Activity 1 - What is Perfect Being Theology?

In this section, we look at St Anselm's articulation of the method for philosophizing about God now called 'perfect being theology', starting with his famous definition for God in the *Proslogion*. We look at a problem arising from his definition, and how philosophers in the twentieth century departed from medieval methods so that they could use modern logical tools. The resulting method is explained more clearly.

Defining God
St Anselm wrote the *Proslogion* in 1078 while a monk in Normandy. The work sets out to write 'one argument'[1] showing that God exists, is perfect, and the source of everything else. Strictly speaking he can't achieve the second goal, since when he sets to work in Chapter Two he begins with the assumption that God is "something than which nothing greater can be thought"[2]: that is, he has assumed that God is perfect from the start. We should treat this assumption as a 'term definition' for God. Anselm can't show that God exists, or show anything else about God, without *some* explicit explanation of what he takes the word "God" to mean. We might think that this is not what everyone means by the term "God"; or at least not what they fundamentally mean. But perfect being theologians will supply arguments for why this is a promising way to define "God", which we'll look at later.

The definition Anselm gives is rather a mouthful: by way of explanation, the basic idea is this. Think of a being, *x*. If you can think of a better being, *x* is not God. If you can't think of a better being, *x* is God. The being *x* will only 'satisfy' the definition "something than which nothing greater can be thought" if you can't imagine a being which is better than *x*. Compare this with a non-theological case. Suppose I have this definition for "water": "a colourless odourless liquid which boils at 100°C". If I want to know whether the liquid in my test tube is water, I check to see if it's colourless, odourless and boils at 100°C. Note that other things can still be true of water in general, and other things can be true of my sample of water. Note also that I can deduce other things about water from the definition: for instance, I can deduce that there's no water on the planet Mercury using what I know about Mercury's atmospheric temperature. Likewise, God can satisfy the definition "something than which nothing greater can be thought", and the things the Bible says about Him can still be true (as long as they aren't things a perfect being wouldn't do). And from this definition Anselm deduces a range of things about God using what he knows about "greatness" or perfection: that God is the Creator of everything else, impeccable, incorporeal, omnipotent, omniscient, timeless and that He cannot fail to exist (more on these later!).

Conceivability and Possibility
There is an odd feature with this definition, however. Read at face value, it implies that a huge range of different things will be God, since different people are capable of thinking different things. Whose thought does the definition refer to? The average human? That would raise a problem: if Joe is an average thinker and Sally is an above-average thinker,

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[1] Anselm, *Proslogion*, preface.
[2] Anselm, *Proslogion*, Chapter 2

then Joe knows that the greatest being Sally can conceive of will be greater than the greatest being he can conceive of himself. He can "think about" a being which Sally can "think up", even though he can't "think up" the same being, because of his mediocre thinking powers. Sally, in her turn, can "think about" a being which she can't "think up" herself: "something greater than which can be thought". But what's the difference between thinking about and thinking up? Is there one?[3]

The way contemporary philosophers have handled worries of this sort is to give a version of Anselm's definition which does not refer to human thought, but rather to truths of logic which hold regardless of our powers. Some things are possible and impossible due to certain conditions: for instance, if there are no chocolatiers, then chocolate triangles are impossible. Some things, however, are logically possible and some things are logically impossible: a chocolate triangle is logically possible, but a square triangle is logically impossible. Nothing could be changed about the world to make it possible that there be square triangles. Square triangles would be impossible even if there were no humans alive, thinking, or whatever. So if we define God instead as "something than which nothing better is possible", our definition doesn't raise any of the weirdness raised by a surface reading of Anselm's, with its references to human mental activities. (On a historical note, this surface reading is clearly not what Anselm meant. His words referring to mental activities were just the words used to discuss logical possibility in his day.) We can also change 'greater' to 'better' just to reflect the way that English has different sets of connotations for these two words, whereas Anselm only had one Latin word for both 'great' and 'good'.

The Method

So, when we do perfect being theology we start with a definition of "God" as "something than which nothing better is possible". We presume that we know what makes one thing better than another – that we have *moral knowledge* – and that we know what is possible and what is impossible – that we have *modal knowledge*. The word "modal" just refers to matters of possibility, impossibility and necessity. Something is "necessary" if it must exist whatever else is the case – necessity is the opposite of impossibility. For example, triangles necessarily have three sides. Sometimes necessities can be easily logically deduced from definitions – for example, triangles necessarily have three sides because they have three angles (and 'triangle' just means 'has three angles'). Sometimes necessities have to be discovered in much more complicated ways, such as the truth that water necessarily boils at 100°C.

Step one of a use of perfect being theology, or a 'perfect being argument' about God's nature, goes as follows. Using our moral knowledge, we can take some property, some way a thing can be – such as alive, or loving, or powerful – and ask "would something be better if it had that property, or had more of that property?" If the answer is yes, that property counts as a 'perfection' or 'great-making property', which is just to say that having that property makes something better, more 'great'. If the property is a perfection, God must have that

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[3] Anselm raises this problem at *Proslogion* Chapter 15, but moves on rather quickly!

property, with a rule for exceptions which takes us to step two. When we have two or more properties we think God has because these properties are perfections, we must ask "if something had both of those properties, could it possibly exist?". Do the two properties contradict each other? If the answer is 'yes', we must check to see if we have understood the properties well enough to see if they can be reconciled. If they can't be reconciled, God couldn't have them both. So then we need to decide which of the two properties is a more important perfection, and say that God has only that more important perfection, since He can't have both. We can keep repeating this process, fleshing out our understanding of God, until we've exhausted all the properties which seem like sensible candidates for perfections.

Questions

It would be helpful to read chapters 2, 3 and 5 of Anselm's Proslogion before answering the following questions. You can read it online [here](#)

1. Give a list of three 'perfections' – properties things can have which make them better, such as kindness – and three properties which are morally irrelevant, such as redness.

2. Look at your examples. Do you believe that the perfections would make any being better for having it, or only some kinds of being (humans, cats, oranges)? If the latter, which kinds?

3. Aquinas calls properties which would make any being better, no matter what kind of being it is, a pure perfection. Can you think of any examples of pure perfections besides life, love/virtue, power/agency, and knowledge/rationality?

4. Can you think of an example of a pure perfection which it seems mistaken or confused to attribute to God? If so, explain why it seems mistaken or confused to attribute to God.