Malcolm's primary insight is that there are (even if Anselm didn't so consider it) two arguments in the Proslogion: one (allegedly unsound) that seeks to demonstrate the existence of an infinitely great being; the other (allegedly sound) – a modal argument – that seeks to demonstrate the necessary existence of such a being (or maybe the existence of a necessarily existent such a being). His paper divides into four sections:

1. Agreement that the argument in Anselm's Proslogion II fails for the reasons given by Kant. Existence is not a predicate. The concept of a being “than which no greater can be conceived” does not guarantee that being’s existence.
2. The second argument in Anselm's Proslogion III succeeds. The concept of a necessarily existent being has not been shown to be self-contradictory. And this concept guarantees the existence of the being conceived.
3. Kant's criticism of this second argument fails
4. Is the idea of a being “than which no greater can be conceived” self-contradictory; how did our concept of God arise; and what is the relation of Anselm’s ontological argument to religious belief?

Malcolm is a Wittgensteinian, and “forms of life” feature frequently in the paper. There's also a comparison between existential statements in mathematics and the statement “God exists”. There’s therefore a question whether Malcolm intends that God should be said to “necessarily exist” in an anti-realist sense – ie. in the form of life of believers – or in some even more ethereal sense as in the way mathematical objects do or do not exist (as “the greatest prime number” does not exist). On a first and second reading, I found the paper obscure in this regard, but if God does only exist in the anti-realist or mathematical sense, I should be said to “necessarily exist” in an anti-realist sense – ie. in the form of life of believers – or in some even more ethereal statements in mathematics and the statement “God exists”. There’s therefore a question whether Malcolm intends that God should be said to “necessarily exist” in an anti-realist sense – ie. in the form of life of believers – or in some even more ethereal sense as in the way mathematical objects do or do not exist (as “the greatest prime number” does not exist). On a first and second reading, I found the paper obscure in this regard, but if God does only exist in the anti-realist or mathematical sense, I take this as a disappointing result, and that the ontological argument doesn’t take us very far.

Part I

This is standard stuff, and doesn’t need much further comment. There are two modes of existence: “in the understanding” and “in reality”, and it is better to exist in both than in only one mode, and better to exist in the second mode than the first. Existence is a perfection. If I conceive of something that does not exist, than it is possible for it to exist, and it will be greater if it exists than if it doesn’t. This doctrine of existence as a perfection is “remarkably queer”. The example is given of two “job resumes” – tacking “and I exist” on the end as an extra quality would be “ludicrous”. Gassendi’s dictum (anticipating Kant) that “Existence is a perfection neither in God nor in anything else; it is rather that in the absence of which there is no perfection” is accepted. So, the argument in Proslogion II is fallacious.

Part II

In Proslogion III, Anselm says two things: (1) that a being whose nonexistence is logically impossible is greater than a contingent being whose nonexistence is logically possible; and (2) that God is a being than which a greater cannot be conceived. Malcolm takes it as a virtue that Anselm’s definition of the term GOD makes no reference to potentially contingent attributes (like “tallest”) that might fail to obtain even were God to exist. He distinguishes truths that are logically necessary from those that aren’t (without using the analytic / synthetic or de re / de dicto vocabulary). While he had rejected existence as a perfection, he accepts that the logical impossibility of nonexistence is a perfection. He discusses the issue of dependence – both in time and in reliance on external support – and notes that it’s part of the concept GOD to be an unlimited being. He distinguishes “endless” from “eternal” beings. An “endless” being is one that contingently never ends, while an eternal being is one whose nonexistence is impossible. The idea of contingent existence or nonexistence cannot be applied to God.

The second proof therefore reduces to the claim that God’s existence is either impossible or necessary. He’ll consider the first option in the final Part. Necessary existence is a property of God in the same sense as necessary omnipotence is. Again, Gassendi appears in support. I have to agree that necessary existence does have a lot more going for it as a property than (mere) existence does.

Part III

Malcolm considers Kant’s objections to positing an absolutely necessary being. Kant agrees that “God is omnipotent” is a necessary judgement (because omnipotence is included in the concept GOD) – but it’s analytic, not synthetic. Yet, there is (for Kant) no contradiction in saying “There is no God”. Malcolm’s view is that this is a necessarily false statement. Yet, it’s not clear to me whether he means this in an analytic or synthetic sense, and what mode of existence he wants to give to God. Malcolm claims that “once one has grasped Anselm's proof of the necessary existence of a being a greater than which cannot be conceived, no question remains as to whether it exists or not, just as Euclid's demonstration of the existence of an infinity of prime numbers leaves no question on that issue”. It's not clear to me what the “just as” relation is supposed to be.
Malcolm notes that “There are as many kinds of existential propositions as there are kinds of subjects of discourse.” He then discusses the views of Ryle, Smart and others that “Any assertion of the existence of something, like any assertion of the occurrence of something, can be denied without logical absurdity.” And “The concept of a logically necessary being is a self-contradictory concept, like the concept of a round square.... No existential proposition can be logically necessary.” He agrees with J. N. Findlay – famous for his attempted ontological disproof of God’s existence – that “if God is to satisfy religious claims and needs, He must be a being in every way inescapable, One whose existence and whose possession of certain excellences we cannot possibly conceive away.” Findlay draws the conclusion from this that – because the concept of God is “self-evidently absurd” – it “entails its necessary non-existence”. Malcolm doesn’t agree with this conclusion.

Malcolm accepts the view that “logically necessary truth “merely reflects our use of words””, but denies that this should draw us to conclude that “the Divine existence is either senseless or impossible” any more than concluding that “mathematics is “senseless or impossible””. If theory has it that every proposition of the form “x exists” is contingent – and “God exists” is a necessary truth – then so much the worse for theory. He doesn’t take it that this proves that God cannot exist – which is Findlay’s conclusion.

Malcolm says (rightly) that the correct reply is not to blindly accept some dogma on existential propositions, but look at how words are actually used. He points out the Judeo-Christian language games in which God’s status as a necessary being is indubitable. My worry is whether we can get out of the Matrix into the real world, and whether Malcolm wants us to.

Finally, Malcolm looks at the Kantian analysis of the problem – which is expounded as “(the) a priori truth of the conditional proposition, ‘If such a being exists then it necessarily exists.’ ... does not entail the existence of anything.” Malcolm’s view is that the proposition “God is a necessary being” cannot be explained in such conditional terms, which are themselves self-contradictory. The conditional implies that it is possible for God not to exist, whereas the necessity claim says that his non-existence is impossible.

Part IV

Leibniz attempted to demonstrate that the idea of “a being a greater than which cannot be conceived” is not self-contradictory. He thinks this is a good move, but he’s not impressed by Leibniz’s efforts. He admits that he (Malcolm) doesn’t know how to demonstrate that this is the case, but denies that such a demonstration can be legitimately demanded; and he’s no doubt right that there are truths that “we can’t prove”. He doesn’t go into the issues that apologists and sceptics have worried their heads over – such as the possible incompatibility of God’s omnipotence and goodness with the existence of “excessive” evil in the world – but simply gives a (presumably then topical) alleged parallel of not being able to prove that we actually see material things when we think we do. I was not impressed by this.

He gives a “non-biographical” account of how our concept of “a greater than which cannot be conceived” might have come about – based on our need for the forgiveness of overwhelming guilt, and wheels out Kierkegaard’s claim that “the dread of sin and a heavy conscience torture a man into crossing the narrow line between despair bordering upon madness - and Christendom”; a claim that the non-theist might see as a psychological hang-up “merely” requiring amendment of life to resolve. Malcolm views most philosophers as shallow beings who “When (they) encounter this concept (of God) as a problem in philosophy, ... do not consider the human phenomena that lie behind it”. And no doubt he’s right.

He closes by considering whether acceptance of the soundness of the (second) of Anselm’s ontological arguments would necessarily lead to “conversions”. He thinks not and thinks that it’s perfectly possible (contrary to the intuitions of Plato’s Socrates) to follow the logic and not be “touched religiously” – and to be “(inclined) to partake in (the) religious form of life”. No doubt true, but relevant in this context only as whether it implies realism or anti-realism on Malcolm’s part.