

# Anselm's Conception of God's Omnipotence

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*This paper is focused on a systematic analysis of the Anselmian concept of omnipotence. Starting from a reading of Anselmian sources (from Monologion to Cur Deus Homo) and, in a continuous dialogue with contemporary interpretations, it is shown what Anselm means by divine omnipotence. Through the analysis of Anselm's language and logic the paper reconstructs the history of the term and its particular meaning within the writings of the archbishop of Canterbury. Anselm's account of omnipotence, the author notes, differs from the previous tradition because it is not based on the idea that God can do everything.*

*Keywords: Anselm, Monologion, Proslogion, Cur Deus Homo, divine omnipotence, God.*

## 1. Introduction

In this paper, I focus on one particular attribute of God, omnipotence, and attempt to show how Anselm's conception of this attribute can lead us to a fuller understanding of its meaning. In doing this I hope to be able to indicate some of the implications of the Anselmian way of conceiving of God as «that than which nothing greater can be thought» [X]<sup>1</sup>. I will proceed by reviewing Anselm's use of the concept of omnipotence in his writings and show how he resolves the linguistic and logical difficulties associated with this term. I will then present a set of distinctions concerning power<sup>2</sup> and omnipotence that, I believe, underpins Anselm's understanding, and which I consider fundamental to clarifying the meaning of omnipotence more generally<sup>3</sup>. Finally, in the light of these distinctions, I will offer a brief outline of an Anselmian defence of God's

<sup>1</sup> I use the following abbreviations: X for «that than which nothing greater can be thought»; Q for «God is whatever it is better to be than not to be»; Qc for «whatever it is better to be than not to be»; M for *Monologion*; P for *Proslogion*; CDH for *Cur Deus Homo*.

<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this paper I take "power" generally to refer to the ability (realised or not) to perform an action. I leave aside any wider discussion of the relation between dispositions, abilities and powers that forms part of contemporary metaphysics of powers.

<sup>3</sup> The distinctions are: Apower (absolute power – omnipotence as understood by Anselm); Lpower (power that lacks Apower); Rpower (relative power); Npower (negative power); Epower (extraordinary power). By Apower, I am *not* referring to *potentia absoluta* as conceived in the scholastic tradition. Discussion of the relation of *potentia absoluta* and *poten-*