunderstood by his critics (particularly his nineteenth and twentieth century critics). But, to state it briefly, Anselm argues that the very definition of God entails that He exists and that He exists necessarily. This argument has been endlessly controversial throughout the history of philosophy, garnering the criticisms of St. Thomas Aquinas, Rene Descartes, Immanuel Kant, G.W.F. Hegel and perhaps most of history's great philosophical minds following the eleventh century. The book also includes a famous criticism of Anselm's ontological argument, given during his life by a fellow priest known as Gaunilo; Anselm's reply to Gaunilo is included as well.

But between the Monologium and Gaunilo's criticism, the authors have placed another of Anselm's most important works, Cur Deus Homo or "Why God Became Man." Believing that he had decisively established not only that God exists, has the standard properties attributed to him by Christians, including that He is a trinity, Anselm proceeds to vindicate the claim that the birth, crucifixion and resurrection of Christ was necessary for humanity to atone for its sins and be reunited with its Creator, God the Father. The entire book is an extended dialogue between Anselm and an interlocutor, Boso. Boso is a Christian but he worries that the Christian understanding of the atonement doesn't make sense. So Anselm takes him through an extended argument that only the death of a being who was simultaneously God and man (as Christians claim Jesus was) could reunite humanity with God. These three books, along with Gaunilo's criticism and Anselm's reply, constitute one of the most detailed philosophical attempts to defend a religion in history, and are classics in the history of philosophy.



# Proslogium

## Proslogium Summary and Analysis

After Anselm wrote the Monologium, he reports that he became dissatisfied with the high degree of complexity of his arguments. Anselm believes that, following various Scriptural passages, the existence of God must be obvious. Therefore, it should be relatively easy to construct a simple argument for God's existence that can convince anyone who honestly and calmly considers it. That is the task of the Proslogium. The Proslogium contains twenty-six chapters; however, each chapter is intended to establish a single point; consequently, the chapters are short, some less than a page. Thus, they will be treated as a single work.

Anselm begins the Proslogium in the preface by stating his dissatisfaction with the Monologium and his rationale for writing the Proslogium; he believes that his project of proving God's existence is a case of "faith seeking understanding". Anselm knows what he believes, but he also wants to know why it is true. Chapter one transitions into an exhortation to believers and a prayer to God that his work will reveal the truth. He exclaims that the mind was created to contemplate God and focus on Him alone. Humans were created primarily to see God, but through sin lost this vision and suffer in misery. The first man, Adam, discarded a state of unity with God which was easy to keep. But now humans are so corrupt that we cannot win back our salvation; we cannot even seek God without His help. The believer, once God has rescued him, does not question his belief, but instead seeks to understand it. Chapter two points out that only a fool would not believe in God; and that men should always believe in Him, not expecting to understand until he has lived with his belief for some time. But an argument can be given to prove his foolishness.

With preliminaries complete, Anselm sketches his main argument. It bears emphasizing that chapter three is only a sketch of the argument; it must be evaluated against the backdrop of Anselm's metaphysical system in order to properly assess it. Chapter three makes the claim that God is defined as the being "than which nothing greater can be conceived." In other words, he possess all the properties that could make a being great; for instance, he is eternal, perfect, completely good, completely beautiful, knows everything, has absolute power, etc. If one can imagine God not existing, then that being is not God. In chapter four, Anselm distinguishes two types of conceivability. The first type of conceivability is when one conceives of the name of a thing that it exists. In other words, this type of conceivability occurs when we conceive of something only under its name without truly understanding the thing. Supposing that I do not know Robert, when I imagine him not existing, I only imagine the person 'Robert' about whom I know nothing, ceasing to exist. But the second type of conceivability is an all-things-considered conceivability. When I know Robert and imagine him not existing, I imagine the person, Robert, not existing. On Anselm's view, when we do not understand the concept of God, only then can we conceive of Him not existing. Thus, we can conceive



of Him not existing in the first sense. But when we understand the concept of God, we cannot conceive (in the second sense) of Him not existing.

In chapter five then, Anselm proceeds to explain the concept of God. A being greater than which nothing can be conceived is the "highest of all beings, alone exists through itself, and creates all other things from nothing ..." To be God is to be the thing that has no equal and no superior. God is the Supreme Good and lacks nothing, being "just, truthful, blessed, and whatever it is better to be than not to be."

It is imperative that the reader not conclude that the ontological argument is complete, for Anselm has only begun to describe the concept of God. The final piece of the argument is arguably not found until chapter fifteen. But here is the argument's general form. When Anselm describes all of God's properties in great detail, he believes that his reader will understand how it could be that God cannot be conceived of not to exist. Anselm will then argue that if one could conceive of God as not existing, then the being one imagines as not existing is not the greatest possible being. Call the God we can imagine not existing God\*. God\* and God have all of the same properties except that God\* does not exist. But, Anselm will argue, certainly it is better to exist than not to exist; therefore God is greater than God\*. And since the very definition of God is that being greater than which nothing can be conceived, then a being that shares all the properties of God must exist because if He failed to exist He would not be the greatest conceivable being; he would be God\*, not God.

Chapter six argues that God can perceive without having a body. He is pure spirit, with no material part. God can perceive, is omnipotent, compassionate and lacks the active "feel" of the emotions. Thus, God cares for all of His creation, but He does not "feel" his caring in the same sense that we (partly) material beings do. Anselm then argues it is better to have these properties than to lack them. In chapter seven, Anselm argues that God is not only omnipotent but incapable of certain things - He cannot do evil and He cannot fail to have maximal power. Yet how could this be? The reason for this is because only God's nature prevents Him from doing these things, not any outside force. Thus, his omnipotence is not impugned.

Chapter eight explains how God can be compassionate but also lack the feeling of compassion ("passionless" in Anselm's terms). God is compassionate in the sense that we experience and feel His care; but he is passionless because he does not have the feeling, the "affection" of compassion.

Chapter nine introduces another set of problems. God is perfectly just, yet He forgives sinners and has mercy on them. But shouldn't God only be good to those who are good and punish those who sin? It turns out that God's compassion and justice are compatible because through atonement, God will make the wicked good and thus worthy of forgiveness. God's compassion enables God to be just. Chapter ten adds to this that God is not just with respect to us because He does not punish us for sin (if and only if we atone through faith, that is). He is just to Himself because He does what is perfectly good. Chapter eleven argues that we cannot fully comprehend this fact.



In Chapter twelve, Anselm states that God is identical with his own life, and is equivalent to all of His properties. Thus, God is not only good, but He is identical with goodness. He is not only perfect but is identical with perfection. This is a complicated idea expressed quickly. In short, Anselm believes that the properties of goodness, perfection, beauty, etc. exist independently of human evaluation; they are "forms" in the Platonic sense (following the great Greek philosopher, Plato). But these forms are embodied in the being of God; they are in a sense identical with God, and do not exist independently of Him. In chapter thirteen, Anselm argues for God's infinity and eternity. Time and space cannot contain Him; He has no beginning or end. In chapter fourteen, Anselm follows up by arguing that God can be seen but also not seen by those who follow and seek Him. We can understand aspects of Him, but we cannot understand Him in his totality.

Chapter fifteen gives us the punch line. Not only is God identical with His attributes, but He is identical with His existence. He exists necessarily. Any being like God that did not exist, therefore, could not be God. It would be God\* instead (Anselm does not use the term "God\*"). Therefore, since God cannot be conceived of without conceiving of Him as existing, He must exist. This argument is not explicit in the text but can be inferred from the foregoing. Anselm points out explicitly that God is the greatest being that can be conceived but that He is also greater than we can conceive. And chapter sixteen points out that for this reason God is in a sense "unapproachable". He also contains "harmony, fragrance, sweetness" and "pleasantness" to all the senses at once, despite being ineffable, as stated in chapter seventeen.

In chapter eighteen, Anselm argues that God is "life, wisdom, eternity, and every true God". Further, God is perfectly simple; He has no parts. If He had parts, He could come apart and would therefore not necessarily exist and fail to be eternal. This means that all of the attributes of God are a unity as well; thus, "wisdom, eternity, beauty", etc. are all aspects of the same thing, God.

Chapter nineteen argues that God both exists in every place and every time but does not exist in any place or time because all times and places exist within Him. Thus, in chapter twenty, Anselm argues that God is before and beyond all things, including the eternal things. He is also present as a whole at each time and place, not only as a part (otherwise, He would have parts). The eternity of God, therefore, contains all times and thus, in a sense, each time contains all times.

This is the "age of the age", so says chapter twenty-one. In chapter twenty-two, Anselm argues that God "is what he is and who he is". He is equivalent to His definition or essence, in other words. Furthermore, every other being requires God to be happy and to exist. In chapter twenty-three, Anselm argues that God is equally the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. He describes the complex relationships between the figures within the Trinity. All three persons are coequal, despite the fact that the Son is begotten of the Father and the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son together. In chapter twenty-four, Anselm maintains that God is essentially a Creator and that His goodness is beyond magnitude. It follows, therefore, that creating is a great good. And those who know and enjoy God have joy beyond measure, as argued in chapter twenty-five.

Chapter twenty-six argues that the Joy of knowing God is "full" or perfect. And will have joy to the extent that they love God. Here the Proslogium draws to a close.



# Monologium, Chapters I - VI

## Monologium, Chapters I - VI Summary and Analysis

The Monologium is much longer than the Proslogium and must be split up into parts. Chapters I - VI describe the relationship of God to His existence. In the preface, Anselm argues that His argument, as in the Proslogium, is faith seeking understanding. His arguments will be consistent with Christian tradition. Chapters one and two prefigure the ontological argument, arguing that a being which is "best, and greatest and highest of all existing beings" must exist. The argument here, however, is importantly different. God must exist because He is the standard by which all other things and the properties of those things are judged. Suppose that two objects both possess goodness, but we do not know which is better. When we compare them, we must implicitly rely on some standard or ideal of goodness. This ideal of goodness must be perfect goodness, otherwise it would not be an ideal. And the ideal must exist, otherwise we could not truly say of anything that it is better than another thing. And this ideal contains all ideals, for the same reason; this being is God.

Chapters three and four argue that there must exist a being that is the source of all existence. The existence of everything else is derived from some other being, caused to be by something else. But this cannot be true of every single being, for some being had to originate being; this being is the best of all beings since it is the source of all being and therefore exists in the maximal sense. Chapter four continues the argument and mixes it with the argument of chapters one and two, arguing that the inequality of dignity and existence of all things comes in degrees and that therefore there must be an ideal by which to compare them; this idea must exist. Chapter five argues that this being must exist through itself. And chapter six maintains that God could not have been brought into existence by anything else but does not derive His existence through nothing. Anselm then argues that this is conceivable.





# Monologium, Chapters VII - XXVIII

## Monologium, Chapters VII - XXVIII Summary and Analysis

Anselm turns to describing and deriving God's other properties, now that He has derived God's existence. He will first turn to God's nature as a creator, then to other properties.

In chapter seven, Anselm argues that all beings other than God derive their nature from God and exist through Him. Anselm explains in the following chapter that God must create from nothing. Anselm realizes that creation from nothing is a puzzling idea and argues that the concept of nothingness can be understood in multiple senses; he settles on a third sense. Chapter nine follows this by arguing that everything God created existed in one sense already because they were ideas in the mind of God. And in chapter ten, Anselm points out that these thoughts are true expressions of what are created, just as the idea an artist has for a painting is similar to the painting. But this analogy is "incomplete", he claims in the next chapter, in part because the expression of God is identical with God, since God is identical with all of his properties (as argued in chapter twelve). All things live through God; He is in all things and throughout them, so argued chapters thirteen and fourteen. Chapter fifteen argues that we can only ascribe certain properties to God within our understanding. We can understand that God is better than anything we can conceive, for instance, but we cannot understand his supremacy in its truest sense; we can only conceive of God negatively, in terms of properties he fails to lack.

Chapter sixteen raises a challenge: since God is equivalent to all his properties (like justice), can't we understand God when we understand these properties (like when we understand justice)? Anselm denies that our understanding of these ideas allow us to wholly understand God as they are only representations of Him to us, and not the whole being. Chapter seventeen reiterates God's simplicity; His existence and essence are the same. The only absolutely true thing that can be said of God is that He is what He is (as stated in the Old Testament, God's name is the "I AM WHO I AM").

Chapters eighteen through twenty-four describe God's eternity and omnipresence. God has no beginning or end, and nothing will exist before or after Him. He exists in every place and time but neither in any place or any time, yet He exists in all places and times and none of them without contradiction. God is best understood as existing every "where" rather than in every "place" and is best understood as existing "always" rather than at every "time". (These ideas are already explained in the Proslogium).

Chapters twenty-five through twenty-nine discuss the fact that God is an unchanging substance. He cannot change by what Anselm calls "accidents", or contingent properties of a thing, such as the brownness of a horse (rather than the horseness of a horse). Acquiring accidents is a process of change; thus, since God can't change through acquiring accidents, He cannot change. God is a substance but also transcends



substance (a substance is something that can exist by itself; whereas accidents can only exist through substances - brownness is an accident - it only exists as a property of other things. But a horse is a substance, being able to exist on its own). God, despite being a substance, is not properly listed among common substances; He exists simply and created substances cannot be accurately compared to Him. Unlike other substances, God's idea of Himself is equivalent to Himself; and since God's idea of Himself is identical to Him, He and His idea of Himself exist as one substance, making Him quite different from other substances.



# Monologium, Chapters XXX - LXIII

## Monologium, Chapters XXX - LXIII Summary and Analysis

Chapters thirty through sixty-three discuss God's Trinitarian nature. We will see Anselm argue that God is one being in one sense, but three beings - Father, Son and Holy Spirit - in another.

Chapter thirty argues that the expression of God consists of only one "Word". God has one ultimate description. And Anselm argues in chapter thirty-one that this "word" is not like the name of created beings; but instead is more like their reality. In other words, the Word exists as a thing. God expresses Himself through a "coeternal Word", meaning that God's conception of Himself and His relation to the world is The Word that has always existed with Him. This is the argument of chapter thirty-two. In chapters thirty-three through thirty-five, we discover that God utters "Himself" with a single "Word" that is the same substance as Himself. And this Word helps to "express" or create the world. And in fact, the Word is the only method of creating the world. This Word is Jesus Christ, following The Gospel of John, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God."

Chapter thirty-six explains that God creates and knows His creation in an incomprehensible manner. And in chapter thirty-seven, we learn that God and His Word bear the same relationship to all creation, but do not sustain these relations separately, but as one being. Chapter thirty-eight argues that we cannot understand how they are two but that they must be so due to force of argument. In chapter thirty-nine Anselm argues that the Word "derives" existence from God through His Birth, but not His creation, as the Nicene Creed expresses that Jesus was "begotten, not made".

God is a true parent and The Word is His Son, so Anselm argues in chapter forty. In chapter forty-one we discover the God "begets" in the most perfect and true way but is also "begotten" in the most perfect and true way, and in chapter forty-two, Anselm argues that God the Father has the property of being the Father, and the Son has the property of being the Son. Anselm argues in chapter forty-three that God the Father and the Son both possess properties together as God but also possess separate properties. And in forty-four, Anselm continues by arguing that the Son is the essence of the Father. The Father is not as appropriate called the essence of the Son; The Son is 'of' the Father and so He is the 'virtue, wisdom, etc.' of the Father. This is the argument of chapter forty-five.

Chapter forty-six explains that these truths can be explained but can only be conceived of indirectly. Thus, chapter forty-seven can explain without making it possible to fully understand the Son of God is "the intelligence of intelligence and the Truth of truth". God is identical with His attributes. So He is His intelligence, but the Son is the essence



of the Father, so He is also intelligence. In this way, the Son is the intelligence of intelligence. This is explained further in chapter forty-eight.

Chapter forty-nine begins the explanation of the third element of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. From Chapters fifty to fifty-eight, we learn the following about the Holy Spirit: that it is the love the Father and the Son share for one another, that this love proceeds from them both; they both love themselves and each other equally and this love is as great as both of them. The love is identical with God but is with both the Father and the Son at once. And the Holy Spirit "proceeds" as a whole from God and the Son but is still only one love, and it is not the Son of the Father and the Son. Anselm argues that the Father begets but is not Himself begotten, while the Son is begotten but does not beget; the Holy Spirit however fails to be unbegotten or begotten. In fact, this love, the Holy Spirit, is both uncreated and a creator, just as the Father and the Son are. And there is one and only one creative and uncreated being. Thus, this love can be called the "Spirit" of the Father and the Son together. Finally, we learn that just as the Son is the Father's essence, the Spirit is the essence of both the Father and the Son.

Chapters fifty-nine through sixty-three describes the relations between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They all exist within each other. But this relation is not required for the others to love one another and themselves. There is one Father, one Son and one Spirit, despite the fact that they each exist within each other. And despite the fact that they all exist within the Son and the Son is begotten, they are not all begotten. And despite the fact that they all exist within the Father and the Father begets, there are not three fathers.

# Monologium, Chapters LXIV - LXXIX

## Monologium, Chapters LXIV - LXXIX Summary and Analysis

Chapters sixty-four through seventy-nine take a new direction. Anselm has argued that God exists, has all the properties traditionally attributed to Him and is a Trinity. He described the relationship between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in detail. Now he turns to argue that one should believe these facts. Anselm argues that, despite the fact that we cannot truly understand the nature of the Trinity, we should believe in it. He explains how we can reach the truth about a matter when discussing an ineffable subject. The best we can do is understand how there is no contradiction between any two statements about the Trinity; thus, we can understand how it is not false. But we cannot do more.

The rational mind is the closest method of approaching God and is the "mirror and image" of Him as well. The rational mind is the divine part of us. And the reason that the rational mind was created was so that it might love its Creator, God. When the soul loves God, he is blessed and God returns love to His creatures, so that He is blessed all the more. And any soul that hates God will be miserable for all of time. We must be aware that each human soul is immortal and so will be either completely happy or completely unhappy. Souls will be awarded according to justice but their efforts must be directed towards the good; the presence of God should be hoped for and we should believe in God by seeking Him. We should believe in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in the same way, each apart from one another and each as one. Anselm maintains that one cannot merely believe, but one's belief must be accompanied by the love of God.

God can be properly called both three and one; and the essence of the Trinity is God; He "alone is lord and ruler of all." Thus ends Anselm's attempt to demonstrate the basic truths of Christian doctrine.



# Cur Deus Homo, Book I, Chapters I - XXV

## Cur Deus Homo, Book I, Chapters I - XXV Summary and Analysis

Anselm's task of defending the Christian faith is not complete, for we must understand how God became man, why He did it and why He had to die and be resurrected. Cur Deus Homo was written to answer these various questions. In fact, "Cur Deus Homo" translates as "Why God Became Man". The book is divided up into two, the first of which addresses the problem which of why atonement needs to occur, and how it could occur if it were to occur. The second book shows how Jesus could make satisfaction for the sins of humanity. The summary begins with the first book.

Cur Deus Homo is not written as an extended argument. Instead, Anselm represents his argument in dialogue form. Thus, Boso plays the challenger to Anselm's theory of the atonement. Boso is a Christian but he is worried that the doctrine of Christ's atonement for sins does not make sense. Chapter one informs the reader that Christians have been ridiculed for their theory of the atonement, particularly for the idea that God become man. Anselm argues that a response is required, and that a dialogical format will make the argument clearer; thus, he introduces Boso. Chapter two has Boso argue that while belief by faith must precede belief due to reason, faith should still seek understanding. So Boso asks Anselm to explain the atonement to him. Anselm admires Boso's "zeal" for understanding.

Chapters three through eight discuss the objections of the "infidels" to the theory of the atonement. They say that Christians do injustice to God by claiming He was born of a virgin, whereas Anselm vehemently denies this because the incarnation is the method of God expressing divine compassion. Chapter four discusses the attitude of the infidels, that they regard Christians as fools, but Anselm replies that God would not be good if He did not at least try to reconcile humanity to Himself. And chapter five maintains that only God could redeem humanity, as human sin is too serious for any human to do it.

Chapter six has Boso give the infidels' primary objections: Why can't God redeem humanity without the Incarnation? And even if He incarnated, why must He die on the cross? How could demanding the blood of an innocent man possibly be demanded by a good God? Certainly God could have simply reconciled man to God with a "single word." Chapter seven follows this with Boso's concern that the devil, being wicked, could not have had a just claim to the lives of humanity. Why would he even seem to have such a claim? And why would God have to free men in accord with Satan's claim? Chapter eight piles on still more concerns. Infidels argue that Christ's condescension to not only become man but to act as he did was improper, not only for God but even for a man. Why would a righteous man willingly go to his death, not to mention God Himself?



How could this be appropriate? It appears then that Christ did not go willingly to His death. The Scripture seems to support this interpretation.

Chapters nine through twenty-five begin and end Anselm's set-up for Book II. He will outline the structure of a reply, showing how Christ was not compelled to offer himself to die, how humans must make satisfaction for sin but can't, and why humanity will be saved at all (to replace the fallen angels). Anselm maintains that Christ died by his free choice and that the Scripture must be interpreted accordingly. The necessity of Christ's death was self-imposed, not imposed from without. Christ desires to die in order to make satisfaction for sin, which occurs when men and angels fail to give God what they owe him. Satisfaction for sin is made when God is given sufficient reason to forgive sin. A debt must be paid, a debt that no man or angel can pay by him or herself. Some worry that God shouldn't forgive sins merely by compassion, and they are right. For if God is to be good, He must be both compassionate and just, and His justice demands satisfaction. A critic might ask how God could be harmed such that He would be owed anything. Anselm notes that while God cannot be harmed, His honor can be damaged, and His honor can be restored through punishing those who do not render Him full obedience. However, there is a sense in which God's natural honor cannot be impugned, yet we can fail to honor Him and thereby damage His creation "disturb[ing] the order and creation of the universe."

One disruption of the universe was the fall of a large proportion of the angels. The initial harmony of creation, on Anselm's view, must be restored. The fallen angels cannot be redeemed and other angels cannot take their places. Only humans can (the reasons for this are obscure). Further, the number of holy men will eventually equal the number of fallen angels.

Thus, man must be saved to restore the initial harmony of the universe, but he cannot be saved unless someone makes satisfaction for his sin. And this satisfaction has to be in proportion to the guilt of the person. But the problem is that a finite sin against an infinitely good being - God - incurs an infinite debt, something no finite being could ever hope to repay. Thus, sin is an incomprehensible burden. Men displayed spectacular contempt for God when they gave themselves over to Satan as a result. And since men took themselves from God and disrupted the harmony of His creation, they are beyond hope without the mercy of God, for they cannot repay their debt. And because of this, men can never be truly happy because the only thing that can make them truly happy is knowing God. He can only be happy if he atones. Since God is both just and compassionate, then the atonement of humanity through God's sacrifice is "necessarily possible". Here ends Book I; Anselm will now explain how Christ accomplishes this atonement.



# Cur Deus Homo, Book II, Chapters I - XXII

## Cur Deus Homo, Book II, Chapters I - XXII Summary and Analysis

Book I set up the problem that atonement is needed to solve: man is alienated from God by his sin and has incurred a debt to God that he cannot possibly pay. But atonement is possible through God's mercy. Chapters one, two and three explain that man was initially made holy so that he could enjoy God and that he would never had died unless he sinned, for it would be inappropriate for something to perish had it no defeat. Men, when they are resurrected, will have the same bodies they had in this world.

Chapters four and five argue that God must complete His original plan to bring about man's enjoyment of Him and that while His goodness compels Him to do this, He still does it freely since the compulsion comes from His nature and is not imposed on Him from outside of Him. Chapters six and seven argue that only a particular sort of being can make atonement - a being that is simultaneously God and man. He must be God because only a God could be perfectly good and only a God can make up an infinite debt; but He must be a man in order to atone for men as a species. He must therefore be fully God and fully man. Thus, in chapter eight, Anselm argues that God must incarnate as one from Adam's race. Further, He must be born of a woman; otherwise, He would be disconnected from a human lineage. Chapter nine emphasizes that only one of the persons within the Trinity can take on the nature of man, for multiple persons cannot incarnate as one person.

Chapters ten through eighteen explain the properties the God-man has such that He is free to sin and yet is in another sense unfree to sin, how He dies without sinning, how He suffers while remaining happy and so on. The God-Man - in this case, Christ - does not die because of a debt He has incurred. He cannot sin, but only due to His nature; thus, He can sin in the sense that no one can compel Him not to sin. He dies of His own free choice, and yet despite His perfection, His ability to die is not a part of human nature. He is limited in power and knowledge in His human nature, as we are, but He is not miserable because His divine nature still contemplates God. And while He is limited in His capacities, He still has perfect knowledge in His divine nature.

The fact that the God-man offers Himself as a sacrifice to God the Father is an act of such supreme love and sacrifice that it outweighs all human sin and allows God to forgive sinners on the God-man's behalf without violating His justice. This love is so great that it can even purchase the forgiveness of those who killed Him.

It is also important to emphasize that the God-man was not born with original sin despite His being born in a lineage of sin. And since He did not have original sin, He did not die necessarily; however, He would not have been born unless it was His destiny to





die, again, because the necessity of His death is one imposed by His nature, not from without. For God, His action is neither necessary, nor impossible. He experiences no coercive necessity since His actions proceed from His will alone. The second half of chapter eighteen shows how Christ's life pays God for humanity's sins. There is a sense in which Christ should suffer, because it is in line with His commitment to atonement; but He has no positive duty to suffer.

Chapters nineteen through twenty-two wrap up *Cur Deus Homo*. Anselm argues that human salvation follows from Christ's death by faith in His death for humanity's sins. He praises God's great and just compassion; he points out that despite God's love, justice and compassion, Satan and the fallen angels cannot be redeemed through Christ's death because Christ was a God-man, not a God-angel. And God's justice demands that He not become a God-angel because the Fallen Angels fell without any aid, whereas humanity fell only with the aid of Satan. Anselm concludes by arguing that he has shown how the core ideas of the Old and New Testaments are true.

# In Behalf of the Fool

## In Behalf of the Fool Summary and Analysis

The Appendix of Anselm: Basic Writings contains two documents, Gaunilo's "In Behalf of the Fool" and Anselm's reply. Gaunilo's piece is a critique of Anselm's ontological argument in the Proslogium. Gaunilo's argument is that Anselm's Ontological Argument, if correct, proves too much. He gives the famous counterexample of the greatest conceivable island. To explain, on Anselm's view, God is greater than a being with all of God's properties save existence (God\*) because God possesses existence and God\* does not. And since it is greater to exist than not to exist, God must exist because if He didn't, He would not be the greatest conceivable being. Gaunilo draws an analogy with the greatest conceivable island. The Greatest Conceivable Island is greater than an island with all of the Island's properties save existence (Island\*) because the Island possesses existence and Island\* does not. And since it is greater to exist than not to exist, the Island must exist, because if it didn't, it would not be the greatest conceivable island (Like Anselm, Gaunilo does not use the Island/island\* terminology; they are for purposes of explication only.)

Gaunilo submits that this is absurd and would show that the greatest conceivable X - where X is anything at all - must exist. Therefore, something must be wrong with the argument. On Gaunilo's view, the argument fails because it confuses what exists in the understanding with what exists in reality. One cannot infer the existence of X in reality from its existence in the understanding; that is a fallacy.



# Anselm's Apologetic, Chapters I - X

## Anselm's Apologetic, Chapters I - X Summary and Analysis

Anselm responds to Gaunilo in ten brief chapters. Anselm first denies it is a fallacy to deduce the existence of a being in reality from one that exists in the understanding. On Anselm's view, what we can conceive and cannot conceive is a guide to what can and cannot exist. Thus, our understanding somehow links up with the world and is not wholly severed from it. Our inability to conceive of God not existing can tell us whether He exists. He continues to maintain that God can be conceived of, since this is something Gaunilo briefly doubted.

Anselm also disputes Gaunilo's island example, arguing that the Island is not analogous to God because God possesses existence by definition, whereas the island does not. He continues to press the argument that there is a tie between understanding and conceivability, which Gaunilo does not acknowledge, and he argues in chapter five that Gaunilo misquoted his argument. A being does not exist because it is greater than all other beings (as Gaunilo represented his argument); a being can only be inferred to exist if it is the greatest conceivable being. He maintains that Gaunilo has contradicted himself by arguing that unreal objects can be understood but that understanding an object meanings understanding it while knowing that it really exists. Anselm again disputes that God can be conceived to exist.

Anselm's response oscillates between disputing Gaunilo on various points and returning to the points again. The basic take away responses are these: (i) What we can understand is a guide to what we can conceive in the case of the being greater than which nothing can be conceived; (ii) God is conceivable in the sense that He can be imagined in the understanding and could exist in reality, (iii) Gaunilo has misrepresented Anselm's argument with the greatest conceivable island (the 'lost island') and (iv) the lost island does not have the same properties as God.



# Characters

## St. Anselm of Canterbury

St. Anselm of Canterbury (1033 - 1109) is one of the most important philosophers of the medieval period, third only to St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas. He produced many of the most important arguments in the history natural theology, the branch of theology that attempts to establish religious truths the reason alone. Anselm: Basic Writings contains Anselm's most famous works in natural theology - The Prologium, Monologium and Cur Deus Homo. Anselm believes that while faith should be the ultimate source of Christian belief, that faith can seek understanding and look for reasons that justify it. And Anselm believes that unaided reason is extremely powerful. Not only can it establish the existence of God in multiple ways, some arguments so easy that only a "fool" could doubt them, but it can also establish all of God's properties, the relations between those properties, God's Trinitarian Nature and the relationship between the three members of the Trinity. Furthermore, unaided reason can establish that the second person of the Trinity, Christ, must become man to reconcile humanity to God. Thus Anselm: Basic Writings is almost exclusively a long chain of extremely dense and complicated arguments. Despite this, Anselm shows his deep faith and religiosity when he argues for the primacy of faith and phrases many of his writings in the form of prayers and praises to God. Further, Anselm plays a role as a member of a dialogue in Cur Deus Homo with a fictional interlocutor, Boso.

## God

While God, the prime divinity of the Judeo-Christian tradition, does not speak in the book, Anselm refers to Him on nearly every page. All three major works concern Him and defending not only His existence but a vast number of facts about Him. God possesses no less than the following properties: He exists necessarily, is perfectly good, all-knowing, all-powerful, eternal, indestructible, immaterial, beyond time and space, compassionate, just, perfectly beautiful, the Truth itself, maximally great, is merciful, uncircumscribed, greater than can be conceived, unapproachable light, harmony, wisdom, and every true good. He is also simultaneously three persons, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, that are distinct from one another according to some of their properties but not according to others. God the Father begets God the Son, and God the Son is the essence of God the Father. God the Holy Spirit is the love that God the Father and God the Son have for one another and is itself a personality. Further, God has a plan for fallen humanity. Humanity must be reconciled to God, but God cannot be just and simply forgive them out of mercy. Instead, He must demand satisfaction for sin. Yet no man can repay this debt on His own, so the second person of the Trinity, God the Son, Jesus Christ, must become simultaneously God and man by taking human nature into Himself. He must be born of a virgin, be sinless, obey God's law perfectly, freely offer Himself to God the Father as a sacrifice for humanity to satisfy God to the extent that God the Father can justly forgive humanity due to His mercy.



## **Gaunilo of Marmoutier**

A monk from Marmoutier who criticizes Anselm's ontological argument.

## **Jesus Christ**

The second person of the Trinity, both identical and not identical with God the Father and the Godhead (the being that is simultaneously three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit). In some sense, Jesus is not really a separate character from God.

## **The Holy Spirit**

The third person of the Trinity, both identical and not identical with God the Father and God the Son. In fact, the Holy Spirit is the love that the Father and the Son share for one another. In some sense, the Holy Spirit is not really a separate character from God or Jesus.

## **Boso**

Anselm's imaginary interlocutor in *Cur Deus Homo*.

## **The Devil**

The greatest of all the angels, the Devil, Baal, Beelzebub, Satan, Lucifer, etc. chose to rebel against God, was cast down to earth and constantly tempts humanity to fall away from God's grace. The Devil is irredeemable.

## **The Angels**

The immaterial beings that worship God in heaven. At one point in time, beyond the measure of human time, the angels had a war and a third of them "fell", or rejected God.

## **The Fallen Angels**

The Fallen Angels are those angels that rejected God and now reside in hell and on the earth, harassing humanity and tempting them to sin. The "demons" cannot be redeemed and must be replaced by redeemed humanity.



## **Humanity**

The entirety of the human race as extended across all times and places in which humans will ever exist. Humanity is fallen and sinful, but can be redeemed and reconciled to God through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ if they have faith in Christ's promises. Humans can also use their reason to know various truths about God they first arrived at through faith.

## **Saved Humanity**

Saved humans are those humans who believed in Jesus Christ's promise of atonement and live with God forever in the Heavenly Realm.

## **Damned Humanity**

Damned humans are those humans who rejected Jesus Christ's atoning sacrifice by refusing to have faith in Him. They will live in eternal misery and torment at the hands of the demons.



# Objects/Places

## The Forms

The Forms are hard to describe. More or less, they are the most pure representations of our concepts but are embodied in the world independently of human thought. Thus, our idea of goodness is a mere approximation of the Form of Goodness, which is the perfect ideal of Goodness. But the Form of Goodness exists independently from what humans believe about them. The Forms are an idea of Plato's that Anselm makes great use of. The Forms are God's ideas, on Anselm's view. However, God is also identical with the Forms, which are themselves ultimately identical with one another.

## Conceivable Ideas

Conceivable ideas are those ideas humans are capable of imagining. There are, in fact, inconceivable ideas, ones that either cannot be imagined at all or can only be imagined in part or negatively. Conceivable ideas play a foundational role in Anselm's ontological argument and in his response to Gaunilo. The distinction between conceivable and inconceivable ideas is absolutely crucial to understanding Anselm's argument.

## Substance

A substance is any entity that can exist of its own. Consider persons, horses, gold and angels. Each is a substance, a self-subsisting entity. Substances are created by God, but they are self-subsisting because they do not exist in virtue of being properties of some further thing, like accidents. Instead, they are the possessors of accidents. God is a substance in some sense and not in another.

## Accident

An accident is a contingent property of a substance: brownness, goodness, and pleasantness are all accidents. A human can be pleasant, in which case a substance (the human) possesses a contingent property (pleasantness) which it could lose.

## Existence

Existence is both a place and an object. It is not simply the set of all existing things. Rather, on Anselm's view, existence is something substantial which objects can fail to possess or possess in degrees. Only God has existence maximally, whereas humans only possess existence partially. As God perfects us, we exist more; to put it another way, we become all that we can be. Existence, for Anselm, is a sort of property that a being can lack or possess. Many later philosophers criticized Anselm for treating



existence as a property, on the grounds that since a thing must already exist in order to have properties, existence by itself cannot be a property.

## Goodness

The Form of the Good. This is the mind-independent ideal of Goodness by which all good things are judged. On Anselm's Platonic view, good things "participate" in Goodness. And God is identical with the Good.

## Atonement

Atonement in Cur Deus Homo is what Jesus Christ achieves when He dies on the cross. He atones for sins by satisfying God's just demand to punish wickedness. Cur Deus Homo is an extended attempt to make sense of this idea.

## Justice

The Form of the Just. This is the mind-independent ideal of Justice by which all just things are judged. On Anselm's Platonic view, just things "participate" in justice. And God is identical with Justice. God must be just because God is identical with justice. For this reason, he cannot act unjustly and therefore cannot forgive humanity without demanding satisfaction for sin.

## Faith

In Christian theology, to have faith is to believe in Christian doctrine, but not necessarily without evidence. It is to trust that God's promises are true and that what He reveals to us about Him is true. For Anselm, faith must come before understanding in order for reason to be able to properly function. Reason unmoored from faith will inevitably err.

## Understanding

Understanding a truth is grasping it through reason and/or observation. The understanding is the part of the soul that understands. For Anselm, faith seeks understanding, in that faith believes first and then seeks to understand what it believes.

## The Cross

The cross is the symbol (and t-shaped wooden cross) on which Jesus Christ was crucified. Christians believe that the crucifixion reconciled God and man for those who believe.



## **Heaven**

Heaven is where the blessed exist, God, the angels and redeemed humanity.

## **Hell**

Hell is where the damned exist, Satan, the fallen angels and damned humanity.

## **The Lost Island**

Gaunilo's famous counterexample to Anselm's ontological argument.

# Themes

## God Exists

If there is any major theme in Anselm: Basic Writings it is that God exists. While presumed true in *Cur Deus Homo*, the existence of God is to be established in both the *Monologium* and the *Proslogium*. While the *Monologium* was written before the *Proslogium*, the *Proslogium* comes first in the book. In the *Proslogium*, Anselm argues that God is the being "greater than which nothing can be conceived." In other words, God is the greatest possible or greatest conceivable being. Anselm argues that since it is better for a thing to exist than not to exist, then God can only be the greatest possible/conceivable thing if He exists. Therefore, he concludes God exists. The argument, however, is much more complicated than this and must be studied with care.

Anselm's argument in the *Monologium* is different, however. Anselm follows Plato in arguing that the only way that we can justifiably compare two objects in their possession of some property is if there exists in the world a standard by which the two objects may be judged. Thus, if we compare two humans in beauty, then there must be a standard of perfect beauty by which we are judging, if we are judging truly. Therefore, on Plato's view, the Form of Beauty - the standard of beauty - must exist. For Anselm, there must be a standard of goodness and of existence, in order to judge whether things are good and whether they exist. Further, there must be a being through which all other beings participate in deriving their being. But this being cannot exist through anything else, since it is the standard of being. As a result, there is a being that exists necessarily. And that being is what we call God.

## Jesus Christ Died for Sins

The theme of *Cur Deus Homo*, the third of the three books contained in Anselm: Basic Writings, is that Jesus Christ died for the sake of all humanity, in order to allow God to justly forgive the sins of all humans who would believe in Him. But Anselm must be careful to make a detailed case for why this atoning and sacrificial death was necessary in order to combat the questions and mocking criticisms of the "infidels". Anselm argues in response to Boso's concerns that humanity is fallen and that they have taken something from God by corrupting themselves and disrupting the harmony of the universe that God created. Therefore, humans owe God a debt. However, a sin against God, because God is infinitely good, deserves an infinite punishment. The debt therefore is simply too much for any human to pay. God cannot forgive human sin without satisfaction for sin because He is just, and demanding punishment for wickedness is demanded by justice. However, God is also merciful and compassionate, so He must do whatever is necessary to allow humans to atone in a way that is compatible with His being justice. The only way that this can occur is if one person of the Trinity becomes a God-Man - a being that is fully God and fully man. He must be fully God in order to have the worth sufficient to balance the immeasurable debt



incurred by human sin. Yet He must be fully man in order to atone for the sins of man. He must die in order to display His love and mercy for humanity and do God such a great honor and service that God can forgive humans on behalf of Christ's sacrifice. Thus, if humans believe, they can be reconciled to God through Christ's death and resurrection.

## Faith Seeking Understanding

Clearly Anselm believes that reason is extraordinarily powerful. On Anselm's view, reason can establish a vast number of truths about incredibly esoteric matters, such as the sense in which God exists in every place and every time and the sense in which He exists in no place and no time. But the power of reason or understanding has an important qualification. Anselm believes that faith must precede reason. In other words, one must already have faith that Christian doctrine is true in order to have understanding. Anselm follows Augustine in saying that he believes so that he can come to understand. For many modern people, understanding should come before faith, giving one good reasons to believe. But on Anselm's view, this gets things precisely backwards. Unless one has a firm foundational worldview and set of doctrines to believe, then reasoning cannot lead one anywhere in particular. Reasoning will be led astray with logical errors, bad starting premises and corrupt conclusions. Faith gives reason a starting place and helps it (in part through the grace of God) to reach true conclusions through legitimate inferences and deductions. When faith seeks understanding, this means that one accepts Christian doctrine based on faith alone, but that one should (or at least can) seek to understand why one's beliefs are true and what reasoning supports one's beliefs. One should also use reason to prevent doubt and to refute and confound heretics and infidels.

# Style

## Perspective

Despite the two introductions written by people other than St. Anselm, St. Anselm's perspective is the perspective of the work as a whole. He is the author of all three major books in Anselm: Basic Writings and the appendix, save Gaunilo's reply to the fool. His perspective is that of a Christian philosopher, one who believes by faith alone, but seeks to understand one's faith through the use of reason. Anselm believes that reason has extraordinary power, as evidenced by his complex and dense reasoning about extremely abstract and esoteric topics. He is a committed orthodox Christian of the eleventh century, believing fervently that God exists, possesses the properties typically attributed to Him by Christians, that God is a trinity and that the second person of the Trinity died on the Cross for the sins of all humans, who can take part in his atoning sacrifice through faith. Anselm is also a Platonist in his metaphysics. The ancient Greek philosopher Plato believed that reason was the highest and noblest part of the human and that humans through reason could come to knowledge of the most real aspect of reality - the realm of forms or pure ideas that exist independently from the world and constitute reality through the world's participation in the forms themselves. Plato's metaphysics had a dramatic influence on the theology of Christian from Christianity's first century to its thirteenth, completely dominating Christian doctrine, until Aquinas introduced Aristotelian elements (ideas of the great Greek philosopher Aristotle, who was Plato's student) into Christian doctrine. Anselm is also the bishop of Canterbury and thus seeks an aggressive defense of Christian doctrine against heretics and infidels. He therefore has a perspective of certainty and zeal.

## Tone

The tone of Anselm's writings is concentrated, abstract, enthusiastic, pious, zealous and often dry. Because Anselm is a philosopher and a priest, he is intently focused on defending Christian doctrine against all challengers. Thus, the prose is focused, proceeding steadily step by step from premise to premise and conclusion to conclusion. These major works of the book contain dozens of chapters, each in defense of a particular idea which itself fits within a book length argument for a single conclusion. The work, however, is also extremely abstract. A reader who has never studied professional philosophy, particularly the philosophy of Plato and Christian theology, will find the reading daunting. Anselm speaks quickly and densely about a wide range of issues, from the nature of the Trinity, which Anselm himself believes to be largely ineffable, to the details moral argument for why God became man and how His death atones for sins. Yet, Anselm often writes with great enthusiasm, eager to demonstrate his conclusions. The Proslogium is actually written as a prayer to God, to demonstrate His existence to others. Anselm is praising God side by side with making his details philosophical arguments. Thus, the tone of the book is pious because it seeks to worship and praise God through its arguments. The book has a zealous tone as well.

Anselm is excited about his faith and convinced that others are in error. He stays absolutely loyal to orthodox Christian dogmas, calling those who disagree or criticize heretics and infidels. Finally, the tone can be dry at times because of the highly dense and abstract nature of the arguments.

## Structure

The structure of *Anselm: Basic Writings* is complex. The second edition of the book from which this study guide is constructed contains two introductions, an introduction to the first edition and a new introduction to the second edition. The book also contains a brief preface. Next, the book contains three large books of Anselm's: the *Proslogium*, the *Monologium* and *Cur Deus Homo*. *Cur Deus Homo* is itself divided into two smaller books. The appendix contains Gaunilo's response to Anselm's *Proslogium* and Anselm's reply to Gaunilo. The authors chose to place the *Proslogium* at the beginning of the book despite the fact that the *Monologium* was published before it and the *Proslogium* discusses the inadequacies of the *Monologium*. And the appendix of documents concerning the *Proslogium* is placed after both the *Monologium* and *Cur Deus Homo*.

The three major books and Anselm's reply to Gaunilo are all divided into small chapters. In the *Monologium*, *Proslogium* and Anselm's reply to Gaunilo, each small chapter gives one or more arguments for a particular point. These premises all add up to support Anselm's general conclusion at the end of each book. And the book contains brief statements of the point of each chapter. The *Proslogium* contains twenty-six chapters, most no more than a page long. It also includes a brief preface. The *Monologium* also contains a preface, and has seventy-three chapters, also around a page long. The reply to Gaunilo contains ten chapters of similar length. *Cur Deus Homo*, however, is different. It is written in the form of a dialogue between Anselm and a fictional interlocutor, Boso. Boso presents challenges to the Christian doctrine of the atonement and reacts to Anselm's replies. *Cur Deus Homo* is divided into two books, one setting up the reason for the atonement, showing how it is possible, and the second explaining how Christ meets the conditions for atonement. Chapters in *Cur Deus Homo* are sometimes longer than elsewhere in the book, as it is a dialogue. It is also worth noting that many passages throughout the book, particularly in the *Proslogium*, are written in the form of prayers.

## Quotes

"For I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand. For this also I believe, - that unless I believed, I should not understand." p. 53

"Or is there no such nature, since the fool hath said in his heart, there is no God? (Psalms xiv. 1)." p. 53

"So truly, therefore, dost thou exist, O Lord, my God, that thou canst not be conceived not to exist; and rightly." p. 55

"Certain brethren have often and earnestly entreated me to put in writing some thoughts that I had offered them in familiar conversation, regarding meditation on the Being of God, and on some other topics connected with this subject, under the form of a meditation on these themes." p. 81

"Though this truth is inexplicable, it demands belief." p. 173

"It is, therefore, most obvious that the rational creature was created for this purpose, that it might love the supreme Being above all other goods, as this Being is itself the supreme good." p. 179

"Truly, therefore, he is not only God, but the only God, ineffably Three and One." p. 190

"As the right order requires us to believe the deep things of the Christian faith before we undertake to discuss them by reason; so to my mind it appears a neglect if, after we are established in the faith, we do not seek to understand what we believe." p. 193

"This they greatly wonder at, because we call this redemption a release. For, say they, in what custody or imprisonment, or under whose power were you held, that God could not free you from it, without purchasing your redemption by so many sufferings, and finally by his own blood?" p. 199

"Now God help me, for you do not spare me in the least, nor consider the weakness of my skill, when you enjoin so great a work upon me. Yet I will attempt it, as I have begun, not trusting in myself but in God, and will do what I can with his help." p. 253

"All things which you have said seem to me reasonable and incontrovertible. And by the solution of the single question proposed do I see the truth of all that is contained in the Old and New Testament." p. 301

"The fool might make this reply ..." p. 303

"Now I promise confidently that if any man shall devise anything existing either in reality or in concept alone (except that than which a greater cannot be conceived) to which he can adapt the sequence of my reasoning, I will discover that thing, and will give him his lost island, not to be lost again." p. 316



## Topics for Discussion

What is Anselm's ontological argument in the Proslogium?

What is Gaunilo's reply to the ontological argument? What is Anselm's defense of the argument?

Do you think the ontological argument works? State the argument and then explain why you think it works or why not.

Who do you think gets the better of Anselm and Gaunilo's exchange? Why?

What is Anselm's argument for God's existence in the Monologium?

Explain Anselm's understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity within Christian Theology.

Why does Anselm think God became man?

What are three of Boso's objections to the Christian doctrine of the atonement? What are Anselm's answers? Are Anselm's answers satisfactory?

Why can't God simply forgive sins without demanding atonement in Anselm's view?

How does Christ's death make satisfaction for sins in Anselm's view?