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READING ANSELM'S NATURAL THEOLOGY THROUGH A PALAMITE LENS

Travis Dumsday

While Anselm's famous ontological argument from the *Proslogion* receives the great bulk of attention from philosophers of religion and historians of philosophy, the case for theism that he begins to develop in the opening three chapters of the *Monologion* is also of considerable interest. Like the ontological argument, the opening arguments of the *Monologion* have also received substantial criticism. Here I suggest that one important line of critique (namely that supplied by Visser and Williams (2009)) can be deflected if those arguments are read (or rather, creatively *re-read*) using the distinctive interpretive lens and theological resources of Palamism.

1. Introduction

My interest in this paper is with the case for theism that Anselm begins to make in the opening chapters of his *Monologion*. The arguments found there have generated a substantial literature (if a molehill compared to the mountain of work on the *Proslogion's* ontological argument), and seemingly telling criticisms. My goal will be to suggest a new line of reply to one recent critique. It is a line Anselm himself would almost certainly not have accepted, but which today's reader may find of interest, particularly if that reader is Orthodox or at least sympathetic to major theological currents within Orthodoxy. More specifically, my thesis is this: if we read the first three chapters of the *Monologion* through the lens of Palamite theology (in particular its doctrine of the divine energies), then the arguments found in those chapters become more defensible—at least, not obviously invalid or unsound or heretical.

The immediate criticism liable to arise from the historian of philosophy is that this kind of project is culpably anachronistic and liable to lead to conceptual confusion. Lifting elements out of one theological system and depositing them into the arguments of another such system, and expecting the result to hang together coherently, might just be the intellectual analogue of P.T. Barnum's mermaid (being the upper body of a monkey-corpse crudely sewn onto the lower body of a fish-corpse). This



criticism seems particularly apt in cases like the present, where the systems in question are hundreds of years apart, arise from very different cultures, and are formulated in different languages (Latin versus Byzantine Greek). My primary defense against this reasonable charge is that the resulting reinterpreted arguments might be of sufficient philosophical interest on their own account to warrant further discussion, prescinding from those significant hermeneutical/historical complications. My secondary defense is that Anselm's arguments actually *lend* themselves to a Palamite re-reading, insofar as such a reading constitutes perhaps the clearest non-heretical way to retain them as theistic arguments in the face of a serious criticism—specifically, criticism levelled by Visser and Williams.¹

The remainder of the paper is divided as follows: in the next section, I supply an overview of the interconnected arguments found in chapters 1–3 of Anselm's *Monologion*. Then, in section three, I examine Visser and Williams's recent critique of those arguments. In the fourth section, I summarize the relevant components of Palamas's theology and proceed to show how a Palamite re-reading of this portion of the *Monologion* would allow for the avoidance of that critique.

A cautionary note: I've tried to make this paper accessible to a few distinct audiences—Anselm folk who may not know much about Palamism, Palamas folk who may not know much about Anselmianism, and fans of analytic natural theology who may not have much acquaintance with either. This attempt at broad accessibility runs the risk of trying to do too much while at the same time disappointing each group. The charge of 'that's an oversimplification!' tends to ring out whenever a favored concept or system is being concisely summarized for the benefit of outsiders. No doubt I am guilty of this charge in what follows and I can only beg the indulgence of readers from all sides.

2. *The Arguments of Monologion 1–3*

Here is Anselm's opening argument in chapter 1 of the *Monologion*, in which he reaches a significant preliminary conclusion within his wider case for Christian theism:

Since there are countless goods, whose great diversity we both experience through our bodily senses and discern through the reasoning of our mind, are we to believe that there is some one thing through which all goods whatsoever are good? Or are different goods good through different things? Indeed, to all who are willing to pay attention it is clear and quite certain that all things whatsoever that are said to be more or less or equally a certain way as compared to each other are said to be so through something that is not understood as different but rather as the same in diverse things, whether it is detected equally or unequally in them. For whatever just things are said to be equally or more or less just by comparison with other just

¹See Visser and Williams, *Anselm*.

things, they must be understood to be just through justice, which is not different in diverse things. . . . [I]t must also be the case that all useful or intrinsically valuable things, if they are genuinely good, are good through the very same thing—whatever that is—through which all goods must exist. Now who would doubt that this thing, through which all goods exist, is itself a great good? Therefore, he is good through himself, since every good exists through him. It follows, therefore, that all other things are good through something other than what they themselves are, and he alone is good through himself. Now no good that exists through another is equal to or greater than that good who is good through himself. And so only he who alone is good through himself is supremely good. For something is supreme if it surpasses others in such a way that it has neither peer nor superior. Now that which is supremely good is also supremely great. There is, therefore, some one thing that is supremely good and supremely great—in other words, supreme among all existing things.²

Before laying out the argument more formally, there are several points worth making. First, it does not conclude explicitly to the reality of God, but rather to the reality of something both *inherently* good (good of its own accord rather than good via participation in or causation by something other than itself) and *supremely* good (something whose goodness renders it better than anything else). Anselm recognizes that since our idea of God involves much more than this, he has not yet established the truth

²Anselm, *Monologion*, 7–8. Note that Anselm may be drawing here on a similar (though perhaps not wholly equivalent) argument provided by Augustine in *On the Holy Trinity*, book 8, chapter 3, para. 4–5. That passage reads, in part, as follows:

Behold again, and see if you can. You certainly do not love anything except what is good, since good is the earth, with the loftiness of its mountains, and the due measure of its hills, and the level surface of its plains; and good is an estate that is pleasant and fertile; and good is a house that is arranged in due proportions, and is spacious and bright; and good are animal and animate bodies. . . . [A]nd good are the angels, by their holy obedience; and good is discourse that sweetly teaches and suitably admonishes the hearer; and good is a poem that is harmonious in its numbers and weighty in its sense. And why add yet more and more? This thing is good and that good, but take away this and that, and regard good itself if you can, so will you see God, not good by a good that is other than Himself, but the good of all good. For in all these good things, whether those which I have mentioned, or any else that are to be discerned or thought, we could not say that one was better than another, when we judge truly, unless a conception of the good itself had been impressed upon us, such that according to it we might both approve some things as good, and prefer one good to another. So God is to be loved, not this and that good, but the good itself. . . . Wherefore there would be no changeable goods, unless there were the unchangeable good. Whenever then you are told of this good thing and that good thing, which things can also in other respects be called not good, if you can put aside those things which are good by the participation of the good, and discern that good itself by the participation of which they are good (for when this or that good thing is spoken of, you understand together with them the good itself also): if, then, I say you can remove these things, and can discern the good in itself, then you will have discerned God. And if you shall cleave to Him with love, you shall be immediately blessed.

of theism, a fact that becomes readily apparent as he draws out additional distinctive divine attributes during succeeding chapters. Still, as part of a larger case for theism, this argument gets us part of the way there (if it works). Most arguments for theism function the same way.³

Second, on an initial perusal one will naturally tend to interpret Anselm's reasoning as resting on a strongly realist—perhaps even Platonic—account of common natures or universals. Bob and Jim and Tatiana are all just because they all manifest/reflect/exemplify/participate-in/instantiate (or stand in some other sort of relationship to) the Form 'justice.' But that reading does not fit the whole text. Granted, Anselm does appear to be thinking of 'justice' as a common nature or universal manifested (etc.) by diverse things, at times manifested equally and at other times manifested to varying degrees. But he has *not* told us that *all* things manifesting a sameness in some respect manifest that sameness because of the presence of a common nature or universal. (And it may be that, in the end, he doesn't even think this about justice—the way the example is used here leaves this open for now.)⁴ Rather, what he has told us is that "all things whatsoever that are said to be more or less or equally a certain way as compared to each other are said to be so through something that is not understood as different but rather as the same in diverse things, whether it is detected equally or unequally in them." This formulation leaves abundant room for the notion that, in other cases, the sameness may be grounded in some other way.

For example, right now Ottawa and Moscow and Bucharest all exist at the 'same time,' not because they possess/manifest/exemplify a common nature or universal but rather because the identical concrete temporal moment somehow encompasses all three cities.⁵ Or consider the light bulb in my office which illuminates both me and my copy of Anselm's writings—i.e., the same illumination, shared in by me and by the book, is due to the exercise of a single causal power having multiple simultaneous effects. Anselm is talking here about generic sameness, which includes *but is not restricted to* sameness grounded by a universal. In his translation, Williams seems to hint at this very point, given his choice to use personal pronouns in referring to this source of sameness, writing that:

it must also be the case that all useful or intrinsically valuable things, if they are genuinely good, are good through the very same thing—*whatever that is*—through which all goods must exist. Now who would doubt that this

³Think, for instance, of the Kalam argument: it is usually referred to as an argument for the existence of God, even though it concludes only to the existence of a cause that created the temporal universe. Still, few would deny the claim that, if the argument works, it can function as part of a wider case for theism.

⁴In fact, later on we learn that, for Anselm, justice, like goodness, is ultimately identical to the divine nature. See the sixteenth chapter of Anselm, *Monologion*, 23–24.

⁵The scrupulous reader may at this point raise a quibble about relativity theory and the illusion of simultaneity. Thankfully, that isn't relevant for my conceptual point, so just pretend we live in a Newtonian universe.

thing, through which all goods exist, is itself a great good? Therefore, *he* is good through *himself*, since every good exists through him. [emphases added]⁶

While the Latin does not necessitate that translation,⁷ Williams' rendering is still accurate, such that those lines can be seen as telling us two things: (a) Anselm is, for the moment, remaining cagey about precisely what ontological category this 'goodness' belongs to, whether abstract universal or concrete power or something entirely different;⁸ and, (b) Anselm can

⁶See Anselm, "Monologion."

⁷The original text here is as follows:

neesse est omne quoque utile vel honestum, si vera bona sunt, per idipsum esse bona, per quod neesse est cuncta bona, quidquid illud sit. Quia autem dubitet illud ipsum, per quod cuncta sunt bona, esse magnum bonum? Illud igitur est bonum per seipsum, quoniam omne bonum est per ipsum. Ergo consequitur, ut omnia alia bona sint per aliud quam quod ipsa sunt, et ipsum solum per seipsum. (*S. Anselmi Opera Omnia, Vol. I, 14–15*)

An alternative, perhaps more pedantically literal, rendering of this text might run as follows:

It is also necessary that all things either useful or honored, if they be truly good, be good through it, through which it is necessary to be conjoined in goodness, whatever that thing be. Because how could one doubt that that very thing, through which they are conjoined in goodness, be a great good? Therefore that thing is good through itself, since every good thing is good through it. So it follows that all other good things are good through another rather than through themselves, and it alone is good through itself." (My own translation)

⁸Later on, in chapter 27 of the *Monologion*, Anselm clarifies this somewhat when he argues that goodness itself (i.e., the supreme nature) should be seen as neither a universal nor a particular:

Indeed, every substance is classified as either universal or individual. A universal substance is essentially common to several substances, as being-a-man is common to individual men; an individual substance has a universal essence in common with others, as individual men have in common with other individual men the fact that they are men. So how would someone understand the supreme nature as being included in this classification of other substances, since he is neither divided into several substances nor conjoined with any other through a common essence? Nevertheless, since he not only most assuredly exists but also exists in the highest way of all things, and the essence of any given thing is generally called a substance, surely, if he can be worthily called anything at all, there is nothing to prevent us from calling him a substance." (Anselm, *Monologion*, 37)

What Anselm is saying here is that 'universal' is properly understood as 'being essentially common to several objects,' while 'particular' means 'having one or more universals in common with other objects.' In other words, for him they are defined conversely—to be a universal is to be exemplified by particulars, and to be a particular is to exemplify universals. With that understanding of the distinction in mind, something with an absolutely unique and simple nature (i.e., one that cannot be exemplified by anything else and which does not depend for its identity or existence on exemplifying distinct universals) will not properly count as either a universal or a particular. It is neither. Notice how this neither-a-universal-nor-a-particular picture of God would not work on other definitions of those categories; if for instance 'universal' were rightly defined as a contrary of 'particular' (if it just meant 'non-particular'), then of course anything that wasn't a particular would ipso facto have to

be read here as foreshadowing a point made explicit later on in the *Monologion*, namely that this 'goodness' is actually personal (hence Williams's use of 'he' rather than 'it'). That is, eventually Anselm will make it clear that this 'goodness' is not a universal or common nature, such that when diverse individual finite things *participate* in or *manifest* 'goodness,' that ontological relationship is *not* fully equivalent to the relationship obtaining between an individual and some Platonic Form it is manifesting/participating-in.⁹

Third, Anselm will likewise make clear later on that, while we can call this entity (whatever it is) 'good' because all of the individual good things we are familiar with possess their goodness via a relationship with this entity, the fact that this entity is *inherently* good (good of itself rather than through another) will entail that it is *identical* with goodness; i.e., this entity doesn't *have* goodness, it *is* goodness. So although we call it 'good,' its goodness is not possessed as a property. Its way or mode of being good is identity, not participation/possession/manifestation/etc. So Anselm's view that 'good' can be predicated of the supremely good entity is rightly understood in such a way that he is not left open to the third man argument (whether or not Platonic Forms are vulnerable to it).¹⁰

By way of clarifying the overall structure of Anselm's argument, here is how I would formalize it:

P1. If multiple things can truly be said to be equal (whether *more* or *less* or *fully* equal) in some way, then there is some one thing (of some sort) which they all share and by which they exist in that way.

be a universal. The fact that he defines them as converses of one another leaves room for the possibility that there could be something that falls under neither category. Given the radically different nature of this entity, how is it even legitimate to call it a 'substance'? Because according to Anselm 'substance' seems the least misleading term on the table. (Compare that passage with the following from Saint Maximus the Confessor:

God is not essence, understood as either general or particular, even if he is principle; nor is he potency understood as either general or particular, even if he is means; he is not act, understood as either general or particular, even if he is end of essential movement discerned in potency. But he is a principle of being who is creative of essence and beyond essence, a ground who is creative of power but beyond power, the active and eternal condition of every act, and to speak briefly, the Creator of every essence, power, and act, as well as every beginning, middle, and end." (Maximus the Confessor, "Chapters on Knowledge," 129)

⁹A bit later, in chapters 6–8 of the *Monologion*, Anselm explains that dependent things depend on the supreme nature by way of efficient causation (in contrast to instrumental or material causation). But this does not entirely clear things up, since Anselm has quite an expansive notion of efficient causation, encompassing both what later (more thoroughly Aristotelian) Scholastics would refer to as 'efficient causation,' and also what they referred to as 'formal causation'—and perhaps still more besides. For more on this see Rogers, *The Neoplatonic Metaphysics and Epistemology of Anselm of Canterbury*, 91–98.

¹⁰In fact they aren't and for a similar reason—for a clear articulation of this point see Clark, *Ancient Mediterranean Philosophy*, 113–114. See also Perl, *Thinking Being*, 27–31.

P2. Multiple things can truly be said to be equal (whether *more* or *less* or *fully* equal) in goodness.

C1/P3. Therefore, there is some one thing (of some sort) which they all share and by which they are good.

P4. If there is some one thing (of some sort) which they all share and by which they are good, then they are good merely derivatively.

C2/P5. Therefore, they are good merely derivatively.

P6. If they are good merely derivatively, then the one thing (of some sort) that they all share, by which they are good, must itself be *inherently* good (i.e., good of itself rather than through another).

C3/P7. Therefore, the one thing (of some sort) that they all share, by which they are good, must itself be *inherently* good (i.e., good of itself rather than through another).

P8. If any entity is *inherently* *x*, then it is in that respect superior to anything that is *x* merely derivatively.

C4/P9. Therefore, this inherently good entity is superior in goodness to anything that is good merely derivatively.¹¹

P10. If this inherently good entity is necessarily the only inherently good entity, then it is superior in goodness to absolutely everything else that exists.

P11. This inherently good entity is necessarily the only inherently good entity.

C5/P12. Therefore, it is superior in goodness to absolutely everything else that exists.

P13. If it is superior in goodness to absolutely everything else that exists, then it is superior in greatness to absolutely everything else that exists.

C6. Therefore, it is superior in greatness to absolutely everything else that exists.

Anselm does not provide much by way of justification for P1, likely because his audience would have taken it for granted as a piece of common-sense. One could of course support it further by arguing that resemblance facts must ultimately be reducible to facts about sameness/identity (contra the claims of certain varieties of nominalism, on which resemblance facts are taken to be primitive). P2 is justified in terms of observation and experience. (Anselm feels no need to defend the objectivity of such value judgements, since no one in his audience would have seriously entertained anything like moral antirealism.) C1/P3 is just the logical consequence of the prior two premises. P4 is justified by the general truth that possession of, or participation in, a trait entails non-identity with that trait and hence

¹¹Read 'entity' here in the broadest possible sense, prescinding from any specific ontological category.

dependence on that trait for its status *qua* possessed/participated—i.e., for x to have F , x 's F ness is derivative on F . C2/P5 follows from the prior two premises. P6 is justified by the need to avoid both infinite regress and circular explanation (something brought out more explicitly in the analogous argument of *Monologion* chapter three, which we'll turn to shortly). C3/P7 follows from the prior two premises. P8 is a normative judgement that Anselm seems to take as intuitively obvious. C4/P9 follows logically from the prior two premises. P10 is implied by extension of the immediately preceding premises. P11 is not justified here by Anselm, though it is taken up later in the *Monologion*, while C5/P12 is another logical consequence. P13 is based on a conceptual linkage Anselm thinks obtains between goodness and greatness, a point on which he elaborates in the very next chapter. The final conclusion, C6, once again follows as the conclusion of a *modus ponens*.

The core reasoning of the *Monologion*'s second chapter is brief, pointing out that the same reasoning which applied to 'goodness' can be applied to 'greatness,' and emphasizing again that what is supremely good must be identical to what is supremely great.¹²

The argument of the third chapter is structurally much like the argument of the first, only with certain points brought out more explicitly by way of considering potential objections. It concludes to the reality of something that exists inherently rather than derivatively, and which must be identical in reference (even if not in sense) to that which is inherently good, which is in turn identical in reference to that which is inherently great:

Furthermore, not only are all good things good through the same thing, and all great things great through the same thing, but it seems that all existing things exist through some one thing. For every existing thing exists either through something or through nothing. But nothing exists through nothing. For it is not so much as conceivable that any existing thing does not exist through something. So whatever exists, exists through something. Since this is so, either there is one thing, or there are several things, through which all existing things exist. Now if there are several, either they are traced back to some one thing through which they all exist, or each of them exists through itself, or they exist through each other. But if they exist through one thing, it is no longer true that all things exist through several things; rather, all things exist through that one thing through which the several things exist. If, however, each of them exists through itself, there is surely some one power or nature of self-existing that they have in order to exist through themselves. And there is no doubt that they exist through this one thing through which they have self-existence. Therefore, all things exist more truly through that one thing than through the several things that cannot exist without that one thing. Now no reasoning allows for several things to exist through each other, since it is irrational to think that something exists through that to which it gives existence. . . . And so, since truth altogether rules out the

¹²Anselm, *Monologion*, 8.

possibility that there are several things through which all things exist, there must be one thing through which all existing things exist. Therefore, since all existing things exist through that one thing, undoubtedly that one thing exists through himself. So all other existing things exist through another; he alone exists through himself. Now whatever exists through another is less than the one through whom all other things exist and who alone exists through himself. Therefore, he who exists through himself exists most greatly of all things. So there is some one thing that alone exists most greatly and supremely of all things. Now he who exists most greatly of all things, and through whom exists whatever is good or great and whatever is anything at all, must be supremely good, supremely great, and supreme among all existing things. Therefore, there is something (whether he is called an essence or a substance or a nature) that is best and greatest and supreme among all things.¹³

Anselm again remains noncommittal here regarding the precise ontological category to which this entity belongs (if it belongs to any of our categories), a point brought out in the final sentence. Williams opts to employ the personal pronoun 'he' rather than 'it' in translating the latter portion of the passage, though this is not required by the Latin.¹⁴ The argument is subject to much the same formalization as the argument of chapter 1, substituting 'existence' for 'goodness':

P1. If multiple things can truly be said to be equal (whether *more* or *less* or *fully* equal) in some way, then there is some one thing (of some sort) which they all share and by which they exist in that way.

P2. Multiple things can truly be said to be equal (whether *more* or *less* or *fully* equal) in existence.

C1/P3. Therefore, there is some one thing (of some sort) which they all share and by which they exist.

P4. If there is some one thing (of some sort) which they all share and by which they exist, then they exist merely derivatively.

C2/P5. Therefore, they exist merely derivatively.

¹³Anselm, *Monologion*, 9–10.

¹⁴For instance, part of the original text here runs as follows:

Quaecumque igitur alia sunt, sunt per aliud, et ipsum solum per seipsum. At quidquid est per aliud, minus est quam illud per quod cuncta sunt alia, et quod solum est per se. Quare illud quod est per se, maxime omnium est. Est igitur unum aliquid, quod solum maxime et summe omnium est." (*S. Anselmi Opera Omnia*, Vol. I, 16)

This portion of text could also be rendered as follows:

Therefore whatever other things exist, they exist through another, and it alone exists through itself. But whatever exists through another, is lesser than that through which these others are joined to being, and which alone exists through itself. Which is why that which exists through itself is better than absolutely everything else. Therefore there exists some one thing, which alone is greatest and best of all." (My own translation)

P6. If they exist merely derivatively, then the one thing (of some sort) that they all share, by which they exist, must itself be *inherently* real (i.e., it must exist of itself rather than through another).

C3/P7. Therefore, the one thing (of some sort) that they all share, by which they exist, must itself be *inherently* real (i.e., it must exist of itself rather than through another).

P8. If any entity is *inherently* *x*, then it is in that respect superior to anything that is *x* merely derivatively.

C4/P9. Therefore, this inherently real entity is superior in being to anything that exists merely derivatively.

P10. If this inherently real entity is necessarily the only inherently real entity, then it is superior in being to absolutely everything else that exists.

P11. This inherently real entity is necessarily the only inherently real entity.

C5/P12. Therefore, it is superior in being to absolutely everything else that exists.

P13. If it is superior in being to absolutely everything else that exists, then it is superior in both goodness and greatness to absolutely everything else that exists.

C6. Therefore, it is superior in both goodness and greatness to absolutely everything else that exists.

I will not run through the justifications for each step of the argument, but will note a few things: first, Anselm has not told us what ontological category existence (whether existence in general or self-existence or derivative existence) belongs to; so, depending on one's understanding of 'property,' nothing he has said here commits him to thinking of existence (whether existence in general or self-existence or derivative existence) as a property, whether trope or universal. We already saw in the argument from chapter 1 that Anselm is *not* thinking of goodness as a universal or common nature—so far he's noncommittal as to goodness' precise ontological category, and also remains noncommittal as to *how* exactly the many good things manifest or possess or participate-in goodness (i.e., what precise ontological relationship is involved there). That same noncommittal stance applies to existence in the argument of chapter 3. Anselm further signals this when he suggests that even if individual beings all exist by sharing more specifically in *self*-existence, that self-existence could be possessed or manifested or shared in in at least two (very) different ways, namely as a *power* or as a *nature*.¹⁵ With all that in mind, it should be clear that the argument does not obviously fall prey to objections proceeding on the basis of the claim that existence can't rightly be thought a property

¹⁵The Latin in the relevant line reads "una aliqua vis vel natura existendi per se" (*S. Anselmi Opera Omnia*, Vol. I, 16). This could also be translated as "some one force or nature of existing through itself" or even "some one *energy* or nature of existing through itself."

or first-order predicate. Anselm isn't telling us here what existence is or what category it belongs to or how it is to be conceptualized—he is merely telling us something about how it *functions*, keeping derivative existents in being through some sort of relationship with them, while at the same time constituting the identity of the *inherently* real (i.e., the one and only entity that exists *non-derivatively*).

Second, Anselm explicitly identifies the inherently real entity with the inherently good entity with the inherently great entity; for him, these are ultimately just different ways of referring to one and the same entity.

Third, Anselm here provides more explicit justification of P6, by way of answering the potential objection that maybe nothing is inherently real and instead every real thing exists merely derivatively. He dismisses that notion on the grounds that it would involve something impossible, namely circular causation or what is sometimes called symmetrical existential dependence (i.e., where A grants existence to B which simultaneously grants existence to C which simultaneously grants existence to A). By extension, he would also dismiss the possibility of an infinite regress, where the inherently real is forever pushed back a step in favor of the derivatively real—clearly, for him, the fact that some *x* is derivatively F entails the reality of F pure and simple (and *non-derivatively*).

More could be said by way of further exposition, but hopefully the preceding will suffice as an overview of the opening arguments of the *Monologion*. Let's turn now to an important recent critique of those arguments.

3. Visser and Williams's Critique

In their superb survey of Anselm's thought, Visser and Williams present several criticisms of the opening arguments of the *Monologion*. With respect to the argument from goodness in chapter 1, they object that it betrays Anselm's confusion about the ontology of universals in relation to God. They write:

Though there are several points in Anselm's proof of a supreme good to which one could reasonably raise objections, we wish to focus on those that reveal the lacunae in Anselm's metaphysics. . . . All just things are just through justice; justice is a property, and just things are just in virtue of exemplifying that property. . . . But then G will be a property—presumably the property of goodness—and Anselm is not trying to prove the existence of a property. G is supposed to turn out to be, not a property, but God. Now one might note in Anselm's defense that he will go on to identify God with goodness; perhaps, then, the fact that Anselm's application of the Single-Source Principle encourages us to think in terms of the property of goodness is not an insuperable difficulty.¹⁶ But this defense simply relocates the problem. The Single-Source Principle is plausible only if we envision

¹⁶The Single-Source Principle is the name Visser and Williams give to Anselm's claim that "all things whatsoever that are said to be more or less or equally a certain way as compared

a relation between properties and property-bearers that Anselm does not think holds between God and creatures. As Anselm's own example suggests, just things are just because they *exemplify* justice or because justice is somehow *present in* them as a metaphysical constituent (while remaining "the same" even though it is "in diverse things"). But creatures do not exemplify the divine nature, and God is not present in creatures by way of being a metaphysical constituent. What this argument brings out is that Anselm has two distinct and incompatible theories of properties, neither of which he develops beyond an intuitive level. On the one hand, he is inclined toward what we might think of as a Platonist (or perhaps, more generally, realist) understanding of properties as universals: unitary entities that are somehow "in" a plurality of things. . . . On the other hand . . . Anselm holds that goodness, justice, and the like—any features that belong to the divine nature—are in fact identical with the divine nature. On this view, goodness is not a universal. Goodness is not realized in or exemplified by a plurality of things, because goodness is God, and there can be only one God. If we accept the first view of properties, Anselm's argument will at best establish the existence of a property or Platonic Form that is supremely good. If we accept the second, the Single-Source Principle is no longer plausible, and the argument does not even get off the ground. Only by switching from the first view to the second can Anselm give his argument the appearance of an argument for the existence of God. . . . The goodness that God gives to creatures is not his own goodness—the goodness that God has—for God's goodness is identical with God himself.¹⁷

Their core claim then is that the first part of Anselm's case for theism equivocates on the metaphysics of goodness, sometimes treating it as an abstract Platonic Form and sometimes treating it as identical to God. This use of the same *term*, all the while engaging in a *conceptual* back-and-forth, makes the argument seem outwardly coherent, but this is illusory. Moreover, it is not apparent that Anselm can satisfactorily fix the situation by committing explicitly to either the first option or to the second. That would resolve the equivocation, but it would raise a dilemma in its place: (a) adopt the *goodness = Platonic Form* option and we no longer have an argument for theism, but rather for the reality of the Platonic Form 'goodness'; or, (b) adopt the *goodness = divine nature* option and we are left with a heretical pantheism (or at least some heresy closely akin to pantheism, by which the divine nature becomes an ontological constituent of creatures). This second horn of the dilemma is particularly pressing given Anselm's well-known commitment to Augustine's peculiar understanding of the doctrine of divine simplicity (with its notion of the divine attributes all being ultimately identical to the simple divine nature and hence identical to each other), an understanding which would dominate

to each other are said to be so through something that is not understood as different but rather as the same in diverse things," *Monologion*, 7–8.

¹⁷Visser and Williams, *Anselm*, 62–65.

Roman Catholic theology until challenged by John Duns Scotus in the fourteenth century.¹⁸

Visser and Williams apply the same basic critique in their brief discussion of chapter 3 of the *Monologion*. In their view, while Anselm is not here treating existence as a property (a Platonic Form), they do think he is treating *self*-existence as a property.¹⁹ As such, I take it they see the argument of chapter 3 as falling prey to much the same metaphysical confusion on display in chapter 1, only now equivocating between treating self-existence as a multiply realizable property and treating it as identical to God. Certainly, they see it as rooted in an inadequately worked out account of creaturely properties and how they relate to God. In their view, Anselm “simply doesn’t bother working out a consistent metaphysics of universals, essences, properties, and individuation. That failure dooms any argument from creatures to God; Anselm’s metaphysics of creatures is too inchoate to support the inferences he wishes to make.”²⁰

So Anselm’s arguments in *Monologion* 1–3 should be seen as either culpably equivocal or as falling into the dilemma between options (a) and (b). Regarding horn (a) of that dilemma, one might quibble on behalf of Anselm that a more charitable reading could take him as adopting what Visser and Williams refer to as the Single-Source Principle while at the same time holding to quite a liberal view regarding the sorts of things that can ground sameness: sometimes sameness may be grounded in the exemplification/manifestation/instantiation (etc.) of abstract Platonic Forms (universals or common natures), but sometimes sameness may be grounded by very different relationships with entities belonging to other ontological categories. In the previous section, I maintained that there is a degree of indeterminateness on this point in *Monologion* 1–3. On the liberal reading, goodness/self-existence might turn out to be a Platonic Form or it might turn out to be a concrete personal entity—whether that personal entity’s *nature* or perhaps instead a *power/force/energy* (“*vis*”) expressing its personality, dual options which, as we’ve seen, Anselm seems to hint at in the argument dealing with existence in *Monologion* chapter 3. In other words, Visser and Williams might have missed some relevant alternative ways of understanding the ontology at play here, ways left open by the texts.

Although reading Anselm in the manner I’ve just suggested might be seen as providing a glimmer of hope for getting out of the equivocation (and the internal tension in his metaphysics) that Visser and Williams are advertent to, in fairness it must be conceded that Anselm himself never

¹⁸It is widely acknowledged that Scotus’s account of divine simplicity is importantly different from that of his predecessors within western medieval theology. For a useful recent discussion that contrasts Scotus specifically with Augustine and Anselm on this point, see Steele and Williams, “Complexity Without Composition.”

¹⁹Visser and Williams, *Anselm*, 66–67.

²⁰Visser and Williams, *Anselm*, 71.

pursues that escape route, whether in the *Monologion* or in his larger corpus. He seems unaware of the difficulty, as they rightly note. Moreover Anselm has not told us *how* exactly it is that multiple finite objects can manifest/share/participate-in (etc.) goodness, given that goodness is ultimately conceived by Anselm in concrete personal terms. How can creatures participate in goodness when goodness is divine? Read in this way, and in light of Anselm's larger set of views regarding the divine nature and divine simplicity, he may indeed seem to be courting pantheism. Consider again the final line of the quote from Visser and Williams regarding *Monologion* 1: "The goodness that God gives to creatures is not his own goodness—the goodness that God has—for God's goodness is identical with God himself."

Still, I believe that, in principle, one can provide a clear and explicit answer to Visser and Williams's challenge, one which preserves the (possible) soundness of the arguments in *Monologion* 1–3 while remaining compatible with most (but not all) components of Anselm's wider system. This answer involves the claim that the goodness God gives to creatures actually *is* His own goodness. God's goodness is indeed identical with God Himself, but 'God Himself' needs disambiguating, because it can indicate either God's essence or God's uncreated energies. God's essence and God's energies are objectively (mind-independently) distinct, though inseparable. Divine goodness is actually one of the uncreated energies, such that when creatures share in that divine energy they share in God Himself (just not God's wholly transcendent essence). This is the Palamite view of creaturely participation in God, a view earlier enunciated in multiple eastern patristic authors, including Saint Dionysius the Areopagite and Saint Maximus the Confessor.²¹ We'll examine this viewpoint in the next section.

4. Palamism and a Palamite Reading of *Monologion* 1–3

Saint Gregory Palamas (1296–1359) is best known in Eastern Orthodox theology for clarifying, systematizing, and defending the doctrine of the real distinction between God's essence and energies. It is difficult to present this distinction accurately without delving into a good deal of additional background material, but the basic idea is that there is metaphysical complexity in the divine Being without there being any problematic sorts of *composition* within the divine Being—i.e., without there being multiple distinct properties or parts or powers of God whose presence in the

²¹In theory, the works of these eastern fathers were available to Anselm via the Latin translations of John Scottus Eriugena, who, about two hundred years before Anselm's time, had translated the complete works of Dionysius, and had also translated two major works of Maximus (the *Responses to Thalassios* and the *Ambigua*). However, these translations were not widely available in western Europe at the time and Anselm almost certainly never read them. Still, for a dissenting view of the matter (at least as regards Anselm's possible exposure to Dionysius), see Andrus, "Anselm of Canterbury and Dionysius the Areopagite's Reflections on the Incomprehensibility of God."

divine Being would require explanation by causes or principles outside God (thereby compromising divine independence and aseity).

There are, in fact, several sorts of complexity within God: the divine essence is really (i.e., objectively, independently-of-our-conceptualizations) distinct from the three divine persons, and both the essence and the persons are really distinct from the energies, even while the persons, essence, and energies are all inseparable. God's essence is wholly beyond us, unknowable to the human intellect and not subject to any kind of participation by us or by any non-divine entity. Yet the energies can be known by us and can be directly participated in by us (and in some ways by the wider creation as well). This doctrine allows for the dual affirmation of God's absolute transcendence of *and* profound immanence within the cosmos. It also allows for an understanding of Christian mysticism in which human beings can be literally divinized by participation in God (via the energies) without compromising the radical and ineliminably infinite divide between human beings and God (in His essence). Papademetriou writes:

In God's existence a distinction is made between the essence of God, which is 'self-existing,' absolutely inaccessible, and His energies, which are accessible to man. This is the great contribution of St. Gregory Palamas, that he taught the absolute hiddenness of God and the indwelling of His energies in the world, thus avoiding pantheism on the one hand and deism on the other, at the same time preserving God's unity. . . . However, Palamas was not the originator of this doctrine; it is both Biblical and Patristic.²²

Along similar lines, Florovsky states the distinction as follows:

These energies do not mix with created things, and are not themselves these things, but are only their basic and life-giving principles; they are the prototypes, the predeterminations, the reasons, the *logoi*, and Divine decisions respecting them, of which they are the participants and ought to be the 'communicants.' . . . The divine energies are that aspect of God which is turned towards creation. . . . The notion of the Divine energy received explicit definition in the series of Synods held in the fourteenth century in Constantinople. There is a real distinction, but no separation, between the *essence* or *entity* of God and His *energies*. This distinction is manifest above all in the fact that the Entity is absolutely incommunicable and inaccessible to creatures. The creatures have access to and communicate with the Divine Energies only. But with this participation they enter into a genuine and perfect communion and union with God; they receive 'deification.'²³

While the uncreated divine energies do not "mix with" created things in the sense of making them essentially divine (divine by nature), they do fulfill any number of intimate functions within creation, including rendering those beings actual-rather-than-merely-possible moment by moment (i.e., rendering them existent in the ordinary-language sense of 'real').

²²Papademetriou, *Introduction to St. Gregory Palamas*, 57–58.

²³Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption*, 67–68.

For instance, Saint John of Damascus in his eighth century work *On the Orthodox Faith* writes of divine energy that “in it they [created things] have their existence, and to all things it communicates their being in accordance with the nature of each. It is the being of things that are, the life of the living. . . .”²⁴ In that formulation, he is drawing on Saint Dionysius the Areopagite, who earlier wrote that in His processions (i.e., energies) God is the being of things that are.²⁵ Similar themes are frequently encountered in the work of Saint Maximus the Confessor.²⁶ Or consider the following from Palamas himself: “God is within the universe and the universe is within God, the one sustaining, the other being sustained by him. Therefore, all things participate in the sustaining energy but not in the substance of God. Thus, the theologians maintain that these constitute an energy of God, namely, his omnipresence.”²⁷ Crucially, God’s sustenance is via creatures’ participation in His energies, not His essence, permitting again a clear sidestepping of pantheism. Elsewhere Palamas writes of the divine glory (a frequent synonym for “energy” in his works): “How, then, could one think that the glory of God is the essence of God, of that God who while remaining imparticipable, indivisible and impalpable, becomes participable by His superessential power, and communicates Himself and shines forth. . . .”²⁸ Later in the same work, drawing on a previous Father to help illustrate the essence/energy divide, Palamas writes:

The blessed Cyril, for his part, says that the divine energy and power consist in the fact that God is everywhere, and contains all, without being contained by anything. But it does not follow that the Divine *Nature* consists in the

²⁴Saint John of Damascus, *On the Orthodox Faith*, book 1, chapter 14, quoted (in his own translation) by Bradshaw, *Aristotle East and West*, 209.

²⁵Any number of passages from the Dionysian corpus might be noted here, but consider for instance the following, from *On the Divine Names*, chapter 5, 817D: “He is the being immanent in and underlying the things which are, however they are. . . . So he is called ‘King of the ages,’ for in him and around him all being is and subsists.” Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Complete Works*, 98. Or consider this from *The Celestial Hierarchy*, chapter 4, 177C–D:

It is characteristic of this universal Cause, of this goodness beyond all, to summon everything to communion with him to the extent that this is possible. Hence everything in some way partakes of the providence flowing out of this transcendent Deity which is the originator of all that is. Indeed nothing could exist without some share in the being and source of everything. Even the things which have no life participate in this, for it is the transcendent Deity which is the existence of every being. (Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Complete Works*, 156)

²⁶For example: “[B]eginning from the moment when God was pleased to give substance to beings and existence to what did not exist, and, through His providence—like an intelligible sun whose power holds the universe together in stability and graciously consents to emit its rays—He deigned to vary the modes of His presence so that the good things He planted in beings might ripen to full maturity, until all the ages will have reached their appointed limit. . . . and because He fills all things with eternal light through the inexhaustible rays of His goodness. . . .” Maximus the Confessor, *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers*, 203–205.

²⁷Palamas, *The One Hundred and Fifty Chapters*, 201.

²⁸Palamas, *The Triads*, 67.

fact of being everywhere, any more than our own nature uniquely consists in being somewhere. For how could our essence consist in a fact which is in no way an essence? Essence and energy are thus not totally identical in God, even though He is entirely manifest in every energy, His essence being indivisible. [emphasis in original translation]²⁹

And a bit later:

It is clear, therefore, that these unoriginate and endless rays are other than the imparticipable essence of God, and different (albeit inseparable) from the essence. In the first place, that essence is one, even though the rays are many, and are sent out in a manner appropriate to those participating in them. . . . Furthermore, the essence is superessential, and I believe no one would deny that these rays are its energies or energy, and that one may participate in them, even though the essence remains beyond participation.³⁰

But what exactly are the divine energies? They receive different sorts of descriptions both in patristic theology and in modern Orthodox theology, such that 'divine energy' is probably best thought of as an umbrella term encompassing elements belonging to multiple ontological categories and fulfilling multiple explanatory roles, including (but not restricted to):

- a) divine ideas and intentions;
- b) divine actions (e.g., the contingent divine acts of creating and conserving-in-existence contingent finite objects, the contingent divine act of deifying a rational creature by grace, etc.); and
- c) divine attributes (e.g., holiness, mercy, infinity, concrete actuality, etc.).

Perhaps there are even energies whose mode of being cross-cuts those categories, such that an energy might be expressed both as an attribute and as an activity (for instance).³¹ And perhaps there are energies that cannot be fitted neatly into *any* of our current ontological categories. Given this diversity, what unites them all, such that they are properly referred to as divine 'energies'?

In an influential recent treatment of the history and philosophy behind the Palamite tradition, Bradshaw, having surveyed such varied descriptions made over the course of centuries, proceeds to answer that question:

We can generalize upon this line of thought to understand the unity of the *energeiai* as a class. Some are contingent, some necessary; some are temporal, some eternal; some are realities or energies, others are activities, operations, or attributes. What could such a disparate group have in common? Simply that they are *acts of self-manifestation*. [emphases in original]³²

²⁹Palamas, *The Triads*, 96.

³⁰Palamas, *The Triads*, 99–100.

³¹By way of a rough (and risky) analogy, think of how charge is conceptualized in current physics: it is described as both an intrinsic attribute of particles (e.g., electrons are negatively charged), and as an energetic emanation from those particles (the electromagnetic field).

³²Bradshaw, *Aristotle East and West*, 273.

Regardless of the differences among them, the energies all express the identity of God; they truly manifest His being because they flow from Him—indeed they manifest Him to such a degree that in knowing them and participating in them we genuinely know Him and participate in Him. The precise ontological mode of that participation (i.e., the nature of that relationship) presumably may vary depending on the energy in question and/or the category to which it belongs, such that different energies (e.g., goodness versus existence, if indeed they are really different) may conceivably require different analyses in this respect.

Within Palamas's thought (and Orthodox theology more broadly), the essence/energies distinction fulfills a number of significant explanatory functions, both epistemological and metaphysical, most of which have not been touched upon here. Still, hopefully the preceding bare-bones description will suffice for present purposes. Readers unfamiliar with Palamism are encouraged to consult the above-cited sources, and others,³³ for further details on what it involves and on the support it finds from Scripture, patristic witness, wider Church tradition (e.g., liturgical texts, conciliar declarations, living Athonite practice, etc.), and independent philosophical argumentation.³⁴

Returning now to the bearing all this has on the interpretation (or rather reinterpretation) of the arguments of *Monologion* 1–3, recall the first seven premises of my formalization of Anselm's arguments from goodness and from existence.³⁵ If we opt to read these premises as referencing uncreated divine energies (rather than as equivocating between Platonic Forms and God Himself, as per the charge of Visser and Williams), then those arguments come across as coherent, non-heretical (i.e., they are no longer courting pantheism), and not obviously implausible (provided we as-

³³Additional relevant resources include: Golitzin, *Mystagogy*; Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*; Russell, *Gregory Palamas and the Making of Palamism in the Modern Age*; Tanev, *Energy in Orthodox Theology & Physics*; and Tollefsen, *The Christocentric Cosmology of St. Maximus the Confessor*.

³⁴On this last score, it is worth noting that there are areas of overlap between Scotism and Palamism, in at least two respects: (a) some of the philosophical objections levelled by John Duns Scotus and his followers against the doctrine of divine simplicity (as that doctrine had been understood by Augustine and mainstream pre-Scotus western Scholasticism) closely parallel objections long held by Orthodox scholars; and (b) some of the conceptual resources employed by Scotism in formulating its alternative understanding of divine simplicity (notably the resource of the formal distinction) have been looked upon with sympathetic interest by some Orthodox scholars, both historically and in the recent literature. For discussion of these points (from somewhat divergent perspectives), see Bradshaw, "Essence and Energies"; Iacovetti, "God in His Processions"; Jones, "An Absolutely Simple God?"; Kapriev, "Gregory Palamas and George Scholarios"; Plested, "St. Gregory Palamas on the Divine Simplicity"; and Spencer, "The Flexibility of Divine Simplicity."

³⁵I will not comment on the final premises 8–13 of these arguments; Palamites might actually resist Anselm's claim that inherent goodness and inherent existence are the same in reference. Or they might not—it really depends on how they view the status of goodness and existence considered as divine energies (i.e., whether they could plausibly be seen as really one and the same divine energy).

sume Palamism is not obviously implausible). The multiple finite beings we are familiar with in everyday experience are all good, but derivatively so—they share in/participate-in/manifest (or whatever the relationship amounts to) goodness rather than simply *being* goodness. They are each good, but they are not goodness itself, and so their status as good must trace back to something that just *is* goodness, namely the appropriate divine energy (which energy is truly God Himself *qua* outwardly expressed, just not God Himself *qua* essence). The same can be said of these beings with respect to their contingent concrete reality (their present status as actual rather than merely possible entities). They all exist, but derivatively so—they share in/participate-in/manifest (or whatever the relationship amounts to) concrete reality rather than simply *being* concrete reality. They are each actual, but they are not actuality itself, and so their status as actual must trace back to something that just *is* actuality, namely the appropriate divine energy (which energy is truly God Himself *qua* outwardly expressed, just not God Himself *qua* essence).³⁶ Provided one rejects the possibility of infinite regress and circular dependence relations (which Anselm very reasonably does), these lines of reasoning seem defensible.³⁷

Of course, one will want to press the Palamite for further details concerning the precise ontology of these energies (e.g., which of our categories do they belong to, if any?), and also the precise ontology of the relationship between these energies and creatures (e.g., is it best thought of as participation or causation or exemplification or manifestation or something *sui generis*?). Such expansion and clarification would certainly be required for any thoroughgoing defense of the actual soundness of the Palamite reconstruction of the arguments of *Monologion* 1–3. Yet, I suspect Palamism actually allows for different interpretive directions to be pursued on these

³⁶Does this claim entail that the divine essence is non-actual/non-concrete? Probably. If so, that would not imply that the divine essence is devoid of being in every sense of ‘being’ (i.e., that it is non-actual in the sense of *nothingness*), but rather that the divine essence transcends the distinction between abstract and concrete. This is possible provided that the categories ‘abstract’ and ‘concrete’ are understood as converses of one another rather than as contraries of one another, such that there could be something real which is neither abstract nor concrete. (Compare Anselm’s idea that God is neither a universal nor a particular, laid out in *Monologion* chapter 27 and discussed in footnote 6 above.) For more on this conception of the abstract versus concrete divide, see Dumsday, “Platonism About Abstracta.”

³⁷It is also worth noting that Palamas himself seems to entertain a like mode of argument, or at least approach; thus he writes in the *First Letter to Akindynos* 12 as follows:

Those who have not attained to this contemplation are able to appreciate from the forethought about all things the common Forethought; from those who are made good, Goodness itself; from those who are made wise, Wisdom itself; and, in general, from all things the One who transcends all and is established above all, the many-named and unnameable Being beyond being. Are not all these immaterially contemplated around that One, whatever it may be? And is it not through them as evidence that there is a demonstration free from deceit that there is One who leads forth all, who before the ages has forethought for all, who is all-mighty, overseeing all, all-good, and the cause of all, transcending nature?” (Quoted in and translated by Bradshaw, “Natural Theology in St. Gregory Palamas,” 54)

points, at least with respect to these particular energies (goodness + existence). At any rate, it would be interesting to see where today's Palamite philosophers could take this, should any of them happen across this article and feel inspired to take up the gauntlet. In fact, provided the foundational Anselmian intuition driving the arguments itself seems plausible (namely that the existence of something which is derivatively F entails that there must be something *non-derivatively* F), then the fact that the arguments leave room for different metaphysical systems to fill out the details in different ways could actually be seen as a point in their favor. If one set of details (Anselm's own) doesn't work, then another (perhaps the Palamite's) still might. And if one Palamite's account of those details seems problematic, a competing Palamite's somewhat different account may yet prove convincing.

My own tentative opinion, for what it's worth, is that the divine energy 'existence,' which functions to instantiate eternal divine *logoi* (ideas/intents) as concrete temporal particulars (rendering them actual-rather-than-merely-possible), probably cannot be fitted into the standard ontological categories we're familiar with (except perhaps that it is concrete rather than abstract); nor, for that matter, can the relationship between that energy and those resultant concrete particulars be so fitted. Most likely, they will both have to be treated as basic, not subject to non-circular definition by other, more fundamental concepts. (I think this understanding of 'existence' must also be sharply distinguished from a wider concept of 'being' that would encompass both concrete and abstract entities, where the latter include mere possibilities and uninstantiated universals.) Much the same can perhaps be said regarding the basic status of the energy 'goodness' (which would warm the hearts of Mooreans everywhere). I'm inclined to think that a suitably fleshed-out Palamite understanding of the divine energies 'existence' and 'goodness,' developed along these lines and plugged into the scaffolding of the arguments of *Monologion* 1–3 as I've summarized them in section (2) above, might result in sound arguments that could play a role in a larger cumulative case for theism. But that is a larger project that will have to be left for another day.³⁸

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³⁸I would like to extend my sincere thanks to two anonymous referees and to F&P's editor (Tom Senor) for their many helpful comments on earlier drafts. The final version is much improved on account of their valuable input.

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