



Hernán Guerrero-Troncoso  
Universidad Católica del Maule, Talca, Chile  
ORCID: 0000-0002-4236-449X  
e-mail: herrguerrero@gmail.com

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## Anselm of Canterbury and the Many Senses of “Being”. A Comparison Between the Argument of the *Proslogion* and the *Regula* of the *Monologion*

### Introduction

One of the most famous philosophical discussions revolves around the validity of the proof for the existence of God formulated by Anselm of Canterbury (†1109) in chapter 2 of his *Proslogion*. Although criticism against the use of the argument to demonstrate the existence of God by Gaunilo of Marmoutiers already appears as an appendix to the *Proslogion*, later Scholastic thinkers focused their criticism of the argument on the fact that it might lead one to dismiss any demonstration of the existence of God, because he would be knowable by itself (*per se notum*).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogion*, in: *Opera omnia*, ed. F. S. Schmitt, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Nelson, 1946), 89–122; Gaunilo of Marmoutiers, *Quid ad haec respondeat quidam pro insipiente*, in: Anselm, *Opera*, t. 1, 125–129. On Gaunilo’s criticism of Anselm, cf. Arthur D. Smith, *Anselm’s Other Arguments* (Cambridge, MA–London, England: Harvard University Press, 2014), 108–124; Richard Campbell, *Rethinking Anselm’s Arguments. A Vindication of his Proof of the Existence of God* (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2018), 281–324; Toivo J. Holopainen, *A Historical Study*

Nevertheless, ever since Kant's refutation of what he calls the "ontological (or "Cartesian") argument", Anselm's argument has been considered an ontological proof of the existence of God as well.<sup>2</sup> The core of Kant's criticism revolves around the famous assertion that "being" is not a "real predicate", but rather a "position", which transcends all real predicates and binds them together with regard to their possible or actual existence. Since this position cannot be contained *a priori* in a concept, because it only consists of real predicates, it is impossible to have an analytical knowledge of the existence or non-existence of an object, one that does not presuppose an actual experience of it, i.e., there cannot be an *a priori* acknowledgment of the existence of God, based only on the concept of its necessary existence, a notion which, according to Kant, is problematic as well. Hence, when Descartes explicitly lists existence as one of the "perfections" God necessarily must possess, he appears to be trespassing the distinction between simply "being" and all real predicates; therefore, there would be no means to demonstrate *a priori*, from the ontologically primary notion of a necessary being, that God exists.<sup>3</sup>

At first sight, Kant seems to be right in his criticism of Descartes, because, when presenting the Anselmian argument in the fifth of his *Metaphysical Meditations*, he explicitly mentions existence as one of the perfections that one cannot exclude when conceiving the essence of God:

Indeed, since I am used to distinguish in all other things [their] essence from [their] existence, I easily convince myself that the latter can be disunited from the essence of God, so that God be conceived as non-existent. However,

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*of Anselm's Prosligion. Argument, Devotion and Rhetoric* (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2020), 197–224. Classical medieval discussions that consider Anselm's argument as a proof for the self-evidence of God can be found, for example, in Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, q. 2 a. 1, in: *Opera omnia iussu impensaque Leonis pp. XIII edita*, studio et cura Fratrum Praedicatorum, vol. 4 (Typographia Polyglotta S. C. De propaganda fide: Romae 1888), 27a–28b; John Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio* I d. 2 p. 1 q. 2, n. 10–38, in: *Opera omnia*, ed. Commissionis Scotisticae, vol. 2 (Civitas Vaticana: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1950), 128–148.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. James McEvoy, "La preuve anselmienne de l'existence de Dieu est-elle un argument «ontologique»? À propos de trois interprétations récentes", *Revue Philosophique de Louvain* 92/2–3 (1994): 167–183, where the author discusses the articles by Robert Sokolowski, Gertrude E. M. Anscombe and Jean-Luc Marion on the ontological argument.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* A 592-602 / B 620-630, ed. R. Schmidt (Hamburg: Meiner, 1993), 567–575; Campbell, *Rethinking Anselm's Arguments*, 128–132; Giovanni B. Sala, *Kant und die Frage nach Gott. Gottesbeweise und Gottesbeweiskritik in den Schriften Kants* (Berlin–New York: De Gruyter, 1990), 426–450. All translations are my own.

it is manifest for anyone who observes [the matter] more diligently, that to separate the existence from the essence of God is not more possible, than [to separate] from the essence of a triangle the magnitude of its three angles being equal to two straight angles, or [to separate] the idea of a mountain from the idea of a valley; indeed, to conceive God (that is, a being totally perfect) that lacks existence (that is, that lacks some perfection) is not more contradictory than to conceive a mount which lacks a valley [...]. However, from the fact that I cannot conceive God if not as existent, it follows that existence is inseparable from God and, hence, that he really exists; not that my cogitation produces this, if there were any necessity that it could impose to a thing, but, on the contrary, it is because the necessity [i.e. necessary character] of this thing, namely the existence of God, compels me to conceive this.<sup>4</sup>

This comparison between God's existence, the essential attributes of a triangle, and the inseparable relation between a mountain and a valley, according to Kant, does not present a valid argument to determinate whether God exists or not, because existence can never be considered as an attribute such as any other "real predicate". In other words, existence is not "something" that can be added to another "something", as it is the case with any other attribute that inheres in a substance, although there is a difference between a merely possible thing and an actually existent one. Hence, by affirming that a non-existent God would be as contradictory as a triangle without any one of its essential attributes, or a mountain without a bordering valley, and that the necessary existence of the divine essence compels him to conceive God as necessary existent, Descartes seems to understand existence as a real predicate and, therefore, to ignore that it is different from simple being. However, a closer inspection of his exposition of the Anselmian argument makes clear not only that he is not oblivious of this distinction, but rather than he presupposes it and has some valid grounds to list existence among all other perfections or real predicates when conceiving God, while at the same time acknowledging that it is different from all real predicates. Those grounds were already laid down in Anselm's *Monologion*, in a passage that deeply influenced the development of Scholastic philosophy as transcendental thought, especially in the case of Henry of Ghent and John Duns Scotus, who constantly refer to the *regula Anselmi*.

This article compares the so-called "ontological argument" with the *regula* that Anselm established in his *Monologion*, c. 15, to show that

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<sup>4</sup> Rene Descartes, *Meditationes de prima philosophia* V, in: *Oeuvres de Descartes*, ed. Ch. Adam. P. Tannery, vol. 7 (Paris: Vrin, 1996), 66–67; Olivier Dubouclez, "Méditation cinquième", in: *Les Méditations Métaphysiques, Objections et Réponses de Descartes. Un Commentaire*, ed. D. Arbib (Paris: Vrin, 2019), 153–174.

this rule would allow, under a certain respect, to consider existence as a perfection attributable to God, even though it does not possess the same ontological status of any other attribute, i.e., it should not be considered a real predicate. Consequently, it is possible to outline the different senses in which Anselm understands the notion of “being” and the conditions under which existence and real perfection can transcend the sphere of creatures and help conceiving God. This distinction of the senses of being would later allow for existence to be considered a perfection, just as real predicates are, but according to a completely different meaning.

## 1. The relation between Anselm’s argument and his *regula*

One neglected author in J. Aertsen’s comprehensive overview of the transcendentals in Scholastic thought is Anselm of Canterbury (†1120). The timeframe Aertsen establishes for his exposition could explain this oversight, which coincides with the emergence of the term “transcendental” in the works of Philip the Chancellor (ca. 1225). However, when enumerating the authors that helped forming this transcendental thought, Aertsen focuses mainly on philosophers such as Boethius, Avicenna or the Pseudo-Dionysius, leaving aside other important figures, such as Anselm, who contributed as well to the development of the notion of transcendence.<sup>5</sup>

Anselm introduces his famous argument at the beginning of c. 2 of his *Proslogion*. However, this introduction is preceded by a whole chapter devoted to a prayer, for God to present himself to the faithful who yearns to get some knowledge of him, and by a foreword, where he establishes an explicit relation between this and his previous work, the *Monologion*. It is precisely in this treatise that Anselm presented a proof of God’s existence and unity, based on his being the most perfect in a qualitative, quantitative and essential or substantial sense, namely as the highest good, the highest degree of perfection and the highest being. Since God appears to be the absolute highest, he must be the absolute first being, and consequently not only does he exist, but he also exists as the absolute highest being in any respect.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Jan A. Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy as Transcendental Thought. From Philip the Chancellor (ca. 1225) to Francisco Suárez* (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2012), 35–107; cf. Holopainen, *A Historical Study of Anselm’s Proslogion*, 74–79. 82–88.

<sup>6</sup> Anselm, *Monol.* c. 1–4, *Opera*, vol. 1, 13–18.

In turn, Anselm's formulation of his argument is preceded by a brief introduction, which serves to give some context to the argument. Since God provides intelligibility to the faith (*ergo, domine, qui das fidei intellectum*), Anselm prays God to grant him, as much as He deems convenient, to understand both that God exists, just as Christians believe He does (*quia es sicut credimus*), and that He is such as Christians believe Him to be (*hoc es quod credimus*). On these grounds, Anselm expresses this faith in the existence of God and on what kind of thing God is in his famous argument, that God is "something, greater than which nothing could be thought of (i.e., conceived), *aliquid, quo nihil maius cogitari possit*".<sup>7</sup> Immediately after that, he raises as an objection the words of Psalms 13 and 52, "Said the foolish man (*insipiens*) in his heart 'There is no God'", which he dismisses by two arguments.

First, although the *insipiens* denies the existence of God, nevertheless he should be able to conceive what God is, and that notion would be in his intellect, even if he conceives God as non-existent. Anselm concedes this possibility, since simply conceiving a thing is different from conceiving that this thing is, i.e., that it exists independently of the intellect that conceives it, just as it is different for a painter to simply imagine or sketch a painting in his intellect from recognizing one that he has already painted. Therefore, if the *insipiens* understands Anselm's notion of God, as something greater than which nothing could be thought of, and insists on denying his existence, he contradicts himself, since being (i.e., existing) independently of the intellect is greater than being (i.e., existing) only in the intellect.

Here lies the second argument. Even if the notion of God is only in the intellect, i.e., there is no more evidence for its validity, other than the terms themselves that compose it, it is possible at least to postulate that existing independently of the intellect is greater than being only in the intellect. In that case, it would be contradictory to postulate that God is something, greater than nothing could be conceived, and at the same time to relegate it to a mere notion, completely dependent on the intellect, at the same level of fictional things and universal notions.<sup>8</sup> In this case, even an existing stone or an existing hamster would be greater than God since they exist both in the intellect and in reality.

Two remarks might be useful to give further context to Anselm's argument. The first one concerns the rest of the *Proslogion*. Starting from chapter 3, Anselm applies the argument as a means to affirm every con-

<sup>7</sup> Anselm, *Prosl.* c. 2, *Opera*, vol. 1, 101.

<sup>8</sup> Anselm, *Prosl.* c. 2, *Opera*, vol. 1, 101–102.

ceivable attribute of God, from his existence to his properties as one divine essence and three divine persons, as something that is beyond reach for the human intellect and beyond time, whose most adequate concept consists in the highest good. In this sense, the argument functions as a means to conceive any perfection both as attributable to God and as existent. This recalls, as Anselm himself does, the rule he established in the *Monologion* regarding the perfections that one is allowed to attribute to God and the ones that one is not, a rule that Scholastics later called the *regula Anselmi*:

Anything that is not relative [i.e., a relative perfection] is such, that being 'this' is absolutely better than being 'not this', or such, that [being] 'not this in something' is better than 'this [in something]'. Indeed, I do not understand 'this' and 'not this' if not as 'true' – 'not true', 'body' – 'not body' and all similar [perfections].<sup>9</sup>

Consequently, argument and rule should be considered as complementary settings or parameters that make it possible to conceive God in rational terms. Whereas the rule determines whether a given perfection present in the creatures, or rather its opposite, is attributable to God, the argument concerns the absolute degree of perfection according to which that perfection is to be thought of when attributed to God. In fact, both argument and rule establish what it is to be a perfection, in two different senses. The *regula Anselmi*, on the one hand, concerns what Kant calls a "real predicate", i.e., the essential boundaries of every "something", which determines a horse or a human being as such, namely "horseness" and "humanity". In this sense, a perfection is to be understood only regarding its boundaries as "this something", and the relation it might have with another perfection depends on whether their boundaries are compatible (*compossibiles*) among themselves or not. Thus, in order to attribute a perfection to God, its essential boundaries must prove by themselves that that given perfection is preferable to its contradictory, for example, that being "wise" is better than being "not-wise". Should the perfection be preferable to its contradictory only because it improves something, that otherwise would be inferior, but whose essential boundaries are not preferable by themselves, i.e., plain and sim-

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<sup>9</sup> Anselm, *Monol.* c. 15, *Opera*, vol. 1, 28: "Quidquid est praeter relativa, aut tale est, ut ipsum omnino melius sit quam non ipsum, aut tale ut non ipsum in aliquo melius sit quam ipsum. 'Ipsum' autem et 'non ipsum' non aliud hic intelligo quam verum, non verum; corpus, non corpus; et his similia"; cf. *id.*, *Prosl.* c. 5, *Opera*, vol. 1, 104.

ply superior, then its contradictory must be attributed to God. This is the case of "golden", which is better when attributed to a stone, because it becomes precious, but is detrimental when attributed to a human body, because if it were made of gold, the human being could not live.<sup>10</sup>

It becomes clear that, since the rule focuses on the compatibility of perfections, i.e., real predicates, with the divine essence, Anselm is concerned with the existence neither of God, which is to be presupposed, nor of the perfections, which are known by the means all creatures are, namely by perception or abstraction. In this sense, the *regula Anselmi* establishes the validity of transcendental predication, i.e., the terms of any rational conception of God, which for us human beings takes place in the form of a discourse, where infinite perfections are predicated of the subject "God".

The second remark regards the only instance where the argument appears independently of the rule, when Anselm presents the existence of God as necessary.<sup>11</sup> It is worth noting that Anselm applies his argument to existence only after establishing that it is contradictory to acknowledge that there is something, greater than which nothing could be conceived, at least in the intellect, and at the same time denying its independent existence, because anything that exists independently of the intellect is greater than which depends on it. This shows that Anselm's argument is not primarily a proof of the existence of God, i.e., an ontological argument, but rather a formula that establishes the parameters according to which it is possible to conceive both God and all perfections that it is licit to attribute to Him, among which one should consider existence in its highest degree, namely necessary existence. Nevertheless, necessary existence is not the first perfection the argument establishes nor is the first conclusion that results from it, but rather independent existence, one that does not depend on any intellect to take place. In fact, this is already at the core of Anselm's proof of the existence of God in the *Monologion*, where he affirms that there is a highest good, which is the only one that is good by itself, i.e., absolutely independent, and from

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Hernán Guerrero-Troncoso, "Identidad – confluencia – trascendencia. Elementos para una interpretación histórico-especulativa del argumento de san Anselmo", *Anales del Seminario de Historia de la Filosofía* v. 36 n. 3 (2019): 631–637.

<sup>11</sup> Anselm, *Prosl. c. 3, Opera*, vol. 1, 102–103: "Quod utique sic vere est, ut nec cogitari possit non esse. Nam potest cogitari esse aliquid, quod non possit cogitari non esse; quod maius est quam quod non esse cogitari potest. Quare si id quo maius nequit cogitari, potest cogitari non esse: id ipsum quo maius cogitari nequit, non est id quo maius cogitari nequit; quod convenire non potest. Sic ergo vere est aliquid quo maius cogitari non potest, ut nec cogitari possit non esse".

which any other good originates and can be recognized as good.<sup>12</sup> It is at the basis of the *regula* as well, because, although God is conceived as the highest good or the supreme being, this highest degree does not express His essence, because it implies a comparison, in this case, with creatures. However, creatures do not add any greater degree of perfection to the divine essence and, consequently, God is to be conceived as equally great, even if there were no creatures. In this sense, the greatness of the degree of the perfection of the divine essence lies in its absolute independence and self-sufficiency:

Indeed, if not one of those things ever existed, by relation to which [the divine essence] is said to be supreme and greater (*summa et maior*), it would neither be conceived as supreme nor as greater: however, neither it would be less good because of that, nor it would suffer some decrease of its essential magnitude in any respect. This is known from it clearly, since any good or greatness that it possesses does not come from anything else other than itself.<sup>13</sup>

Therefore, since necessary existence is the highest conceivable degree of existence, it seems to be the only adequate way that an absolutely independent being is capable to exist. Anselm affirms that, given that something, which could not be conceived as non-existent (*aliquid, quod non possit cogitari non esse*), is greater than anything, which could be conceived as non-existent, and necessity does not seem to contradict existence, it follows that God must necessarily exist.<sup>14</sup> Just as in the previous chapter, where independence of the intellect appears as something greater than dependence on it, here, the impossibility of non-existence is something greater than its possibility. While in the *Proslogion* Anselm does not explain the sense of the comparative which is at the core of the argument, the “greater than”, in the course of his proof of the

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<sup>12</sup> Anselm, *Monol.* c. 1, *Opera*, vol. 1, 15: “Ergo consequitur, ut omnia alia bona sint per aliud quam quod ipsa sunt, et ipsum solum per seipsum. At nullum bonum, quod per aliud est, aequale aut maius est eo bono, quod per se est bonum. Illud itaque solum est summe bonum, quod solum est per se bonum. Id enim summum est, quod sic supereminet aliis, ut nec par habeat nec praestantius. Sed quod est summe bonum, est etiam summe magnum. Est igitur unum aliquid summe bonum et summe magnum, id est summum omnium quae sunt”.

<sup>13</sup> Anselm, *Monol.* c. 15, *Opera*, vol. 1, 28: “Si enim nulla earum rerum umquam esset, quarum relatione summa et maior dicitur, ipsa nec summa nec maior intelligeretur: nec tamen idcirco minus bona esset aut essentialis suae magnitudinis in aliquo detrimentum pateretur. Quod ex eo manifeste cognoscitur, quoniam ipsa quidquid boni vel magni est, non est per aliud quam per seipsam”.

<sup>14</sup> Anselm, *Prosl.* c. 3, *Opera*, vol. 1, 102–103.



existence of God as the highest good in the *Monologion* he gives a clear explanation:

Then, just as it has been found out that something is good in the highest degree (*aliquid esse summe bonum*), because the entirety of all good [things] are good because of some one (*per unum aliquid*), which is good by itself (*bonum per seipsum*); so necessarily one concludes (*colligitur*) that something is great in the highest degree (*aliquid esse summe magnum*), since all those that are great, are great because of some one, which is great by itself. However, I do not say 'great' [in the sense of] the space [it occupies], as a given body is [great], but [in the sense of] the greater [something] is, the better or the more praiseworthy [it is] (*quanto maius tanto melius est aut dignius*), just as it is [the case of] wisdom.<sup>15</sup>

Here lies the difference between Anselm's argument and his rule. In the latter, there is a comparison between a perfection and its opposite, which is not another perfection, but rather the denial of the first one, in order to determine whose essential boundaries are, by themselves or in another, preferable to its opposite. In turn, the comparison that takes place in the argument concerns the different degrees of one and the same perfection, which, in the case of God, consists in the highest conceivable degree of existence and of any conceivable perfection, i.e., real predicate, even beyond the limits of the human intellect.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, one must acknowledge a primacy of the argument over the rule, because it establishes the terms in which the existence of any given perfection, or its opposite, is to be conceived in the divine essence. But also, in general terms, the argument presupposes that the possibility for something to exist, even if it never actually does, is already something greater than the mere logical or fictional existence, i.e., to be bound to exist solely in the intellect. In this respect, what distinguishes God from any other existing or simply possible being is that God does not depend for anything upon any other being, since there can be nothing greater than him, and from this absolute independence Anselm concludes his necessary existence.

Moreover, even if the argument primarily expresses the complete independence of God, Anselm does not consider it an immediate principle for knowing God. In fact, however prior it might be, the argument is nothing but a formal expression of the intelligibility the Christian faith

<sup>15</sup> Anselm, *Monol.* c. 2, *Opera*, vol. 1, 15.

<sup>16</sup> Anselm, *Prosl.* c. 15, *Opera*, vol. 1, 112: "Ergo domine, non solum es quo maius cogitari nequit, sed es quiddam maius quam cogitari possit. Quoniam namque valet cogitari esse aliquid huiusmodi: si tu non es hoc ipsum, potest cogitari aliquid maius te; quod fieri nequit".

is in search of, the form of *fides quaerens intellectum*. In this sense, the argument does not present itself as a proof of anything, but rather as a touchstone of all reasoning about God, a criterion of the validity or falsity of any affirmation about God. In other words, should anyone elaborate either a rational theological discourse or to criticize it, the argument, either by itself or together with the *regula*, establishes the terms under which that reasoning is to be considered valid or not.

## 2. Closing remarks

Based on external and internal evidence, I expect to have shown that there are sufficient grounds to affirm a relation between Anselm's argument of the *Proslogion* and his rule of the *Monologion*. First, Anselm considers that both works present a meditation on God, one of them consisting in a rational discourse on the main theological doctrines about the existence, unity, essential and personal attributes of God, the other that enquires on the rational grounds for affirming such doctrines.

Second, there is a clear allusion to the *regula* in the *Proslogion*, at the beginning of the exposition of the common attributes of God and the creatures, which relates it to the argument and further shows that they complement each other.

Third, Anselm considers neither the argument nor the rule to be an immediate, *a priori* principle, since both presuppose a faith on the existence of God, or the reality of a relation between the attributes found in the creatures and the essential perfections of the divine essence, verified by a demonstration of the existence of God as the supreme good.

Fourth, the way Anselm formulates both argument and *regula* show that, basically, they are a structure that establishes the terms of validity of any theological discourse based on reason. In the case of the rule, it determines the conditions in order to predicate a given essential perfection found in the creatures, or rather its opposite, of the divine essence; regarding the argument, it concerns the sense in which it is valid to conceive the existence of those perfections in the divine essence.

Finally, the comparative terms in which Anselm formulates argument and rule constitute a way to express the absolute character of divine perfection, which surpasses any determinate qualification; therefore, it constitutes an adequate way to allude the infinite progress of the essential perfections attributable to God, and the infinite mode in which the divine essence exists.

Consequently, it is possible to suggest that the rational theology Anselm develops in two of his most famous works, the *Monologion* and the *Proslogion*, offer a metaphysical meditation as well, which acknowledges the many senses of the notion of "being", most notably the distinction between essence and existence, although he does not elaborate on the character of this distinction. Indeed, Anselm seems more interested in showing the unity and confluence between those notions in the divine essence, or at least in emphasizing that such a distinction does not occur in God. When Descartes will later use indiscriminately the term "perfection" to denominate both the essential attributes and the existence of God, he is only making a consistent use of Anselm's awareness of the original confluence between the many senses of being, i.e., the fundamental ambiguity of the term.

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## Summary

This article makes a comparison between Anselm's so-called "ontological argument" of the *Proslogion* and the *regula* he established in the *Monologion*. This *regula* would allow, under a certain respect, to consider existence as a perfection attributable to God, even though it does not possess the same ontological status of any other attribute, i.e., it should not be considered what Kant calls a "real predicate". Consequently, it is possible to outline the different senses in which Anselm understands the notion of "being" and the conditions under which existence and real perfection can transcend the sphere of creatures and in help conceiving God. This distinction of the senses of being would later allow for existence to be considered a perfection, just as real predicates are, but according to a completely different meaning.

**Keywords:** early scholasticism, Immanuel Kant, ontological argument, René Descartes, transcendentals