The appeal of an investigation performed by means of the confined domain of logica vetus is one of the most fascinating elements offered by Anselm’s theological and philosophical works. The Archbishop of Canterbury illustrated the ultimate epistemological implications of the submission of reason to faith before Aristotle’s syllogistics made its way back into the curriculum studiorum with James of Venice’s and Boethius’s translations from 1120 onwards. As a fine dialectician, Doctor Magnificus thus applies the rules regulating categorical predication in an orderly and correct fashion until reaching the truth of divine essence itself. The analysis of predicates along the degrees of the Porphyrian tree overturns the limiting value of apophatic theology into an ontological doctrine that employs the verb ‘to be’ as God’s own noun and places the creature in the condition, close to non – being, of a reality always fluctuating in the precarious dialectic between magis and minus esse (cf. d’Onofrio 2008, 216).

The landscape of studies about Anselm of Aosta is now enriched by an easy introduction to Doctor Magnificus’s life and works by Thomas Williams. The essay doesn’t merely summarise Cantuariensis’s main theses but provides the status quaestionis on the most recent interpretative approaches. The slim publication, with colour illustrations and several detailed boxes, is completed by a chronological table with main biographical events and a bibliography, divided by chapters, for further study of discussed topics in the latest scholarly literature. The division into seven chapters thus articulates a useful monograph for the student of the history of medieval philosophy. The divulgative style, underlined by a middle register that, however, doesn’t undermine the use of technical language, is mirrored by the limited dimensions of the critical apparatus. Williams confines himself at most to quoting late ancient and medieval sources without any reference to scholarly bibliography in the footnotes, drafted according to APA methodology. The translations – which quote the English version of Anselm’s writings, published by Williams himself (cf. Williams 2022) – follow the Latin text and merely revise the syntactic order of the sentences according to the grammatical differences between the two languages. However, an indication in brackets or in footnotes of the original of technical expressions, so frequent in such a refined dialectician as Anselm, would have been useful. If the omission of any quotation of Latin seems, nevertheless, consistent with the aims and ambitions of the publication, a reference to the critical edition of Cantuariensis’s works, even if only in the bibliographical section, might have added value to the study. As a further critical element,
the absence of any reference to scientific literature not written in English partially undermines the aim of offering a truly complete and updated introduction (cf. Catalani & de Filippis 2018). Nevertheless, the essay is possibly a helpful instrument even for the English scholar of medieval philosophy who, by introducing himself to Anselm’s work, may find an original interpretation strongly set in late 11th – century England. In this sense, the publication is a necessary supplement to the companions on Doctor Magnificus – nowadays rather dated – published in 2008 in Oxford, by Sandra Visser and Williams himself, and in Cambridge, by Brian Davies and Brian Leftow.

The book begins by examining those biographical details which throw light on Anselm’s writings. In this respect, within the different historical, geographical and ecclesiastical coordinates, relations between Roman Church and Kingdom of England in the critical decades of Investiture Controversy are taken as pivotal in understanding the medieval theologian’s life and work. Williams reports several episodes connected with the archbishop’s relationship with the Norman kings William II Rufus and Henry I Beauclerc, resulting in Anselm’s exile from December 1103 to August 1106. The author also devotes several pages to the Doctor Magnificus’s collaboration with the Roman See with regard to the Gregorian Reform. In particular, Williams details Anselm’s visit to Pope Urban II in 1097, the participation in the synods of Bari and Rome as well as the convocation of a primatial council in London in 1102. Nevertheless, any accounting of the undeniable originality of Anselm’s work in his own time must take into account the intellectual and monastic background to which Cantuariensis belongs. From Augustine of Hippo to Lanfranc of Bec, all Christian thinkers have exposed the limits of human comprehension of the reasonability of the faith. Anselm engaged in the exercise of a logical accommodation of knowledge that would challenge the vertigo of an ultimate explanation of reality without thereby subjecting the mysteries of Christian revelation to the judgment of reason. The widespread use of dialectics thus constitutes the tool by which Doctor Magnificus generates the positive content of his pages. The quotations of sources are replaced by the argumentative reproduction of the mental proceedings that led Church Fathers and hagiographers to crucial theological assertions. The first part of the volume, made up of the second, third and fourth chapters, is devoted to the argumentation of Monologion and Proslogion. Williams emphasizes Anselm’s divergences with Boethius about divine pre-science. The author claims the Benedictine adopts a “dual presentism” opposed to the “eternalism” of Book v of De Consolatione Philosophiae, also ascribed by Katherin Rogers to Doctor Magnificus (cf. Rogers 2007). According to one of the most striking features of the short essay, the author is committed to pointing out Anselm’s detachment from his own sources without, however, providing...
a balancing archaeology of the items employed by the medieval theologian. According to Williams, Anselm cannot equate divine present with the human one, insofar as God’s knowledge is all embracing whereas human time always flows by sliding into the unreality of the past. If the reference to Brian Leftow’s theses makes the volume a document of recent years’ interpretive discussion (cf. Leftow 2009), it would seem that the author’s reading of Boethius’s doctrine is extremely simplified. Boethius’s analogy between divine prescience of future contingents and human knowledge of the present cannot be reduced to a profession of a phantom contemporaneity of God with respect to the entire course of temporal events. In this regard, even the detection of a dependence of divine knowledge on temporal events in Boethius’s work fails to notice that the thesis is expressly denied by the Roman senator as pointed out by John Marenbon some years ago (cf. Marenbon 2003, 137–138).

The complex set of topics in Monologion presents an ensemble of attributes – simplicity, aseity, omnipotence and omniscience – determined by Scripture and tradition rather than by rational exigencies. The Proslogion is entrusted with a unifying model of inference of the predicates that belong to that than which a greater cannot be thought. The ontological argument removes the necessity of a long series of demonstrations concerning distinct conclusions about God. It accounts for a complete outline of the divine nature that postulates its real existence. Of the argument “repeatedly defended, demolished and rehabilitated over the centuries” Williams reshapes mainstream interpretation on the basis of what he considers a more authentic reading, played out on a modal conception, already enunciated in his essay of 2008 and taken up by Peter van Inwagen (cf. van Inwagen 2015, 135–158). The intriguing thesis Williams focuses on is that Anselm, unlike Gaunilon in the megalogical argument, does not employ the premise that real existence is a greater perfection than being in thought. According to the author, existence does not constitute an additional perfection since it does not change the quid-ditative content of the subject. Rather, the type of existence referred to God in the ontological argument would be the modal concept of necessity: “that than which the greater cannot be thought” is a necessary being and, therefore, exists by its very definition.

The modal account of God as a necessary being in the megalogical argument generates and unifies divine attributes but doesn’t say anything about the traditional Christian doctrine of creation and Trinity. Williams notes how Anselm links the two theses by means of the traditional doctrine of divine exemplarism. The statement of a plurality of divine ideas, corresponding to the different creatures, compounded in the unity of the Word, serves metaphysical and epistemological aims related to the Problem of Universals. First,
it provides an ontological referent to universals whereby *Doctor Magnificus*’s platonic realism is projected into the unity of divine mind. On the epistemological side, it grounds and measures the possibilities of human knowledge. According to Anselm, divine ideas, undistinguished from divine essence, constitute the primary reality, endowed with full ontological richness. Beings, created in the likeness of the Creator’s simple and absolute essence, possess a depotential realness as an imitation of the models within the divine mind. The timaiic analogy with human craftsman proves to be a successful device able to introduce, as a countermelody to the *Monologion*, the theme of difference. By the particular light of Anselm’s realism, ideas are ontologically superior to the world of experience that’s nothing but its pale imitation. Picking up on a paper by Jonathan Stewart McIntosh, who reviewed Katherin Rogers extensive essay on Anselm’s divine exemplarism (cf. Rogers 1997, 91–198), Williams points out once again the differences between the *Doctor Magnificus* and his most conspicuous source, Augustine, by means of the analysis of the variations between “locutio” and “verbum”. Indeed the consideration of the divine attribute of immutability allows the reader to reflect on a recent paper by William Mann about the relation between mercy and justice in God. Williams brings the lack of an answer to the crucial question of predestination back to a *reductio in mysterium* of any matters regarding divine will as often happens in philosophy of religion and natural theology studies. A historical – salvific treatment of the question, able to place predestination in the plan of redemption, is what the author attempts to do in the second part of the short essay. The discussion of Anselm’s work come to the themes that are most familiar to Thomas Williams, the theological – moral doctrine, regarding which the reprise of the topics of the 2008 monograph is combined with a response to the essays on the *Doctor Magnificus*’s ethics published in the meantime by Katherin Rogers (cf. Rogers 2017). Moreover, introduction and commentary on *De Veritate*, *De libertate arbitri* and *De Casu Diaboli* allows the writer to take a position in the recent debate between William Wood and Michael Barnwell on *De Casu* (cf. Wood 2016; Barnwell 2017). Williams points out the hypothetical – deductive use of angelology which enables Anselm to make abstraction of circumstantial elements proper to the human condition and clarify the essential coordinates of free choice. Anselm accounts for the angelic prelapsarian condition in such a way as to save both God’s justice and rational agent’s free choice by displaying the presence of something available purely to the subject. *Doctor Magnificus*’s solution deals with the distinction of three meanings of “will” as power, disposition and operation. If God provides the good as well as the wicked with equal powers and dispositions, there follows that it’s to be imputed to agent’s free will the direction of choice towards justice or to “commoda” as to its own object.
It's a radical break with the Augustinian tradition which stresses that nothing is at the disposal of the subject's power at all since everything comes from God. Williams omits, however, to underline Anselm's distance from Augustine in one closely related aspect, i.e., the formal distinction of original sin from concupiscence. Moreover, *Cantuariensis* establishes an Anglo – Saxon protology, quite far from Augustine's and doomed to succeed in Aquinas' theology through Alexander of Hales' mediation.

In the sixth chapter the discussion on redemption, logically posterior to the topic of the Fall, places Williams within the theological debate raised by Oliver Crisp in 2020, with respect to which the author resumes the theses defended by Fleming Rutledge (cf. Rutledge 2017). As with the Fall in the previous chapter, the analysis of *Cur Deus homo* relates redemption to the concept of truth as adherence to the divine project. Williams states that, according to Anselm, the very purpose of creation commits God to restoring human beings to the possibility of knowing and loving their creator. In a remarkable way, the author sets Anselm's work in the dialectical and interreligious context given by the presence of a Jewish community in London at that time, as Gilbert Crispin, the Abbot of Westminster, reported. Thus, Anselm's arguments aim to demonstrate not just the beauty of Christian mystery, but also its rational necessity, a position contested by his opponent Boso. It is once again to a modal argument that, according to Williams, Anselm commits the presentation of the intelligibility of faith. Necessity is applied to the mysteries of incarnation and crucifixion as to the redemption sin requires. According to a typical feature of Anselm's method, the demonstration of the intelligible and necessary character of atonement proceeds "remoto Christo", that's to say without reference to scriptural details. Williams rewrites straightforwardly Anselm's fragmentary argument that sinful human beings can only be reconciled with God through the God – man's death. The first of two premises – necessity of satisfaction – is explained through the feudal metaphors of debt and honour whereby reconciliation cannot be the result of free remission. On the contrary satisfaction, as Anselm means, requires a reward which heals the gap between God and human beings, an adequate refund for the debt of sin, a sufficient reparation for the offence suffered by God. The second fundamental premise is the infinite nature of satisfaction each sin demands. Therefore, a human agent is required, since only the debtor can repay the obligation, but one who is however, hypostatically united to God insofar as satisfaction must be proportionate to the infinity of the debt. The incarnate God's atonement, therefore, can only be voluntary, as the fall was an offer of the greatest possible gift, i.e., his own life. As a natural corollary, the conclusion of the essay, in the seventh chapter, is devoted to a discussion of how the cosmic satisfaction realised by
Christ becomes actual in individual lives between redemption and eschatology. Anselm, as a clergyman, never loses the dramatic sense of an existence he judges to be disputed between heaven and hell. In order to display this point, Williams takes into account minor works, such as *Lament for virginity unhappily lost*, which allow him to treat the doctrine of grace and merits as theoretical concerns inseparable from pastoral ones.

The urgency of prayers, meditations and pastoral advice echoes Anselm’s passionate quest for rational knowledge as something similar to a direct experience of the infinite treasures of faith. Without saying anything that Scripture or the Fathers had not already said, *Doctor Magnificus* aims to portray the intelligibility of faith as a personal discovery, not just true, not merely reasonable, but aesthetically and morally appealing. With a perfectly Augustinian spirit, Anselm is aware that dialectical reason, when subject to the truth of revelation, is projected within a system of knowability of the absolute in which it finds a demonstrative power guaranteed by divine light (cf. d’Onofrio 2008, 227–228). In *Anselm: A Very Short Introduction* Thomas William attempts to analyse in a slim essay the structural and organic fullness by which this demonstrative aspiration is realised throughout Anselm’s speculative works. Ultimately, the author succeeds in displaying how it’s possible to find in *Cantuariensis’s* writings the progressive definition of the different articulations of a unitary system of truth. *Doctor Magnificus* might seem to the reader the last spokesman of a decadent cultural experience, but no one can deny that he was the first exponent of a restored confidence in human cognition, capable of prospecting new studies and researches.

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