Anselm, *On Truth*

They say that “God is Truth.” (Recall Augustine’s argument for this.) But, what IS truth? In Anselm’s dialogue, a teacher and a student explore this question.

1. **Truth cannot have a beginning or end (ch. 1):** Imagine that there was a time when there BEGAN to be truth. But, then, BEFORE that, it was true that there was no truth. “So, truth existed before truth existed … which is an absolute absurdity.” And we can say something similar if truth had an END. Therefore, truth cannot have a beginning or end.

   [But, what if time itself has a beginning, and truth began to exist when time itself began to exist? In that case, strictly speaking, there was no time “before” truth. A more charitable, or less controversial, reading?: There are no times at which truth does not exist.]

2. **The Truth of Statements (ch. 2):** What is the truth of a STATEMENT?

   - not the thing in reality: The truth of the statement <There is a table in this room> is not just (the same thing as) the actual table in this room. Rather, the “thing stated” (i.e., the table in this room) is “the cause of its truth.”

   - not the statement itself: Neither is the truth of the statement <There is a table in this room> the statement itself (without any regard to the external things in reality). For, then, that statement would ALWAYS be true.

So what IS truth? It seems to involve some RELATION between the statement and the thing in reality. A statement is true “when what it states … is the case.”

[Today, this is known as the **Correspondence Theory of Truth**, originating in Aristotle. A statement is only true when it CORRESPONDS to reality. For instance, <There is a table in this room> is true if and only if reality is such that there really IS a table in this room.]

The purpose of statements: So, we know WHEN a statement is true. But what IS its truth? To answer, Anselm asks what the PURPOSE of a statement is. Answer: To SIGNIFY something; it ASSERTS something—and furthermore, to do so CORRECTLY (“signifying that what-is is”). This is what a statement “OUGHT” to do—namely, signify CORRECTLY. So, the truth of a statement is just its **rectitude** (i.e., the statement signifying correctly).

Objection: The student points out that the purpose of a statement simply to STATE something—i.e., assert something in a meaningful way. But, then, even THIS statement is doing what it “ought” to do, and is therefore true: <Virginia is in Canada>
Two things that statements "ought" to do: Anselm replies that, sure, this statement does ONE of the things that statements are supposed to do. But, there are TWO things that statements ought to do. Namely, a statement ought to both:

(1) **be meaningful**, AND

(2) **accurately describe the way things really are**

ALL statements are meaningful, and so are “true” in some sense because they are partially doing what they were meant to do—but only those statements which assert either “that what-is is” or “that what-is-not is not” (i.e., only those that signify CORRECTLY) have rectitude in the second sense. For instance, consider:

<It is raining>

This is ALWAYS (1) a **meaningful** assertion, but it is only SOMETIMES (2) **correct**.

Other statements always have both (1) AND (2); e.g., <Humans are mammals>. We call these “**necessary truths**”. They cannot fail to signify correctly.

[Contrast this with <Colorless green ideas sleep furiously> which SEEMS to signify something meaningful (it’s grammatically correct), but conceptually makes no sense.

Or consider <Ham orbs bucket sector>, which isn’t even grammatically correct.

Anselm would say that these are not statements at all! To even **BE** a statement, it needs to **meaningfully** assert something.]

3. Other kinds of truth (chs. 3-10): Anselm’s conception of truth was much broader than ours. Here are some other things that he says can be “true”:

Thoughts/Beliefs (ch. 3): Similarly, a **thought** is true whenever what you’re thinking is really the case; i.e., when your thought (or belief) is **correct**. He says, “if someone thinks that what-is is, he is thinking what he ought to think, and so his thought is correct.”

[Anselm says that we **ought** to have correct beliefs. If you “ought” to do something, this means that you have some **DUTY** or **OBLIGATION** to do it (see ch. 8). For instance, you ought to be kind to others, and you ought **NOT** harm others. If you do harm them, you are doing what you ought **NOT** to do—which is just another way of saying that you’re acting **WRONGLY**. The implication is that it is **WRONG** to have false beliefs. Do you agree?]
Wills (ch. 4): Christian scripture says that the devil “did not remain steadfast in the truth.” The implication is that we are able to abandon truth (or remain in it) via the WILL.

Anselm believes that we have free will. So, just like statements, our will was given the POWER to aim at truth or falsehood. But, the purpose of God giving us a will was to use it CORRECTLY, by willing what we OUGHT to will. When you do this, your will is “true”. In short, once again, the truth of the will is its rectitude.

Actions (chs. 5 & 9): Two Biblical passages are very important to Anselm here:

“One who does evil hates the light” (John 3:20)
“One who does the truth comes to the light” (John 3:21)

Anselm sees the phrase “does the truth” as being the contrary of “does evil” here. The inference is that to DO the truth is to do GOOD (which is the contrary of doing evil). He concludes says, “Doing the truth is the same as doing good.”

This makes sense. If truth is rectitude (or correctness), then an action can be true if it is the action that you OUGHT to have performed.

“Doing the truth” naturally vs. spontaneously: Humans OUGHT to do good things. But, even inanimate objects “ought” to act in certain ways. For instance, a fire is doing what it “ought” to do when it burns or heats things (ch. 5). Similarly, a stone is doing what it “ought” to do when it “seeks to go from higher to lower” (i.e., when it falls; ch. 12).

The difference for us is that we have a CHOICE in the matter. (In ch. 12, he points out that we act by free will—i.e., “spontaneously”—while fires and stones and things act “naturally”.) Anselm writes,

“When the fire heats, it does the truth and acts correctly out of necessity; but when human beings do good, it is not out of necessity that they do the truth and act correctly.”

[This may seem strange, but the idea here is that each thing has a “proper function” or PURPOSE. This is easier to understand for artefacts; i.e., manmade things. For instance, the proper function of a refrigerator is to keep things cold. The proper function of a car is to transport people from one place to another. The proper function of a light bulb is to produce light. And so on. They have these proper functions because we MADE them with a specific purpose in mind. But, remember, for Anselm, ALL things have a maker—namely, God—and God made all things with a purpose in mind.]
Furthermore, we do still have relics of this way of speaking in the English language. For instance, we may say things like:

- The arrow flies true.
- My horse runs sure and true.
- Be true to your lover.
- True to its nature, the squirrel couldn’t resist the nut.
- Even today, we remain true to the ideals of our founding fathers.

In each of these, the word ‘true’ refers to something being how it OUGHT to be, or functioning according to its PURPOSE, or faithfully measuring up to some STANDARD.

**Actions can even signify, just like words:** Consider an example (based on one from ch. 9):

Imagine that you were lost in the woods and trying to figure out which berries were edible, and which were poisonous. Your guide says, “The red ones are edible and the blue ones are poisonous”—and then promptly begins to eat the blue ones and avoid the red ones.

Though this person has signified that <The red berries are edible> in WORDS, haven’t they in some sense signified that <The blue berries are edible> in ACTION?

Furthermore, which statement will you believe? The one signified by words, or the one signified by actions? Clearly the latter, right? So, not only is it evident that actions can signify just like statements do (and therefore can be “true” just like statements), but, as the old adage goes it even seems that, sometimes, **actions speak LOUDER than words**.

**Senses (ch. 6):** It may seem that the senses sometimes DECEIVE us, by incorrectly reporting the way reality is to us (e.g., when someone viewed through green stained glass looks green, when a stick half submerged in water looks broken, when you think you see someone you know, or when a child thinks that a statue of a dragon is REAL).

But, Anselm thinks that the senses are “true” WHENEVER they report things—even when what they report seems to be false. (!) Even in the cases above, the senses are just doing what they have the power to do. They’re “acting correctly and doing the truth.” The mistake is in US when we incorrectly JUDGE something about reality based on senses.

[Is that right? The “falsehood” in an optical illusion is always in US, and not the senses?]

**Existence (ch. 7):** Things also have truth merely by EXISTING: “there is a truth in the being of all things that are, since they are what they are in the supreme Truth.”
Keep in mind that Anselm believes that God—i.e., the supreme Truth—created everything that exists (other than Himself). And, since God is perfect, all things that exist “are undoubtedly what they ought to be.” And “whatever is what it ought to be, is correct” (i.e., exists TRULY). This is reminiscent of Augustine, who says that existence itself is a good.

Objection: True Evil? (ch. 8): Wait. If everything that exists is good (or “ought to be”), then EVIL DEEDS are good!

Note that Anselm could have easily avoided this problem by invoking Augustine’s “Evil is not a thing, but only the privation of good”, but he doesn’t.

Anselm replies that evil “ought to be” in one sense, but not in another:

1. Evil ought to be since everything that God either causes or permits ought to be.
2. Evil ought NOT to be since evil proceeds from an incorrect use of the will.

This is not a contradiction. Though nothing can have opposite attributes in the SAME sense, it can do so in DIFFERENT senses. For instance, punishment is simultaneously an action performed by an agent AND a passion suffered by a patient. (Note: “Passion” means to undergo some experience or change here; It has the same root as “passive”)

Imagine a case of vigilante justice (e.g., Batman punishing a criminal). It is GOOD in one sense (since the criminal DESERVES punishment), but BAD in another (since the one doing the punishing lacks the appropriate authority to punish).

The Supreme Truth (ch. 10): We’ve said that truth always existed. It follows that truth’s CAUSE or SOURCE—i.e., Truth—has always existed. “After all, the truth of a statement could not always exist if its cause did not always exist.” For Anselm Truth with a capital ‘T’ is just God, and He is the cause of the existence/truth of all other things. So, insofar as any of the things we’ve discussed above have truth, they have truth BECAUSE OF the one, supreme Truth. The Supreme Truth is “rectitude” but not in the sense that God is how He OUGHT to be (for, God is subject to no obligations, and He has no maker who gave Him a purpose). Rather, because He is the SOURCE of rectitude.

4. The nature of justice (ch. 12): It seems that acting justly means acting as one OUGHT to. But, even fires and stones OUGHT to do things. So, “Shall we say that a stone is just when it seeks to go from higher to lower, since it is doing what it ought to?”

That can’t be right. Something ‘just’ is deserving of PRAISE (and unjust, deserving of BLAME). But, something is only praiseworthy if it: (a) it is AWARE of rectitude (in which case it must be RATIONAL), and (b) uses its WILL to freely pursue rectitude.
A fire CAN’T HELP burning. A stone CAN’T HELP falling. These are “natural” actions. But, humans are rational and capable of “spontaneous” (i.e., free, non-necessitated) action.

But WHERE in rational beings does justice reside? There are three plausible candidates:

- In our understanding; i.e., knowledge
- In our actions
- In our wills

But, imagine this case:

**Inept Murderous Baker** Imagine that there are some starving people in my neighborhood. I fully understand that what I OUGHT to do is feed them. However, I wish to murder them instead. So, I bake a bunch of cakes for them. Unbeknownst to me, when I reach for the rat poison, I mistakenly grab the sugar. My cakes turn out deliciously sweet and all of the hungry people end up happy and well-fed instead of dead.

Here, I had a correct UNDERSTANDING of what I ought to do. Also, I actually ACTED as I ought to have acted. But, did I act justly? No. What seems important here is that my WILL was directed toward something that it ought not have been directed toward.

So, justice resides in rectitude of the will; i.e., willing what one ought to will.

However, not just ANY instance of willing what one ought to will is just. There are some further restrictions:

- One must KNOWINGLY will correctly; i.e., be AWARE that they are doing so

  For instance, you might lock a door that, unbeknownst to you, prevents a murderer from reaching his victim. This was the right thing to do, but you are not praiseworthy for it, since you didn’t KNOW that you were doing the right thing.

- One must WILLINGLY will correctly

  For instance, a thief might begrudgingly give some money he stole back to its rightful owner. This was the correct thing to do, and he was AWARE of this, but not praiseworthy since he only does it because he was FORCED to do it.
You must will correctly for the RIGHT REASONS

For instance, someone might give to the poor, both willingly and aware that it is what they ought to do—but motivated by the desire to be praised by others (since it makes them look really generous to others). This was the correct thing to do, but not praiseworthy because it was done for the wrong reasons.
(Note: The correct reason is to will to preserve rectitude for its own sake.)

Conclusion: All actions have (a) a what and (b) a why. (What is willed? Why is it willed?)

A just action is one that wills (a) to preserve rectitude (b) for its own sake.

[This is reminiscent of a point made by Plato in The Republic. He tells a story about a magical ring called the Ring of Gyges, which makes the wearer undetectable. Glaucon insists that everyone who had such a ring would steal and rape and kill. In short, that people only do the “right” thing to avoid punishment, or criticism from others, etc. A horrified Socrates insists that we ought to act justly purely for the sake of justice itself!]

5. One Truth (ch. 13): Finally, Anselm asks if there is some one Truth independent of individual true things (a Platonic view) or whether instead truth is located in all of the individual true things, so that there are “several” truths (an Aristotelian view).

He replies that, if truth were IN the various true things, then it would go in and out of existence as those things changed. (Similarly, since colors are IN particular objects, colors cease to exist when those objects cease to exist.)

But, when a statement signifies incorrectly, or a person acts incorrectly, there IS still a way that they OUGHT to signify, or act. So, truth, or rectitude, DO NOT cease to exist whenever the particular things cease to be “true”, or “correct”. He concludes,

“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 ... ; instead, it’s because at that time signification falls away from a rectitude that never fails.”

So, truth is not IN THINGS (e.g., the way colors are in things). Rather, things are IN TRUTH (e.g., the way that they are in time). Truth is always there, and we can either direct ourselves toward it, or “fall away” from it.