

# ANSELM ON TRUTH

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## I. INTRODUCTION

A good place to start in assessing a theory of truth is to ask whether the theory under discussion is consistent with Aristotle's commonsensical definition of truth from *Metaphysics* 4: "What is false says of that which is that it is not, or of that which is not that it is; and what is true says of that which is that it is, or of that which is not that it is not."<sup>1</sup> Philosophers of a realist bent will be delighted to see that Anselm unambiguously adopts the Aristotelian commonplace. A statement is true, he says, "when it signifies that what-is is."<sup>2</sup> But the theory of truth that Anselm builds on this observation is one that would surely have confounded Aristotle. For no matter what the topic, Anselm's thinking always eagerly returns to God; and the unchallenged centrality of God in Anselm's philosophical explorations is nowhere more in evidence than in his account of truth. Indeed, we see in the student's opening question in *De veritate* that the entire discussion has God as its origin and its aim: "Since we believe that God is truth, and we say that truth is in many other things, I would like to know whether, wherever truth is said to be, we must acknowledge that God is that truth."<sup>3</sup> The student then reminds Anselm that in the *Monologion* he had argued from the truth of statements to an eternal Supreme Truth. Does this not commit Anselm (the student seems to be asking) to holding that God himself is somehow the truth of true statements? But what definition of truth could make sense of such an odd claim? Anselm is happy to take up the challenge of showing that his description of God as "Supreme Truth" is no mere metaphor, but the expression of the deepest insight into the nature of truth. An account of truth is just theology under a different name.

This first distinctive characteristic of Anselm's theory, the centrality of God as Supreme Truth, helps account for a second distinctive characteristic: its strong insistence on the *unity* of truth. All truth either is God or somehow reflects God; thus, one simple being provides the

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<sup>1</sup>Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 4.7 (1011b 25-8).

<sup>2</sup>*De veritate* 2. We will hyphenate 'what-is' and 'what-is-not' for ease of reading.

norm by which all truth-claims must be judged. As G. R. Evans rightly notes, “When Anselm makes distinctions, as he frequently does, he intends to show more clearly the underlying unity of what is being subdivided.”<sup>4</sup> As we shall see, Anselm will deploy the concept of *rectitude* to assimilate all the various manifestations of truth — in statements, opinions, wills, actions, the senses, and the being of things — to each other and, in the end, to the Supreme Truth. Indeed, it will turn out that truth is so much the same thing in each of its manifestations that it is not strictly correct to speak of the truth *of* this or that thing. There is just truth, period; instead of speaking of the truth *of* action *a* and statement *s*, we should say that both action *a* and statement *s* are in accordance with truth, period.

## II. TRUTH AND RECTITUDE

In their search for a definition of truth, the teacher and student who are the interlocutors in *De veritate* begin with the most common sort of truth: the truth of statements. Anselm’s account of truth in statements is a sort of double-correspondence theory. A statement is true when it corresponds *both* to the way things are *and* to the purpose of making statements. Of course, the purpose of making statements *just is* to signify the way things are, so the two correspondences cannot pull apart. But Anselm clearly takes the function of statements to explain why we should call them true when they correspond to reality; their corresponding to reality would not be reason to call statements true unless such correspondence were what statements were *for*:

TEACHER: For what purpose is an affirmation made?

STUDENT: For signifying that what-is is.

T: So it ought to do that. —S: Certainly.

T: So when it signifies that what-is is, it signifies what it ought to. —S: Obviously.

T: And when it signifies what it ought to, it signifies correctly (*recte*). —S: Yes.

T: Now when it signifies correctly, its signification is correct (*recta*). —S: No doubt about it.

T: So when it signifies that what-is is, its signification is correct. —S: That follows.

T: Furthermore, when it signifies that what-is is, its signification is true.

S: Indeed it is both correct and true when it signifies that what-is is.

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<sup>3</sup>*De veritate* 1.

<sup>4</sup>G. R. Evans, *Anselm and a New Generation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 136.

T: Then its being correct is the same thing as its being true: that is, its signifying that what-is is. —S: Indeed, they are the same.

T: So its truth is nothing other than its correctness (*rectitudo*).

S: Now I see clearly that this truth is correctness.

So for statements, at least, rectitude (correctness) is a fundamentally teleological notion: statements are correct when they do what they were “made for.”

But made by whom? Anselm goes on to make a distinction that shows clearly that it is not the one who *utters* a statement who “makes” it in the sense that is relevant to determining its rectitude or truth. The distinction arises out of a clever observation by the student:

S: A statement . . . has received the power to signify (*accepit significare*) both that what-is is, and that what-is-not is — for if it had not received the power to signify that even what-is-not is, it would not signify this. So even when it signifies that what-is-not is, it signifies what it ought to. But if, as you have shown, it is correct and true by signifying what it ought to, then a statement is true even when it states that what-is-not is.<sup>5</sup>

To this the teacher responds that we do not customarily call a statement true just because it signifies what it received the power to signify: but we *could*. Statements have two truths or two rectitudes. A statement’s signifying what it received the power to signify is “invariable for a given statement”: “It is day,” for example, always signifies that it is day, and so it has that sort of rectitude “naturally.” But a statement’s signifying what is the case is “variable”: “It is day” does not always signify that what-is is, and so it has this second sort of rectitude “accidentally and according to its use.” This accidental rectitude is what a statement has “because it signifies in keeping with the purpose for which it was made.” And here is where Anselm makes it clear that it is not made by a particular speaker:

T: For example, when I say “It is day” in order to signify that what-is is, I am using the signification of this statement correctly, since this is the purpose for which it was made; consequently, in that case it is said to signify correctly. But when I use the same statement to signify that what-is-not is, I am not using it correctly, since it was not made for that purpose; and so in that case its signification is said not to be correct.

Note first that this speech makes it clear that a statement (*oratio*) is a type, not a token.

The token is a *use* of the type, and such a use is correct — or true — when the speaker uses the type in accordance with the purpose for which the type was made. Now the purpose of every

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<sup>5</sup>*De veritate* 2.

statement-type is to signify that what-is is, so a given statement-token is correct when it signifies that what-is is. The statement-token as such has no further purpose, beyond that of the type, by which it can be evaluated as correct or incorrect, true or false.

One might be tempted to think that the token does have a purpose of its own, namely, the speaker's purpose. But Anselm's understanding of truth as rectitude precludes him from identifying the purpose of a statement-token with the speaker's purpose in uttering that token. For if the purpose of the token really is the speaker's purpose, then every token (except perhaps those that involve Freudian slips and other kinds of misspeaking, in which the speaker fails to utter the words he intended to utter) will achieve its intended purpose. Now whatever achieves its intended purpose has rectitude and, therefore, truth. So if the purpose of the token is the speaker's purpose, almost every sentence-token will turn out to be true. Strictly speaking, then, the token does not have a purpose. The *tokening* (the act of uttering the token) has a purpose, but the token itself is simply an instance or use of the type, and it is the type that has a purpose. Using the type correctly is using it for its proper purpose.

Of course, the tokening is an act, and as we shall see, acts have rectitude and truth as well. Once again, Anselm cannot hold that the speaker's purpose in uttering the token establishes the purpose of acts of tokening. For in that case, an act of lying would have rectitude if the speaker succeeded in the deception he intended, but an act of truth-telling would lack rectitude if the speaker failed in, say, the persuasion he intended to produce in his audience. Here again, therefore, it seems that action *types* have purposes (in this case, the purpose of the type *tokening statement-types* is that of using signification correctly), and particular actions are right when they accord with the purpose of the action-type. Thus, speaker's purpose and agent's purpose do not matter for rectitude. Rectitude is a matter of natures or types, and it is God who makes natures and thus gives them their purpose. Creatures have no genuine power to confer purposes.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>This is not to say that creatures do not act purposively — some of them obviously do — but that in acting purposively they perform actions, make statements, and so forth, whose *genuine* purposes are determined, not by their own wills, but by God's creative activity. For example, *my* purpose in making a statement may be to hurt a colleague's feelings, but it does not follow that that is what the statement is

So it is statement-types, not tokens, that were “made” in order to signify that what-is is. We asked earlier: made by whom? By now it has become clear that Anselm’s answer is: by God.<sup>7</sup> This answer certainly appears strange, since the statement-types that Anselm is talking about here are *natural-language* statements, not the denatured propositions of contemporary philosophy.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Anselm has does not have our notion of proposition, in the sense of whatever it is that is equally “expressed” by the Latin “Dies est” and the English “It is day.”

The strangeness of the view lies not in the mere claim that God makes natural-language statement-types. God’s making those is in itself no odder than his making any other type. The strangeness lies instead in the *teleological* element of Anselm’s claim. God not only makes the type “It is day” but confers on it its purpose of signifying that it is day (when, in fact, it is day). So if the English language had developed in such a way that we all used “It is day” to express what we now mean by saying “It is obligatory,” we would all be misusing that statement-type. We would be violating God’s will for our linguistic practices. Since English is not something we are making up, we can get it wrong.

Now there are ways of mitigating the strangeness of this view, but we will not pursue them here, since they all involve a platonism so lush and giddy that even Anselm ought to blanch at them.<sup>9</sup> The important point is that there is no need to go to such lengths in order to preserve the teleological notion of truth to which Anselm is committed. One can build the

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actually *for*.

<sup>7</sup>Although Anselm does not state explicitly that natural-language statement-types were made by God, Anselm describes the powers and purposes of statements using exactly the same sort of language he uses to describe the powers and purposes of creatures generally. Thus, statements “received the power to signify” (*accepit significare*) just as an angel created by God “received the power to will” (*accepit velle*). And a statement’s signifying what it received the power to signify is “natural” — Anselm’s usual word for what follows from the nature God gave a thing — just as, if an angel received only the power to will happiness, its willing happiness would be “natural.” In *De veritate* 5, in fact, Anselm expressly notes that the invariable truth of statements is an instance of the rectitude that actions have when a thing acts in accordance with the nature God gave it: “For just as fire, when it heats, does the truth, since it received the power to heat from the one who gave it being, so also the statement ‘It is day’ does the truth when it signifies that it is day, whether it is actually day or not, since it received naturally the power to do this.”

<sup>8</sup>Anselm’s usual word, as we have noted, is *oratio*. *Propositio* occurs a few times in *De veritate*, but it is not distinguished in sense from *oratio*.

<sup>9</sup>We take the expression “lush and giddy platonism” from William E. Mann, “Simplicity and Properties: A Reply to Morris,” *Religious Studies* 22 (1986): 343-53, at 348.

teleology into our God-given power to use language, rather than into the statement-types themselves. Such a move allows one to recognize the conventionality of natural languages — to acknowledge, in other words, that it is human beings who make natural-language statement-types — but insist that our ability to make and use such languages was given to us by God for the purpose of signifying that what-is is. Thus, we use our power of speech correctly when we use conventional natural-language statement-types in order to signify that what-is is.

Unfortunately, Anselm himself cannot take this approach, since it involves conceding that creatures do have a limited power to create natures and confer purposes on them.

In any event, the truth of statements (which Anselm also calls the “truth of signification”) is only the first manifestation of truth that the teacher and student consider.

They turn next to the truth of thought or opinion, which is also identified with rectitude, again understood teleologically:

S: According to the reasoning we found persuasive in the case of statements, nothing can be more correctly called the truth of a thought than its rectitude. For the power of thinking that something is or is not was given to us in order that we might think that what-is is, and that what-is-not is not. Therefore, if someone thinks that what-is is, he is thinking what he ought to think, and so his thought is correct. If, then, a thought is true and correct for no other reason than that we are thinking that what-is is, or that what-is-not is not, its truth is nothing other than its rectitude.<sup>10</sup>

Scripture also requires that we speak of truth in the will and in action,<sup>11</sup> and these are analyzed in the same way. There is truth in a will so long as a rational creature wills “what he ought — i.e., that for the sake of which he had received a will”<sup>12</sup>; there is truth in an action so long as the agent (whether rational or irrational) does what it ought to do, which is whatever it was created

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<sup>10</sup>*De veritate* 3. Note that if Anselm thought of propositions as a kind of mental language, as some later medieval thinkers will, then he would have no need to suppose that God creates natural-language statement-types. For then utterances would express mental language or thought, which is the same in all human beings because it is a function of the powers we were given by God. In this way the truth of statements could be analyzed in terms of the truth of thought or mental language. Unfortunately, Anselm does not think of propositions in this way.

<sup>11</sup>For truth in the will the teacher appeals to John 8:44, which says that the devil “did not abide in the truth.” “It was only in his will,” the teacher says, “that he was in the truth and then abandoned the truth.” For truth in action the teacher appeals to John 3:21: “He who does the truth comes to the light.”

<sup>12</sup>*De veritate* 4.

by God to do.<sup>13</sup> Thus, as the student notes, truth in the will is just a special case of the truth of action.<sup>14</sup> There is also a close connection between the truth of action and the truth of signification, as the teacher argues in chapter 9: “since no one should do anything but what he ought to do, by the very fact that someone does something, he says and signifies that he ought to do it. And if he ought to do it, he says something true; but if he ought not, he lies.”

Thus far, Anselm’s discussion of truth poses no special philosophical difficulties (apart from the strangeness of the suggestion that natural-language statement-types are created by God). Truth is rectitude — in fact, Anselm defines truth as “rectitude perceptible by the mind alone.”<sup>15</sup> Rectitude, in turn, is a matter of something’s doing or being what it ought to do or be. As applied to statements, thoughts, wills, and actions, this account of truth seems straightforward enough. But two further applications of the account will reveal deep philosophical puzzles beneath the superficial simplicity. When Anselm turns to the truth that is in the being of things, he finds that the notion of “what something ought to be” is unexpectedly complicated. And when he finally turns to the Supreme Truth, God, he insists that God is rectitude but denies that we can ever correctly say that God “ought to be” anything whatever.

### III. THE TRUTH IN THE BEING OF THINGS

Having analyzed the truth that is found in statements, opinion, the will, action, and the senses, Anselm turns in chapter 7 of *De veritate* to a consideration of what he calls “the truth of the being of things.” The teacher asks, “Do you think anything is, in any time or place, that is not in the supreme Truth and did not receive its being, insofar as it has being, from the supreme Truth; or that it can be anything other than what it is in the supreme Truth?” The student replies, “That is unthinkable.” Now ‘is’ and ‘being’ are used very broadly here: Anselm has in mind not merely the existence of things, but their being the way they are, having the characteristics they have, and so forth. On this understanding of ‘is’ and ‘being’, we can

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<sup>13</sup>*De veritate* 5.

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<sup>15</sup>The qualification “perceptible by the mind alone” excludes rectitude that can be perceived by the senses, such as the rectitude (that is, the straightness) of a stick.

identify at least two distinct claims to which the student is agreeing:

(1) Everything that exists (is a certain way, is the case) received its existence (its being that way, its being the case) from the Supreme Truth.

(2) Necessarily, everything that exists (is a certain way, is the case) exists (is that way, is the case) in the Supreme Truth.

(1) is simply an emphatic affirmation of God's sovereignty and providence. Anselm's formulation is, as always, very careful. He does not say that God *causes* the being of all things, but that all things receive their being from God. For there are evils that God permits but does not bring about; but it is nevertheless legitimate, Anselm argues, to say that those evils are received from God.<sup>16</sup>

What (2) means is less clear. What exactly is it for something to "exist in" or to "be a certain way in" the Supreme Truth? By way of an example, suppose John is young. According to (2), John is young in the Supreme Truth. This cannot simply mean that God knows that John is young, or even that John's youth exists as an object of awareness for the divine mind. For Anselm will argue that John's being young is *correct* or *right* — that it is as it ought to be, and hence is *true* — because it is in the Supreme Truth. Now it would make no sense to say that John's being young is as it ought to be because God knows that John is young or because John's youth is an object of awareness to the divine mind. The notion seems to be, rather, that John's being young is in accordance with God's plan or purpose. If this is a correct understanding of (2), then there is a close connection between (1) and (2). (1) says that things received their existence and their characteristics from God; (2) says that what they received from God necessarily accords with his plan for them. Thus, according to (2), there is rectitude in all things, because all things accord with God's plan for them. Whatever is, is right.

In chapter 8 Anselm addresses an obvious objection. Both what God permits and what God causes equally ought to be, according to Anselm, because God in his perfection would not allow or cause anything that ought not to be. And yet among the things that God permits are evil actions. Hence, the student asks, "But how can we say, with respect to the truth of a thing,

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<sup>16</sup>See *De casu diaboli* 20.

that whatever is ought to be, since there are many evil deeds that certainly ought not to be?"

Anselm argues that such things both ought to be and ought not to be:

T: I know you do not doubt that nothing is at all, unless God either causes or permits it. .

. . Will you dare to say that God causes or permits anything unwisely or badly?

S: On the contrary, I contend that God always acts wisely and well.

T: Do you think that something caused or permitted by such great goodness and wisdom ought not to be?

S: What intelligent person would dare to think that?

T: Therefore, both what comes about because God causes it and what comes about because God permits it ought equally to be.

S: What you are saying is obviously true.

T: Then tell me whether you think the effect of an evil will ought to be.

S: That's the same as asking whether an evil deed ought to be, and no sensible person would concede that.

T: And yet God permits some people to perform the evil deeds that their evil wills choose.

S: If only he did not permit it so often!

T: Then the same thing both ought to be and ought not to be. It ought to be, in that God, without whose permission it could not come about, acts wisely and well in permitting it; but if we consider the one whose evil will instigates the action, it ought not to be.

Anselm's position has some apparently unwelcome consequences. First, Anselm cannot argue that one of the ways of looking at a situation is privileged and thus mitigate the awkwardness of saying that the same action both ought to be and ought not to be. If there were a privileged way of looking at the situation, it would surely be God's way. But God looks at every situation in at least the same variety of ways that humans do. (To speak anthropomorphically, he must ask "Ought John to kill Samantha?" in one way when assessing his providential plan, and in quite another way when assessing the punishment that might be due to John.) Which way is relevant depends entirely on the circumstances in which, or the reasons for which, we want to know the answer to the question, "Ought S to have done X?" or "Ought S to do X?"

Since Anselm applies this analysis to 'can' statements as well as to 'ought' statements, the view has a second unwelcome consequence. Not only whether someone *ought to* perform a certain action, but also whether someone *can* perform a certain action, depends on the way in

which one is considering the 'can'-statement. It might be true, for example, that Gertrude can both wash her car tomorrow and refrain from washing her car tomorrow, when we ignore God's eternal plan. But when we assess the same thing while considering his plan, Gertrude can only do one or the other, depending on what God planned to permit.

One might object that Anselm need not embrace these consequences. Contrary to what Anselm seems to think, one might argue, in such cases we are not considering the same action in two different ways. Instead, we are considering two different actions. In the first example, we are not evaluating John's murdering (considered morally) and John's murdering (considered in terms of providence); rather, we are evaluating John's murdering and God's permitting John to murder, which are clearly distinct actions. Unfortunately, Anselm cannot dissolve the apparent paradox so easily. For he is interested in whether these two actions ought to have occurred, and here we cannot assess God's action of permitting without considering what it is that he is permitting, namely, John's murdering of Samantha. And since whatever God permits ought to be, then John's murdering of Samantha ought to be.<sup>17</sup> Yet, looked at in another way, it ought not to be. The requirement that we assign different truth values to one and the same statement depending on the ways in which the statement is considered cannot be eliminated after all.

So what is it to consider the truth of one and the same statement in different ways? It is to take into account different features or aspects of reality when assessing a sentence. One might want to argue that if this is all that is meant by "ways" of considering the truth of statements, then it is clear that there *is* a privileged way: the one in which we consider everything about how the world is. But Anselm cannot go along with this suggestion, since it implies that any judgment of the form "X ought not to be" is, if considered in the privileged way, false. For if we consider everything, then we consider God's plan; and if we do that, then whatever is the case ought to be the case. But then there seems to be little sense left in saying

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<sup>17</sup>Would Anselm then infer that John ought to kill Samantha? The answer is not altogether clear from the text, but we are inclined to say yes. Anselm acknowledges that expressions of the form "S ought to " do not always imply that S is under an obligation to . So he can consistently affirm both that John is not under an obligation to kill Samantha (indeed, that he is under an obligation not to kill her) and that he

that one ought not to have murdered or lied or been spiteful to one's friends, because whatever one did is what God permitted one to do and therefore what — taking everything into account — one ought to have done. And clearly Anselm is not willing to strip moral judgments of their force in this way. So we are left with a theory of truth according to which one and the same statement is true or false depending on the context of assessment.<sup>18</sup>

In the end, this odd feature of Anselm's view is almost invisible in *De veritate*. He rarely explicitly refers to the context in which he assesses the truth of normative and modal claims — perhaps because it is typically obvious which context is the relevant one given the discussion at hand. When there is ambiguity, Anselm is quick to let us know what the relevant context is. Nonetheless, the view that the truth value of normative and modal statements varies depending on the context of assessment has important implications for other areas of his thought. We do not have space in this essay to pursue those implications, but we will note that there can be no fully adequate account of Anselm's views on human freedom, grace, providence, and divine foreknowledge without a recognition that modal statements do not, for Anselm, have context-independent truth values. Indeed, if Anselm's perspectivalism can be defended, it opens up philosophically promising avenues for discussions of those perennially vexing issues.

#### IV. THE SUPREME TRUTH

In *De veritate* 2-9 Anselm examines a variety of truths and finds that each of them can be identified as rectitude. It is therefore no surprise that when he comes to God, the supreme Truth, at the beginning of chapter 9, Anselm easily wins his student's agreement that the supreme Truth is rectitude. But Anselm immediately makes it clear that God cannot be rectitude in the same sense as all the other rectitudes:

T: You will surely not deny that the supreme Truth is rectitude.

S: Indeed, I cannot acknowledge it to be anything else.

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ought to kill her.

<sup>18</sup>It is important not to confuse this claim with the superficially similar (and relatively uncontroversial) claim that the propositional content, and hence the truth-value, of an utterance can change depending on the circumstances of the utterance. Anselm holds the much stronger and more counterintuitive view that one and the same utterance, with just one determinate propositional content and in one determinate set of circumstances, can have different truth-values according to different ways of assessing the utterance.

T: Note that, while all the rectitudes discussed earlier are rectitudes because the things in which they exist either are or do what they ought, the supreme Truth is not a rectitude because it ought to be or do anything. For all things are under obligations to it, but it is under no obligation to anything.<sup>19</sup>

By affirming that the supreme Truth is rectitude, Anselm completes his assimilation of all truths to rectitude. But by insisting that the rectitude of the supreme Truth is not the same as the rectitude of all inferior truths, he seems to run up against two problems. The first is what we shall call *the problem of significance*: What can Anselm *mean* by calling God the supreme Truth or rectitude? He cannot avoid such language, since both Scripture and the arguments of the *Monologion* require him to call God 'Truth', and the earlier arguments of *De veritate* require him to identify truth with rectitude. And yet the earlier sense of rectitude, according to which a thing has rectitude in virtue of its being what it ought to be or doing what it ought to do, cannot apply to God. So it is hard to see what significance Anselm can attach to this language that he now has no choice but to use.

The second problem is what we shall call *the problem of unity*: By insisting that God is not a truth or a rectitude in the same sense as all other truths or rectitudes, Anselm appears to abandon his stated aim of showing that "there is one truth in all true things." For the truth that we identify with God is not the same as the truth of statements, actions, and the other true things analyzed in the earlier chapters. Now recall the student's opening question: "Since we believe that God is truth, and we say that truth is in many other things, I would like to know whether, wherever truth is said to be, we must acknowledge that God is that truth." It appears that Anselm has now backed himself into such a corner that he must deny that God is the truth "wherever truth is said to be."

We shall begin with Anselm's solution to the problem of significance. Immediately after pointing out that the supreme Truth is rectitude, but a rectitude of quite a different sort from all the others, the teacher continues:

T: Do you also see that this rectitude is the cause of all other truths and rectitudes, and nothing is the cause of it?

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<sup>19</sup>more literally: ". . . the supreme Truth is not a rectitude because it owes something. For all things owe [something] to it, but it owes nothing to anything."

S: I see that, and I notice that some of these other truths and rectitudes are merely effects, while others are both causes and effects. For example, the truth that is in the being of things is an effect of the supreme Truth, and it is in turn a cause of the truth of thoughts and statements; and the latter two truths are not a cause of any other truth.

This exchange strongly suggests that what we mean when we call God 'Truth' is that he is the cause of the other truths.

This suggestion is confirmed by the new spin Anselm gives to the argument from *Monologion* 18 with which the student had confronted him at the beginning of *De veritate*.

Anselm had argued from the truth of statements to the existence of a supreme Truth without beginning or end:

Let anyone who can do so think of this: when did it begin to be true, or when was it not true, that something was going to exist? Or when will it cease to be true, and no longer be true, that something existed in the past? But if neither of these can be thought, and neither statement can be true apart from truth, then it is impossible even to think that truth has a beginning or end.<sup>20</sup>

Now that the student understands that the supreme Truth is the cause of other truths, Anselm says, he is in a position to appreciate the true force of that earlier argument:

[W]hen I asked, "when was it not true that something was going to exist?" I didn't mean that this statement, asserting that something was going to exist in the future, was itself without a beginning, or that this truth was God.

Instead, what he meant was that no matter when the statement "Something is going to exist" might have been uttered, it would have been true. Therefore, the cause of its truth must always have existed. And, Anselm continues,

The same reasoning applies to a statement that says something existed in the past. Since it is inconceivable that this statement, if uttered, could lack truth, it must be the case that the supreme cause of its truth cannot be understood to have an end. For what makes it true to say that something existed in the past is the fact that something really did exist in the past; and the reason something existed in the past is that this is how things are in the supreme Truth.

So to argue that the supreme Truth is eternal is not to argue that some feature of statements is eternal, but that the cause of their truth is eternal. God is the supreme Truth because he is the

cause of the truth of all other true things.

Having thus solved the problem of significance, Anselm turns to the problem of unity: "Let's . . . ask whether there is only one truth in all the things in which we say there is truth, or whether there are several truths, just as there are several things in which (as we have established) there is truth."<sup>21</sup> Suppose, for example, that "the rectitude of signification differs from rectitude of will because the one is in the will and the other in signification." It would follow that "rectitude of signification has its being because of signification and varies according to signification." The student replies:

So it does. For when a statement signifies that what-is is, or that what-is-not is not, the signification is correct; and it has been established that this is the rectitude without which there is no correct signification. If, however, the statement signifies that what-is-not is, or that what-is is not, or if it signifies nothing at all, there will be no rectitude of signification, which exists only in signification. Hence, the rectitude of signification has its being through signification and changes along with it.

The teacher quickly rejects this commonsensical position. The rectitude or truth of signification does not have its being through signification, but in fact is altogether independent of signification. For suppose (the teacher argues) that no one wills to signify what ought to be signified. Then there will be no signification, but "the rectitude in virtue of which it is right for what-ought-to-be-signified to be signified, and by which this is demanded, does not cease to exist." The teacher concludes:

T: So when rectitude is present in signification, it's not because rectitude begins to exist in signification when someone signifies that what-is is, or that what-is-not is not; instead, it's because at that time signification comes about in accordance with a rectitude that always exists. And when rectitude is absent from signification, it's not because rectitude ceases to exist when signification is not what it should be or there is no signification at all; instead, it's because at that time signification falls away from a rectitude that never fails.

Thus, the rectitude of signification does not depend on signification. And there is nothing distinctive about signification in this regard: rectitude of will does not depend on the will or rectitude of action on action. Rectitude does not depend on the things in which there is

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<sup>20</sup>*Monologion* 18, quoted verbatim in *De veritate* 1.

rectitude: there is one never-failing, unchangeable rectitude for all things in which we say there is truth or rectitude.

The conclusion that there is only one truth in all true things seems to come too quickly, since it is possible that the never-failing rectitude that makes it right for what-ought-to-be-signified to be signified is distinct from the never-failing rectitude that makes it right for what-ought-to-be-done to be done, and so on for each of the other sorts of rectitude discussed in *De veritate*. In other words, the original question about whether there are distinct *species* of truth, corresponding to the distinct species of true things, is not answered by the teacher's discussion of the rectitude of signification, which seems designed to show that there are not distinct *instances* of a given species. Nonetheless, given what he has already said in discussing God as supreme Truth, Anselm is entitled to this conclusion. For we know that God is the cause of *all* the truths:

T: Do you also see that this rectitude is the cause of all other truths and rectitudes, and nothing is the cause of it?

S: I see that, and I notice that some of these other truths and rectitudes are merely effects, while others are both causes and effects. For example, the truth that is in the being of things is an effect of the supreme Truth, and it is in turn a cause of the truth of thoughts and statements; and the latter two truths are not a cause of any other truth.

So the one and only never-failing rectitude, in accordance with which whatever is right in signification, thought, action, or will comes to be, is God. The supreme Truth is in fact the only truth. As the student suggested at the outset, "wherever truth is said to be, we must acknowledge that God is that truth."

But then why, the student asks, "do we speak of the truth *of* this or that particular thing as if we were distinguishing different truths, when in fact there aren't different truths for different things?" The teacher replies that such language is not strictly correct:

T: Truth is said improperly to be *of* this or that thing, since truth does not have its being in or from or through the things in which it is said to be. But when things themselves are in accordance with truth, which is always present to those things that are as they ought to be, we speak of the truth of this or that thing — for example, the truth of the will or of action — in the same way in which we speak of the time of this or that thing

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<sup>21</sup>*De veritate* 13.

despite the fact that there is one and the same time for all things that are temporally simultaneous, and that if this or that thing did not exist, there would still be time. For we do not speak of the time or this or that thing because time is in the things, but because they are in time. And just as time regarded in itself is not called the time of some particular thing, but we speak of the time of this or that thing when we consider the things that are in time, so also the supreme Truth as it subsists in itself is not the truth of some particular thing, but when something is in accordance with it, then it is called the truth or rectitude of that thing.

Note that Anselm's solution to the problem of unity is not a standard Platonic maneuver of the sort that we see in his account of goodness. That is, he is not arguing that since various things are true, there must be something that is true in the highest degree and has its truth from itself rather than from another.<sup>22</sup> Anselm in fact never argues in this way that God is true, as he argues that God is just, good, and so forth. (The expression 'true God' is common in Anselm in Christological contexts, but he seldom uses 'true' of God predicatively.) So the unity of truth is not the unity of a property in its various instances, but strict numerical unity. There is one truth because Truth is God, who is one.

## V. CONCLUSION

We now have a complete picture of Anselm's view of truth. "Wherever truth is said to be" — in statements, opinions, wills, actions, the senses, and the being of things — that truth is rectitude. Something has rectitude because it accords with its purpose. Something receives its purpose from whatever caused it. God causes all things. So whatever is said to be true is true in virtue of being caused by God in accordance with his will, and God is Truth because he causes all things and establishes the standards by which they are to be evaluated.

To a contemporary philosopher, Anselm's commitment to the unity of truth might well seem gratuitous. For one thing, we would not today speak of truth in wills, actions, the senses, and "the being of things," so the effort to try to capture all those uses of the word 'true' in a single theory seems needlessly strained. And even in the cases where we would speak of truth — in statements and opinions — the elaborate theory Anselm develops in the interest of a

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<sup>22</sup>For the argument concerning goodness, see section I.2 of Jeff Brower's contribution to this volume.

unified theory of truth adds unnecessary complexity to his promisingly commonsensical observation that a statement is true “when it signifies that what-is is.”

But in fact it is not so difficult to see how Anselm’s Grand Unified Theory of Truth emerges out of the deceptive simplicity of the Aristotelian commonplace. His first account of the truth of statements is that a statement’s truth is its correctness, its getting things right. But its getting things right is not simply a matter of its corresponding to the way things are: it is a matter of the statement’s *doing its proper job*. If a statement had some purpose other than saying that what-is is, its saying that what-is is would not be any reason to call the statement correct. (We call a clock ‘right’ when the time it tells is the actual time, but only because clocks are meant for telling time.) Once Anselm starts attending to the notion of “getting things right” in this sense, however, it is perfectly natural for him to ask about the proper job of the will, of actions, and of all the other things whose rectitude he investigates in *De veritate*. In every case, the proper job is the job assigned by God. All sorts of things can therefore be said to be right or correct or true if they do the job assigned them by God. Contemporary philosophers would not put it that way, of course; we would prefer to say that things “are as they ought to be,” rather than that they are correct or true. But our linguistic conventions should not be allowed to obscure Anselm’s fundamental point, which is that the truth we find in statements is not a property limited to the domain of language.