

Andrei Pop

**Iconology and the Logic of Belief: a Case Study of Anselm's Chapel,
Canterbury**

Iconology as classically conceived moves from acts of description ("I see a man in a hat") to acts of narrative interpretation or iconography ("he is greeting me") and finally theorizing about cultures or mentalities, or iconology ("the knightly removal of the helmet to signal peace has been retained in our polite gestures"). Unfortunately, it seems often that we need higher-level knowledge to identify actions or even objects: but in art history, we might not have such higher-level knowledge except from the low-level analysis we perform. Circularity and even arbitrary interpretative fiction threaten. I counsel a way out sympathetic with Panofsky's comparative, bottom-up approach: by paying attention to propositional attitudes, or our mental states of belief, disbelief, and mere neutral entertaining, we can see how acts of perception connect into networks of belief, and also how those networks can provide legitimate, non-circular help in resolving ambiguities lower on the ladder. A classic case is Anselm's proof of the existence of God. In a crucial step of the argument, a great being, if it exists in reality, is said to be greater than the same being, if it exists only in the mind. Anselm makes this comparison stick by considering a painter, before and after he has completed his painting. What matters here is less mental versus physical paintings, but the propositional attitude of expectation in one case, perception in the other. Since these attitudes are elusive (one may spell them out, and then have propositional attitudes about them: for instance, I don't believe that I believe Anselm's argument), it is easy to miss their presence, but they are in fact so important that they may explain the difference between an iconoclast and an iconophile's approach to the same image, or for that matter, a believer's approach to a miracle as opposed to a superstitious omen. The latter, I argue, is the subject of a puzzling fresco in Anselm's Chapel in Canterbury (painted after his death but before a fire in 1174), which shows Saint Paul casting a viper into flames, and out of the picture frame. That belief and disbelief can, however indirectly, be represented in artworks, strengthens my case for art history as part of the philosophy of mind, and for the possibility of responsible, piecemeal analysis in iconography and iconology, which, however, does not thus gain infallibility.