Anselm's First Argument

In *Proslogion II*, Anselm provides the following argument:

> But surely when this same Fool hears what I am speaking about, namely
> 'something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought', he understands what he
> hears, and what he understands is in his mind, even if he does not understand that
> it actually exists. … Even the Fool, then, is forced to agree that something-than-
> which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought exists in the mind, since he understands
> this when he hears it, and whatever is understood is in the mind.

The conclusion of this argument—viz. that that than which no greater can be
conceived exists in the understanding (or mind)—is then the first premise in what is
standardly said to be Anselm's ontological argument. In this paper, I propose to look
carefully at the argument contained in the above-cited passage.

On first sight, it is tempting to set out the argument contained in the above passage in
the following way:

1. When the fool hears the words 'that than which no greater can be conceived',
    he understands what he hears. (Premise)
2. Whatever is understood exists in the understanding. (Premise)
3. (Hence) That than which no greater can be conceived exists in the
    understanding. (From 1 and 2.)

Thus understood, the argument is problematic. The initial premise refers to 'the fool',
and to what 'the fool' hears and understands. But the conclusion simply refers to 'the
understanding', as does the second premise. On any plausible reading, then, the
argument seems simply to be invalid.

In order to restore validity, there are two natural possible moves. On the one hand, we
might set out the argument in a way that consistently maintains reference to 'the fool':

1. When the fool hears the words 'that than which no greater can be conceived',
    he understands what he hears. (Premise)
2. Whatever the fool understands exists in his understanding. (Premise)
3. (Hence) That than which no greater can be conceived exists in the
    understanding of the fool. (From 1 and 2.)

On the other hand, we might set out the argument in a way that consistently omits all
mention of 'the fool':

1. When the words 'that than which no greater can be conceived' are heard, they
    are understood. (Premise)
2. Whatever is understood exists in the understanding. (Premise)
3. (Hence) That than which no greater can be conceived exists in the
    understanding. (From 1 and 2.)

The second rendition of the argument is at least potentially ambiguous. Read one way, the second rendition of the argument is merely a kind of generalisation of the first rendition, and so involves no more problematic commitments than the first rendition:

1. At least some people who hear the words 'that than which no greater can be conceived' understand what they hear. (Premise)
2. Whatever is understood by someone exists in the understanding of that one. (Premise)
3. (Hence) That than which no greater can be conceived exists in the understandings of at least some people. (From 1 and 2.)

However, read another way, the second rendition of the argument involves a further, at least potentially problematic, commitment beyond the commitments incurred in acceptance of the first rendition—for, on this second reading, we suppose that 'the understanding' refers to something that is independent of any particular human individual. On this second reading, at least roughly speaking, the conclusion of the argument could be true even if there were no human individuals, nor any other kinds of cognitive agents.

1

On the first rendition of the argument, and on the first way of reading the second rendition of the argument, we make serious use of expressions such as 'exists in the understanding of the fool' and 'exists in the understandings of some people'. The use of these expressions invites various questions: Do we incur serious commitments in the use of these expressions? Could be use of these expressions be understood in a deflationary way? If the use of these expressions does incur substantive commitments, to what does it commit us?

If the expressions 'exists in the understanding of the fool' and 'exists in the understandings of some people' were used in a deflationary way, then, I take it, they would just be alternative formulations—synonyms, paraphrases, translations—of the expressions 'understood by the fool' and 'understood by some people'. But simple inspection shows that there is no way of carrying through the main part of Anselm's if this kind of deflationary interpretation is adopted. Anselm's main argument relies upon a uniform construal of the expressions 'exists in the understanding (of X)' and 'exists in reality'—but there is no plausible parallel to the deflationary interpretation of 'exists in the understanding (of X)' in the case of 'exists in reality'.

Given that it is simply not open to us to interpret Anselm's use of the expressions 'exists in the understanding of the fool' and 'exists in the understandings of some people' in a deflationary fashion, we are required to suppose that Anselm's use of these expressions involves substantive commitments. In particular, we are required to suppose that Anselm's use of these expressions is underpinned by a substantive theory or proto-theory. But what might this theory or proto-theory be?

Before we begin to address this new question, it is worth observing that the renditions of the argument that are currently before us are not fully explicit. In particular, our current renditions do not succeed in making a suitable connection between someone's

hearing an expression 'X' and X's existing in that person's understanding. At least initially, it is tempting to suggest that what is needed is something like this:

1. When the fool hears the words 'that than which no greater can be conceived', he understands these words. (Premise)
2'. If the fool understands the words 'that than which no greater can be conceived', then that than which no greater can be conceived exists in the understanding of the fool. (Premise)
3. (Hence) That than which no greater can be conceived exists in the understandings of at least some people. (From 1 and 2'.)

But, of course, Anselm's first argument actually contains a generalisation of 2'. And, plausibly, it is the generalisation of 2' that is the entry point to the substantive theory of existence in the understanding. An initial pass at this generalisation is something like this:

1. When the fool hears the words 'that than which no greater can be conceived', he understands these words. (Premise)
2". If an expression 'E' is understood by X, then E exists in the understanding of X. (Premise)
3. (Hence) That than which no greater can be conceived exists in the understandings of at least some people. (From 1 and 2".)

However, once we formulate the generalisation in this way, we see immediately that there must be restrictions on the kinds of expressions that can be substituted for 'E', on pain of allowing substitution instances of 2" to be ill-formed. In particular, it is clear that we must restrict expressions that can be substituted for 'E' to those expressions which not lead to ill-formedness when substituted in the sentence 'E exists in X's understanding'. Speaking roughly, then, expressions that could be substituted for 'E' in 2" must be restricted to expressions that can occupy subject position in a sentence.

The class of expressions that can occupy subject position in a sentence is very broad: it includes proper names, general names, quantifier phrases—including both definite and indefinite descriptions—pronouns, demonstrative phrases, and so forth. Because Anselm's argument works with the expression 'that than which no greater can be conceived'—and because it isn't clear whether this expression is best understood as a definite description, or as an indefinite description, or as something else—it seems reasonable to suppose that Anselm's theory is intended to encompass all of the members of the class. However, if that's right, then in testing out the acceptability of 2", we need to bear in mind that the requirements for understanding an expression that belongs to one of the sub-classes mentioned above might be quite different from the requirements for understanding an expression that belongs to another of those sub-classes.

Apart from questions about specific requirements for understanding particular classes of expressions, there are also some general questions about understanding to be addressed. In the case of simple expressions, does it suffice for understanding that one recognise that the expression does in fact belong to particular syntactic category in one's language? (Does one understand a name if one merely recognises that the

expression in question is syntactically a name?) In the case of compound expressions, does it suffice for understanding that one recognise that the expression is a syntactically well-formed member of a particular category in one's language? (Does one, for example, count as understanding the expression 'the round square' because one understands the expressions 'round' and 'square' and recognises that the definite description 'the round square' is syntactically well-formed?)

It is, I think, quite clear that Anselm cannot be content with a minimal—syntactic—criterion for understanding of expressions (and, in particular, for understanding of compound expressions). Consider, for example, the following definite description: "the least being that is greater than that than which no greater can be conceived". If our account of the understanding of compound expressions allows that this expression is understood by the fool, then it will follow that, in the understanding of the fool, there exists the least being that is greater than that than which no greater can be conceived—and, in that case, it is clear that Anselm's major *reductio* argument simply won't go through.

Of course, there is a sense in which it is a requirement of Anselm's major proof that we do understand the expression 'that which is greater than that than which no greater can be conceived'. For it is claimed, in the *reductio* argument of that proof, that it is impossible—inconceivable, incoherent—to suppose that there is that which is greater than that than which no greater can be conceived. But we could hardly be in a position to make that claim if we did not understand the expression 'that which is greater than that than which no greater can be conceived'! Again, the proper conclusion here is that it cannot be that Anselm is working with such a minimal understanding of 'understanding': the argument of his major proof evidently requires a more robust criterion for the understanding of expressions.

Given that Anselm needs something more than a minimal—syntactic—criterion for the understanding of expressions—in the sense of understanding that is required for his main argument—we are then required to ask what more should be added to the demands of syntax. It is clear that it won't suffice for Anselm's purposes to insist on the strong semantic requirement that a necessary condition for an expression 'E' to be understood is that E exists in reality (i.e. that 'E' has a referent that exists in reality). For, of course, while Anselm himself does suppose that the expression 'that than which no greater can be conceived' has a referent that exists in reality, this is supposed to be the *conclusion* of the line of thought that is encapsulated in his major argument.

There is a range of alternative accounts of what is required for the understanding of subject expressions. For example, it might be proposed that a necessary condition for an expression 'E' to be understood—in the sense relevant to Anselm's major argument—is that 'E' refers to a possible object (or, in other words, that the sentence 'It is possible that E exists' is true). However, no fool worth his salt will allow that it is possible that there is a being than which no greater can be conceived, if nothing could properly be labelled 'that than which no greater can be conceived' that fails to be a necessary existent. That is, any fool worth his salt will now either deny that the expression 'that than which no greater can be conceived' is understood, or he will deny that 'that than which no greater can be conceived' refers to something that is necessarily existent, necessarily omnipotent, necessarily omniscient, necessarily

perfectly good, and so forth. Of course, Anselm will clearly insist that it is *true* that it is possible that there is a necessarily existent, necessarily omnipotent, necessarily omniscient, necessarily perfectly good being—but, if that is what is assumed in the first premise of the first argument, then there is no need for the complicated line of reasoning that is encapsulated in Anselm's major argument, and there is no reason for anyone to think that Anselm's argument *establishes* anything interesting.

Remaining alternative accounts of what is required for the understanding of subject expressions are, I think, best thought of as accounts that adopt a syntactic criterion that is restricted in certain kinds of ways. Think, for example, about definite descriptions of the form 'the really existing X', where 'X' refers to something that exists only in the understanding. If we wish to hold onto the principle that it is always true that 'the F G is F', when 'the F G' is understood, then we shall be obliged to say that 'the really existing X' is not understood if 'X' exists only in the understanding. And the same goes for any descriptive material that carries with it commitment to existence in reality. Suppose, for example that 'that F than which no greater F can be conceived' can only be satisfied by an F that exists in reality. In that case, too, if we want to hold that it is true that that F than which no greater F can be conceived *is* an F than which no greater F can be conceived, we must *already* hold that an F than which no greater F can be conceived exists in reality. (It is worth noting here that Anselm is effectively required to make claims of the form "The F is F" in the course of his major argument *before* it has been established that the 'reality committing' predicate 'F' is instantiated in reality. That is, Anselm's reasoning requires him to be able to assert, for example, that that than which no greater can be conceived is that than which no greater can be conceived before it has been established that the expression 'that than which no greater can be conceived' is instantiated in reality—and, hence, before it has been established that, in the relevant sense, the expression is understood.)

While there is more that might be done to expand the reasoning in the last part of this discussion, it seems to me that the proper upshot of this line of thought is that, if Anselm wishes to go beyond possible existence as a necessary condition on the understanding of subject terms, then he will be forced to insist on something like the following requirement: *a subject expression 'S' that carries with it commitment to existence in reality is only understood if it does indeed refer to something that exists in reality*. Failure to insist on a requirement of this kind will open the way to 'proofs' of the existence in reality of things that do not exist in reality. But insistence on a requirement of this kind is fatal to Anselm's major argument: for, on the understanding of subject terms now in play, while Anselm may be right to think that the expression 'that than which no greater can be conceived' is understood by some people, to assume that it is understood by some people is *already* to assume the existence in reality of that than which no greater can be conceived.

2

On the second way of reading the second rendition of Anselm's first argument, it seems most plausible to suggest that we face the same difficulties that we discussed in the earlier part of this paper, together with the new difficulties that arise in making sense of talk of 'the understanding' in the case in which this expression refers to something that is independent of any particular human individual. Consequently, it seems clear that, in order to see that this second way of reading the second rendition

of Anselm's argument does not lead to a successful argument, we don't really need to add anything to the discussion of the earlier part of this paper.

Nonetheless, it seems to me that it might be fruitful to think about the possible development of theories of 'the understanding', in the sense in which this expression might be understood to serve the purposes of the second way of reading the second rendition of Anselm's first argument. In particular, it is worth recalling that the final part of the preceding discussion of accounts of what is required for the understanding of subject expressions was somewhat swift. Perhaps some readers may suspect that there must be some way of developing a theory of 'the understanding' and 'existence in the understanding' that overcomes the difficulties noted in that earlier discussion.

The second rendition of Anselm's first argument, set out in the introduction to the present paper, is as follows:

1. When the words 'that than which no greater can be conceived' are heard, they are understood. (Premise)
2. Whatever is understood exists in the understanding. (Premise)
3. (Hence) That than which no greater can be conceived exists in the understanding. (From 1 and 2.)

If we understand talk of 'the understanding' to be talk about a domain that is more or less independent of the cognitive capacities of human agents, then we might think that some further refinement of the premises of the argument is required. What matters, one might think, is not whether a given expression is understood—by all, or some, or at least one, of those who have heard it—but rather whether a given expression is susceptible of understanding—by human agents, or, perhaps, by agents with capacities that outstrip the capacities of human agents. Taking this thought into account, one might prefer the following formulation of the second rendition of Anselm's first argument:

1. The words 'that than which no greater can be conceived' are susceptible of understanding.
2. If a subject expression 'E' is susceptible of understanding, then E exists in the understanding.
3. (Hence) That than which no greater can be conceived exists in the understanding. (From 1 and 2.)

Suppose—at least *pro tem*—that we agree that we shall examine this formulation of the second rendition of Anselm's first argument. In order to determine whether this argument is defensible, we need an account of what it is for something to 'exist in the understanding', and what it is for an expression to be 'susceptible of understanding'.

Given the way that Anselm talks about 'existence in the understanding' and 'existence in reality'—and given the way that he employs this kind of talk in his major argument in *Proslogion II*—it is clear that he is committed to the following claims:

1. There are objects that exist in reality.
2. There are objects that exist in the understanding.
3. Some objects exist both in reality and in the understanding.

4. Some objects exist only in the understanding (i.e. some object that exist in the understanding do not exist in reality).

Of course, if we take this talk of two domains of existence seriously, then we are obliged to consider what to say about property possession—i.e., what to say about the properties that are possessed by objects in these two domains. (For instance, given that there are objects that exist both in reality and in the understanding, a natural question to ask is whether objects that exist both in reality and in the understanding have *the very same* properties in both of these domains.) Moreover, given that we take this talk of two domains of existence seriously, we also need to give a theory of the kinds of expressions that can be properly used to pick out, or refer to, or designate, objects that belong to one, or other, or both of these domains.

While this is not the place to try to develop a comprehensive theory of reference and predication for Anselm's two domains of existence, it does seem to me that we can fairly quickly develop serious difficulties that arise in the context of his first argument. For suppose we ask the following question: *Can a descriptive expression pick out an object that exists only in the understanding even though some of the descriptive content of the expression in question is not true of the object thus picked out?*

Consider, for example, the expression 'the really existent tallest inhabitant of the planet Mars'. There are, I think, just two options here. On the one hand, we might say that, since there are really no inhabitants of the planet Mars, this expression fails to pick out anything that exists in the understanding. On the other hand, we might say that, even though there are really no inhabitants of the planet Mars, this expression does pick out an object that exists only in the understanding.

If we take the second option—i.e. if we say that 'the really existent tallest inhabitant of the planet Mars' picks out an object that exists only in the understanding—then we are required to say that the object in question does not have the property of existing in reality, even though 'existence in reality' is part of the descriptive content that figures in the expression that was used to pick out the object in question. If we take this second option, then we are required to say that, for example, there is no *a priori* guarantee that a sentence of the form 'The F G is F' is true, since there are instances of this schema that are false when 'the F G' exists only in the understanding (for instance, it is *not* true that the really existent tallest inhabitant of the planet Mars is really existent, i.e. exists in reality). Moreover, if we take this second option, it is clear that we must also say that whether a sentence of the form 'The F G is F' is true, in cases in which 'F' entails existence in reality, *depends upon* whether or not there is something that exists in reality that answers to the description 'the F G'. For instance, in the case at hand, the reason why the sentence 'The really existent tallest inhabitant of the planet Mars is really existent' fails to be true is that there really are no inhabitants of the planet Mars.

If we take the first option—i.e. if we say that 'the really existent tallest inhabitant of the planet Mars' fails to pick out an object that exists in the understanding—then we are once more committed to that claim that there is no *a priori* guarantee that a sentence of the form 'The F G is F' is true. However, in this case, it remains open to us to go on to say that we do have an *a priori* guarantee that, if there is something that is denoted by the expression 'The F G', then that thing is F. Thus, for example, it is, at

least thus far, open to us to say that we know *a priori* that, if the expression 'the really existent tallest inhabitant of the planet Mars' denotes an object that exists in the understanding, then that object really exists, i.e. that object exists in reality as well.

We can apply the above discussion in the case of Anselm's favourite expression, 'that than which no greater can be conceived'. We shall suppose, for the sake of the present discussion, that this expression entails existence in reality, in the following sense: *if there is something that exists in the understanding that is picked out by this expression, then this expression has exactly the same entailments as the expression 'that real existent than which no greater can be conceived'*. Behind this proposal is the following general line of thought. First, if there is any clear candidate to be an understood expression that *entails* existence in reality, it is surely an expression of the form 'really existent F' or 'F that exists in reality'. Second, when we compare the (presumptively understood) expressions 'F' and 'really existent F' or 'F that exists in reality', it seems evident that the only entailments that the first could have that the second lacks are *non-trivial* entailments involving 'really existent' or 'exists in reality'. Putting these two thought together, we arrive at the following view: for any understood expression 'F', if 'F' and 'really existent F' and 'F that exists in reality' have the same entailments, then it follows that 'F' entails existence in reality.

Given the preceding discussion, we can then argue as follows. There are three possibilities for the expression 'that than which no greater can be conceived' (and these correlate precisely with the three possibilities for the expression 'that real existent than which no greater can be conceived'): (i) it denotes an object that exists in reality; (ii) it denotes an object that exists only in the understanding; (iii) it fails to denote an object that exists in the understanding. If this expression does denote an object that exists in reality, then the conclusion of Anselm's major argument is true. However, if this expression denotes an object that exists *only* in the understanding, then, even though the expression entails existence in reality in the sense outlined above, it is nonetheless false that that than which no greater can be conceived exists in reality. And if this expression fails to denote an object that exists in the understanding, then it is straightforwardly false that 'that that than which no greater can be conceived exists in reality'. Moreover—and this is the key point—whether it is correct to say that the expression 'that than which no greater can be conceived' is understood, and whether it is correct to say that one can make inferences about the reality-entailing attributes of that than which no greater can be conceived if one supposes that it exists in the understanding, *depends upon* (a) whether or not it is true that that than which no greater can be conceived exists in reality, and (b) which of the two options outlined above we take in assessing the denotations of expressions that involve existence-in-reality-entailing content.

The upshot of our slightly more careful consideration of the second way of reading the second rendition of Anselm's first argument is thus as follows. Even if we grant Anselm his distinction between two distinct domains of existence—existence in the understanding and existence in reality—it is not uncontroversial that that than which no greater can be conceived exists in the understanding. On the one hand, if we suppose that there is just no understanding expressions that are existence-in-reality-entailing if there is nothing that exists in reality that is denoted by them, then we must think that the initial premise of Anselm's first argument is question-begging. And, on the other hand, if we suppose that we can understand expressions that are existence-

in-reality-entailing even if there is nothing that exists in reality that is denoted by them, then we must deny the second premise of Anselm's first argument: what is true, roughly speaking, is that if a subject expression 'E' is susceptible of understanding, then (a) it is at least true that E* exists in the understanding, where E* is obtained from E by replacing any existence-in-reality-entailing attributes of E with otherwise identical attributes that are not existence-in-reality-entailing, and (b) whether it is further true that E exists in the understanding depends upon whether or not it is true that E exists in reality. Either way, Anselm's first argument does not serve the purpose that it is intended to serve: it does not *establish* that that than which no greater can be conceived exists in the understanding in any context in which it is also maintained that 'being that than which no greater can be conceived' is an existence-in-reality-entailing attribute. Of course, as we have already noted several times, if it is true that there is something than which no greater can be conceived, then, even in contexts in which it is maintained that 'being than which no greater can be conceived' is an existence-in-reality-entailing attribute, it will be the case that the conclusion of Anselm's first argument is true, and it will also be the case that the further *reductio* argument in Anselm's major argument is sound. But it is quite clear that, even in this case, the combination of Anselm's first argument and Anselm's major argument does not constitute a successful argument for the existence of that than which no greater can be conceived.

3

The more careful discussion of Anselm's first argument in the previous section of this paper still leaves some loose ends. In particular, it is worth noting that the discussion of the previous section effectively takes it for granted that objects that exist both in the understanding and in reality have the very same properties in both of those domains. That is, the discussion of the previous section takes for granted something like the following principle: *for any object X and property F, X has F in the understanding iff X has F in reality*. Moreover, the discussion of the previous section is silent on questions about the consistency and completeness of objects—i.e. it is silent on the following kinds of principles: *for no object X and property F is it true both that X has F and X has not-F*; and *for no object X and property F is it true both that X lacks F and X lacks not-F*. Finally—and unsurprisingly—the discussion of the previous section is silent on questions about interactions between these different kinds of principles.

If we accept that there is a distinction between existence in the understanding and existence in reality, then it seems natural to suppose that objects that exist in reality are consistent and complete in reality. That is: in reality, for no object X and property F is it true both that X has F and X has not-F; and, in reality, for no object X and property F is it true both that X lacks F and X lacks not-F. However, if we accept that there is a distinction between existence in the understanding and existence in reality, then it is a controversial question whether all—or perhaps even some—objects that exist in the understanding are consistent and complete. Some theorists might wish to allow that, in the understanding, for some object X and some property F, it is true both that X has F and X has not-F; and some theorists might wish to allow that, in the understanding, for some object X and some property F, it is true neither that X has F nor that X has not-F.

If we allow that no objects in the understanding are either inconsistent or incomplete, then it seems that we should suppose that objects that exist only in the understanding are merely possible objects. Moreover, given that we suppose that objects that exist only in the understanding are merely possible objects, we should also suppose that the property of existing in reality is possessed only by those possible objects that also exist in reality. Then, when we come to consider whether putatively denoting expressions do pick out an object, we need to decide what to do with expressions that entail existence in reality when there are, in reality, no objects that answer to those expressions. (Here, we can refer back to the two options discussed in the previous section of this paper.)

If we allow that there are objects in the understanding that are either inconsistent or incomplete, then we are supposing that some objects that exist only in the understanding are impossible objects. When we come to think about the properties that are possessed by these impossible objects, we face further choices. Given that we are supposing that these objects exist only in the understanding, it seems right to say that these objects have the property of existing only in the understanding. Moreover, given that we are supposing that these objects do not exist in reality, it seems right to say that these objects have the property of not existing in reality. However, given that we are allowing impossible objects, it is hard to see why we cannot now allow that these impossible objects also have the property of existing in reality.

Perhaps it might be said that, if we allow that an object has the property of existing in reality then, by an obvious principle of predication, that object exists in reality. But, if we are to stick to the view that inconsistency and incompleteness are restricted to the realm of the understanding, we cannot allow that there are any inconsistent objects that exist in reality. So it might be thought that we simply cannot allow that there are impossible objects that have the property of existing in reality. However, there is at least one remaining option whose adoption is not without historical precedent. In order to meet the various demands now in place, we might deny the obvious principle of predication: we might deny that to say that an object *has* a certain property is to say that the object *possesses* that property.

How might we defend the view that we should make this denial? Well, there is a further fundamental question that we have not yet considered. When an object exists in reality, it possesses properties in reality and it also possesses properties in the understanding. But if an object exists only in the understanding, does that object also possess properties in reality? It might seem plausible to some, for example, to say that if an object exists only in the understanding, then that object, even though it fails to exist in reality, nonetheless possesses in reality the property of existing only in the understanding. Suppose that you are tempted by this line of thought, and turn your attention to what you suppose is a paradigm case of an object that exists only in the understanding—say, Santa Claus. If we suppose that, in reality, Santa has the property of existing only in the understanding, then we are required to face the question: what other properties does Santa possess in reality? Some cases may seem straightforward: in reality, Santa is a fictional character, a creature of myth and imagination, and so forth. But what about other properties? Is it the case that, in reality, Santa has a white beard? Is it the case that, in reality, Santa wears a red suit? Is it the case that, in reality, Santa lives at the North Pole? Is it the case that, in reality, Santa brings toys to children at Xmas?

In response to these questions, one might be tempted to give an equivocal answer. Clearly, there is a good sense in which, in reality, none of these things is the case. Santa does not number among the really existent white-bearded men, or the really existent red-suit wearers, or the really existent denizens of the North Pole, or the really existent distributors of presents at Xmas. But, you might think, there is also a good sense in which, in reality, Santa is properly associated with the properties of being white-bearded, red-suit wearing, denizen of the North Pole, and distributor or presents at Xmas—and in which Santa is not properly associated with the properties of being liable to injury by exposure to Kryptonite, having seven toes on his right hand, being a regular attendee at the Mad Hatter's tea party, and so on. But, if these kinds of considerations seem appealing to you, then you might want to say that we should frame our account of property possession so that it properly reflects them.

If we are to develop a theory that does reflect the kinds of considerations just mentioned, then we shall be heading off down the track of constructing a theory of objects in the style of Meinong and his followers. There are many different ways of constructing such a theory, and the present paper is not the proper place to survey such theories. Instead, I shall content myself with the following observation: however we go about constructing a theory of objects that allows that there is some sense in which it is true that, in reality, Santa Claus has a white beard, that theory must have the resources to allow us to say that there really is no Santa Claus (and this despite the fact that the Santa Claus story says, not only that Santa has a white beard, but also that Santa exists). But what goes for Santa Claus must then go for that than which no greater can be conceived as well: even if our theory of objects allows that there is some sense in which it is true that, in reality, there is that than which no greater can be conceived, the theory must also have the resources to allow us to say truly that there really is nothing than which no greater can be conceived *if* there really is nothing than which no greater can be conceived. Of course, this claim requires substantiation; but that will have to remain as work for another day.