

The Ethical Implications of Anselm's De Veritate

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Theologische Zeitschrift**

Band (Jahr): **24 (1968)**

Heft 5

PDF erstellt am: **30.04.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-878609>

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The Ethical Implications of Anselm's De Veritate

Our concern in this essay is with the close relation pointed out by Anselm between telling the truth and doing the truth, evident in the rightness (*rectitudo*) demanded of us in signifying, by word or act, that that which is, is what it is and what according to its nature it ought to be. We shall not follow through all he has to say about truth, but only examine those aspects of his argumentation that throw light upon the ground and nature of moral judgment¹.

1.

Anselm begins by asking what is truth in *statement* (*quid sit veritas in enuntiatione*, 177. 6), to which the answer is given that a statement is true when what is stated, by way of affirmation or negation, is actually the case (*quando est quod enuntiat... quia sic enuntiat quemadmodum res est*, 177. 10–12). In elucidating this, however, Anselm finds that he must discuss the truth of signification (*veritas significationis*) and the two truths of statement (*duae veritates enuntiationis*). It is the truth of signification that we have in mind when we say that a statement is true, i.e. the signifying that that which is, is the case. This truth is not located in the statement itself, for it depends on what is signified as its 'cause' or ground, but it is bound up with the fact that it signifies rightly (*recte*) when it signifies as it ought (*quod debet*) by signifying what is in accordance with the facts (178. 12–14). That a thing is what it is and not another thing demands that we signify it in accordance with what it is. We owe it to the nature of a thing to do that. We signify it truly, therefore, when we fulfil a *debitum* toward the thing signified. Thus truth in a statement is nothing else than its rightness (*rectitudo*) in referring to a condition of reality beyond itself, but in this event its truth or rightness will depend on the truth or rightness of that to which it refers (178. 25–27).

On the other hand, when a statement is considered by itself merely as a piece of speech (*oratio*) it is found to have a truth and rightness in itself (178. 28f.), apart altogether from the truth or falsity of any reference for

¹ S. Anselm, *De veritate*, quoted from *Opera Omnia*, edit. by F. S. Schmitt, vol. 1 (1938, repr. 1946).

which it may be used, in so far as it makes verbal sense, expressing what is intended without self-contradiction. Anselm admits that we do not usually speak of a statement as true in this way, but insists that we may do so since there are two respects in which a statement can be said to do what it ought (*facit quod debet*) and thus have rightness (179. 2f.): i) by signifying what it was capable of signifying (*quod accepit significare*, 179. 4, 12), i.e. by fulfilling its syntactical function as a consistent and coherent set of words, and ii) by signifying in accordance with what it was made to signify (*ad quod significandum facta est*, 179. 4, 11f.), i.e. by fulfilling a semantic function in referring to a state of affairs beyond itself. When a statement does what it ought in both these ways it has two truths or rightnesses, one which is always 'natural' to it as a meaningful sentence, and one which is 'accidental' to it depending on the use to which it is put as a proposition (179. 14f.). Unless it has truth in the first way it cannot be employed meaningfully to refer to a state of affairs – but of course it could make sense as a sentence, having syntactical truth or rightness, and still be false by failing to state what is actually the case. If it has truth in the second way, however, its truth or rightness will depend on the truth or rightness of that which it undertakes to signify. Properly speaking then a statement is true when it is true in both ways, that is, when a statement that is meaningful in itself is employed in such a way that it refers rightly to a state of affairs in things beyond itself (179. 17ff.).

This is what Anselm calls the truth of signification (*veritas significationis*) in which both poles of signification have their place, with a rightness in the signifying statement and a rightness in its relation to the thing signified, but since this rightness depends on the nature of the thing signified, the truth of signification follows as the effect of a rightness in the thing signified – this is what Anselm calls the truth of the essence or existence of things (*veritas essentiae rerum*, ch. VIII, 185, 6ff.). This rightness or truth in the thing signified is that it is truly what it is when it is what it ought to be and therefore when it is what it is rightly (*recte*, 185. 28). This truth or rightness of being in created things is not immanent or self-subsistent in them as such, but is in them only so far as they are truly or rightly related to their source in the Supreme Being who only is Self-subsistent (*subsistens per se*). Whatever is, therefore, is truly in so far as it is what it is there (*quidquid igitur est, vere est, inquantum est hoc quod ibi est*, 185. 15). If all things are what they are there, they are without doubt what they ought to be (185. 26). But whatever is what it ought to be is rightly. Hence it can be said that everything that is, is rightly (185. 30). All this depends, however, on the fact that things are what they are in the Supreme Truth (*in summa veritate*, 185. 19, 22). That is how Anselm defines their nature or their 'being there', by right relation to their source in God. We shall return to the notion of the Supreme Truth later, but what we are concerned with at the moment is the fact that just as the truth of signification fulfils a *debitum* exacted from it by a rightness in the thing signified, and can thus be spoken of as its 'effect' (190. 8ff.), so the truth or rightness of being in the things signified arises out of the fact that they are what they ought to be in relation to the Supreme Truth and is thus to be regarded as the 'effect' caused by the Supreme Truth in the

nature of created things (177. 18; 190. 6ff.). This transcendent reference to and beyond the truth of being belongs to the full scope of the truth of signification.

This is an important analysis for it shows the impropriety of reducing the truth of a statement simply to its truth-function in discourse (*veritas orationis*, 176. 6f.; 190. 15, 21) and discloses the objective depth and range that a true statement must have beyond itself. It is to express the full ambit of truth in these ways that Anselm makes such use of the term *rectitudo*, that is, not only the rightness which a statement must have in itself, which is only a *veritas naturalis* (183. 1f.), and not only the rightness of that which is signified, but the right relation between the signifying statement and the thing signified by it, reaching out to and depending on the right relation of the thing signified to its transcendent source and ground. To participate in this rightness is to be true in the proper sense. To express it otherwise, nothing is true except by participating in truth, and so the truth of what is true is in that which is true (*nihil est verum nisi participando veritatem, et ideo veri veritas in ipso vero est*, 177. 16f.). Does this mean that truth is somehow *independent* of what participates in it? This is precisely the point that Anselm is concerned to make clear, for it is from truth in this supreme sense that there derives a universal obligation for things to be true. Hence whenever anything fulfils this obligation, doing what it ought, it participates in the truth. It is this relationship between *veritas* and *debitum* that is carried by the term *rectitudo*, for truth is a demanded form of rightness: a thing is true not only when it is what it is but when it is rightly what according to its nature it ought to be.

The same *ratio veritatis* applies to thought as much as to statement, for it too functions rightly in dependence on the truth or rightness in the essence of things and therefore through fulfilling an obligation to them. Since the truth of a thing is what it is and what according to its nature it ought to be it is also what according to its nature we are forced to think of it. The truth of thought, then, is its rightness in thinking of something according to its nature. Thus he who thinks that that which is, is, thinks as he ought, and so his thought is right (*quapropter qui putat esse quod est, putat quod debet, atque ideo recta est cogitatio*, 180. 14f.). Anselm emphasises, however, that thought is true or right for no other reason than (*non ob aliud quam*) that we think in accordance with what is actually the case – this is why the truth of thought is nothing else than its rightness (180. 15f.).

This truth in which statements and thoughts participate when they behave as they ought in accordance with their object or some state of affairs must be distinguished from the kind of rightness which material objects have, such as the straightness of a rod perceptible to the senses (191. 9). Even if that straightness or rightness is what it ought to be, it is so by sheer necessity and passes away with the thing in which it inheres. Since this cannot be spoken of properly as its truth, Anselm defines truth as rightness perceptible to the mind alone (*veritas est rectitudo mente sola perceptibilis*, 191. 19f.; 196. 28f.), in order to separate it from visible rightness. At the same time this distinguishes truth as that which is independent of the things in which it is found or of the things that participate in it, for it does not cease to be when they perish (197. 36f.; 198. 11f.). Since truth is this kind of rightness, which things have when they do what they ought to do and to which they bear an accountable relation, the *debitum* remains even when they fail to do what they ought to do – even falsity carries in it an acknowledgment of this obligation. But all this would not be so if truth were merely the kind of rightness which is immutably and naturally inherent in things as they are or as they happen to be – that would be merely *veritas naturalis* (183. 1f.). This is why Anselm was so careful to distinguish at the outset between the two truths of enunciation, for we take away all ground for truth or falsity if we resolve them both into the *veritas orationis* intrinsic to the *oratio* as such (*in ipsa oratione*) and immutably bound up with it. For statements to have truth or falsity they must be accountable to a transcendent ground beyond themselves, and the same *ratio veritatis* operates with our thoughts and actions. Unless that ground in rightness remains when they do not exist or when they perish, there can be no truth in the proper sense (197. 31ff.; 198. 1ff.).

How important Anselm held this recognition of the priority, independence or supremacy of truth to be is evident from the fact that he began the *De Veritate* (176. 8–20) by recalling his argument in the *Monologium* for the timelessness or eternity of truth. No statement about truth having a beginning or end could be true, *without truth*. If truth had a beginning, it was true then, before truth began to exist, that there was no truth, and if truth will have an end, it will be true that there will be no truth after truth has ceased to be. Since nothing can be true without truth, truth cannot be limited by beginning or end, but always is, independently of what participates in it (vol. I. 32–33). This eternal or supreme truth (*summa veritas*) Anselm identifies with God (33. 22f.; 176. 4f.). It is in God that all that is true participates, so that all truth is ultimately one in Him as their transcendent Source and Ground (196–197; 199. 17–29). Anselm returns to this in the tenth chapter of the *De Veritate*, but now speaks of the Supreme Truth as Right-

ness (189–190). It is Rightness, however, not because it owes anything (*summa veritas non ideo est rectitudo quia debet aliquid*, 190. 2f.). All other things are under obligation to it, but it is not under obligation to anything. It is what it is for no other reason than it is (*nec ulla ratione est quod est, nisi quia est*, 190. 5). As such this Rightness is the Cause of all other truths and rightnesses, while nothing is the cause of it. It has absolute priority. This applies not only to the truth of thought and the truth of proposition, as we have seen, but to the truth in the essence of existing things, for they are all effects of the Supreme Truth, participating in rightness in so far as they do what they ought to do in subjection to the Supreme Truth that exists in its own Rightness (190. 6ff.).

It is again of this transcendent ground or objective range of truth that Anselm speaks when he brings the *De Veritate* to a close with a discussion of the fact that rightness or truth is finally one and the same in all true things (*una et eadem est omnium rectitudo*, 199. 5ff.). This is evident from the fact that rightness is not in things that are under obligation to it unless they actually are in accordance with what they ought to be, and from the fact that this is the sole ground of their rightness (199. 7–9).

Since this is so, 'it is not proper to speak of the truth of this or that thing, for truth does not have its being in or from or through the things in which it is said to be. But when those things are in accordance with the truth which is always present in them when they are as they ought to be, then we may speak of the truth of this or that thing, as of the truth of action or will. In the same way we speak of the time of this or that thing, although time is one and the same for all things that are in the same time together, and even if this or that thing did not exist, time would still be the same. We do not therefore speak of the time of this or that thing, because time is in them, but because they are in time. When time is considered in itself it is not said to be the time of anything, but when the things that are in it are considered we do speak of the time of this or that thing. In the same way the Supreme Truth, subsisting through itself, is the truth of no thing, but when some thing exists in accordance with that Truth, then we speak of the truth or rightness of that thing' (199. 17–30).

2.

This understanding of truth which Anselm sets before us is bound up with the conviction that the universe of things is ordered in such a way that, as no created thing exists in its own right but

owes its existence to the Supreme Being who is not caused by anything, so no created thing behaves in accordance with a right of its own but is under obligation to be what it is in the Supreme Truth who is the Truth of nothing. Since the Supreme Truth does not owe anything and is what it is for no other reason than it is, it is also the Supreme Rightness, in accordance with which all other rightnesses are what they are because the things in which they are found either are or do what they ought. Rightness remains in its priority and independence no matter how those things change, and so the obligation to which all things are subject remains no matter how they behave. This is the context in which Anselm considers *ethical questions*. If there were only natural truth in which a thing is what it already is by sheer necessity, then there would be no freedom or room for moral obligation. But since truth in the proper sense attaches to things accidentally so that they can be in the right with the truth only if they do what they ought, there is room and freedom in the world for a man to be what he ought to be. There are clearly different senses in which 'ought' and 'can' are to be understood, but when Anselm considers the truth of will and the truth of action as well as the nature of justice in this context he finds that ethical acts and judgments are grounded in the ultimate Rightness and have to be understood in terms of the debt that it exacts.

Since there is truth in action as well as in statement, truth in action must be considered according to the same principle by which the truths of statement were investigated (181. 12f.). And so Anselm takes his cue from what was discovered in regard to the truth of signification (188. 27). The relevance of this to ethics is evident from the fact that we say more by our act than by our word and that our act is believed more than our word (189. 13ff.). That is to say, actions, as well as what we call 'signs', are capable of signifying truth or falsity. 'Since nothing must be done by anyone except what he ought to do, by the very fact that someone does something he says and signifies that he ought to do it (*dicit et significat hoc se debere facere*). But if he ought to do what he does he tells the truth, and if he ought not to do what he does, he tells a lie' (189. 4-7).

Obversely, one can speak about doing the truth as well as telling the truth. From the sayings of the Lord that 'he who does evil

hates the light' and 'he who does the truth comes to the light', we learn that to do evil and to do the truth are opposites, so that 'doing the truth' is equivalent to 'doing good' (John 3. 20f.). The expressions may be different, but they are not different in their signification. This enables us to see what the truth of action (*veritas actionis*) is. Since he who does what he ought, does good and does rightness, it follows that to do rightness is to do the truth. For it is evident that to do the truth is to do good and to do good is to do rightness. Hence the truth of action is rightness (181. 19–28).

All this implies, however, a distinction between natural action (*actio naturalis*) and non-natural action (*actio non naturalis*) and their corresponding rightness or truth, similar to the distinction between the two truths of statement, the truth that attaches naturally to it and the truth that attaches accidentally to it (ch. V. 181ff.). Thus the statement, 'It is day', does the truth when it signifies that it is day, whether it actually is day or not, since this is what it naturally undertook to do (*naturaliter accepit facere*). This is the truth of discourse which cannot be separated from it and must be classed as natural (*sub naturali ponenda est illa veritas orationis*, 183. 1ff.). The same applies to a natural action such as that of fire. When a fire warms it does the truth, for this is what it took on to do from him who gave it being (182. 1ff.; 183. 3f.). Now since fire does what it ought when it warms, Anselm does not think it improper to speak of it as 'doing truth and rightness', but insists that there are two rightnesses or truths of action, corresponding to natural and to non-natural action (182. 6f.). One is *irrational* and *necessary*, such as fire warming; the other is *rational* and *not necessary*, such as alms-giving (181. 30f.; 182. 1f., 7f.). And it is only in the case of these non-natural actions where there is freedom as well as obligation, and therefore accountability, that we are concerned with doing good or doing evil in the ethical sense (182. 12–17).

In line with this distinction between natural and non-natural actions and their respective rightnesses, there is another distinction to be drawn between different senses of 'ought' and 'ought not' (186–188). In dealing with the problem as to how we can maintain according to the truth of a thing (*secundum rei veritatem*) that whatever is ought to be, when there are many evils that certainly ought not to be, Anselm shows that in certain actions the same thing both ought and ought not to be (186. 9, 29). This is evidently the case in the crucifixion of the Lord. In one sense it ought to have happened, both because God permitted it and because the Lord Jesus wisely and graciously willed to suffer it, and yet as an act perpetrated by evil wills it ought not to have happened (186. 31f.; 187. 1ff.). On the other hand, if we consider the action of driving the nails into the Lord's body according to the nature of things (*secundum rerum naturam*), it is true that the flesh ought to have been penetrated by the nails and ought to have suffered pain, for anything else would have been contrary to nature (*contra naturam*); yet so

far as the agent or the patient was concerned it ought not to have taken place, for those who crucified Jesus ought not to have done it and He ought not to have suffered. Thus the same action both ought and ought not to be – and this can happen very often – but according to diverse considerations (*diversis considerationibus*, 187. 3; 188. 6f.). It is necessity that determines the ‘oughtness’ or ‘rightness’ of natural action, but what determines the ‘oughtness’ or ‘rightness’ of moral action is the willing fulfilment of an obligation. We use the terms ‘ought’ and ‘ought not’ improperly where no real obligation is involved, or when we confuse them with notions of ability or inability (188. 9ff.).

It is in the *will*, then, that we get to the very heart of moral action, for whoever wills what he ought is said to do what is right and good and is included among those who ‘do the truth’ (182. 22f.). If, then, the truth of action is rightness, we must number among right actions the right will (*recta voluntas*). This means that in judging non-natural actions attention must be focussed upon the truth of will (*veritas voluntatis*) – that was in fact the point where the Lord Himself laid the stress (182. 18ff.). It is for this reason, Anselm declares, that he devoted some consideration to the truth of will before he actually discussed the truth of action (182. 9). He took his cue from the dominical word that the devil ‘stood not in the truth’ (John 8. 44). The devil was not in the truth and did not depart from the truth except in will. If he had always willed what he ought, he would never have sinned and thus departed from the truth. This lets us see that the truth of will is nothing but rightness. As long as he willed what he ought *in accordance with the purpose for which he received his will* (*ad quod scilicet voluntatem acceperat*) he was in rightness and in truth. There truth cannot be understood to be anything else than rightness, since *truth or rightness was nothing else in his will than his willing what he ought* (*quoniam sive veritas sive rectitudo non aliud in eius voluntate fuit quam velle quod debuit*, 180. 22f.; 181. 1–8). That is to say, Anselm reaches the conclusion that the truth of genuinely moral action is simply the rightness of will fulfilled for its own sake.

Is rightness of this kind not precisely what we mean by *justice*, whether we think of it in man or in God – apart from the difference that while man is right or just only through the fulfilment of an obligation, the Supreme and Simple Nature is not right or just because He owes anything (191. 27ff.; 192. 1ff.)? This is the case. Nevertheless, the old problem still arises, for it seems ‘right and

just' both for the fire to be warm and for a man to love one who loves him, and this calls for a solution along the line of the argument already advanced. If justice is rightness or truth of will, then it must be understood, in terms of the definition of truth, as rightness perceptible to the mind alone. That is to say, moral actions are rational as well as voluntary, for only when the mind and will act together can the rightness of will be fulfilled for its own sake. A stone is not just, in the proper sense, when it falls from a higher to a lower place as it ought which it does naturally and not freely (*naturaliter et non sponte*). It cannot be said to be just if it does not will what it ought. On the other hand, a horse cannot be said to be just either, even although it wills to eat and therefore does willingly (*volens*) what it ought (191. 10–22). Only those actions that call for praise or blame are just or unjust. Justice of that kind is not in any nature which does not recognise rightness (*quae rectitudinem non agnoscit*). For whatever does not actually will rightness, even though he does have it, does not deserve praise, but no one is able to will rightness if he does not know it (*velle autem illam non valet qui nescit eam*, 191. 30ff.). The kind of rightness that wins praise for those who have it and maintain it is found only in rational natures or beings (193.1ff.). This does not mean that justice is merely rightness of knowledge, or rightness of action, for it is rightness of will, and yet it is not enough to say that. He who wills rightly must will something knowingly and for a proper reason, and not with some ulterior motive such as the desire for empty glory (193. 12–33).

Two things, then, have to be taken into consideration: what we will and why we will – for in fact the will ought to be no more right by willing what it ought than by willing for the reason that it ought (*quippe non magis recta debet esse volendo quod debet, quam volendo propter quod debet*, 194. 1ff.). Both are necessary, therefore, for a will to be just, that it will what it ought (*quod debet*) and because it ought (*quia debet*). There is a sense, however, in which a person does both, when he wills what he ought because he is compelled and is compelled because he ought to will it, where he is clearly maintaining rightness not because of itself but because of something else (*non eam servat propter ipsam sed propter aliud*, 194. 11–22). That is not the part of a just man. The just person, in so far as he is to be called just, maintains rightness of will, when he wills what

he ought, for no other reason than rightness itself. Hence the just will is that which maintains its own rightness for the sake of rightness itself, and therefore, justice is rightness of will maintained for its own sake (*justitia igitur est rectitudo voluntatis propter se servata*, 194. 26). There is no justice which is not rightness, nor is there any rightness other than rightness of will which is called justice *per se* (194. 30f.). For rightness of action is called justice, but only if and when the action is performed with a just will. But even if what we rightly will cannot be performed, nevertheless rightness of will by no means loses the name of justice (194. 34f.). What is ultimately necessary, therefore, is that rightness of will be maintained *for its own sake* (*propter se*) – otherwise it is not justice at all (195. 28f.).

This is a definition that applies to the Supreme Justice (*summa justitia*) rather well, since in Him will and rightness are not different things. Rightness maintained for its own sake cannot be said more fittingly of any other rightness. For just as nothing else maintains God's Rightness, but it maintains itself, not through something else, but through itself, so it maintains itself not for the sake of anything else but for its own sake (*si vero illam rectitudinem dicimus propter se servari, de nulla alia rectitudine sic convenienter dici posse videtur. Sicut enim non aliud illam sed ipsa se servat, nec per aliud sed per se: ita non propter aliud quam propter se*, 195. 31f.; 196. 1–8). If so, then we can say without doubt that justice is rightness of will, rightness that is maintained for its own sake (*justitia est rectitudo voluntatis, quae rectitudo propter se servatur*, 196. 9f.).

3.

We may now look back upon Anselm's argumentation and see how in elucidating the truth of action he took a line parallel to that which he had developed in analysing the truth of signification, not forgetting, however, as he complained most people did, the truth which is in the essence of things, upon which the truth of signification depends (188. 27–30).

A *statement* is true when it signifies rightly, or as it ought, in accordance with what is the case. It signifies, however, in a double way, one through a relation of necessity under the determination of the nature of things, and one through a relation of freedom in

which it fulfils an obligation demanded of it by a rightness independent of it. A statement that is naturally right in itself can be used to signify what is not the case, but then it would signify wrongly. It signifies rightly or as it ought when the signification is right *because of* and *in accordance with* this independent rightness (*significationem tunc esse rectam propter hanc et secundum hanc ipsam rectitudinem*, 198. 2f.). That is to say, the rightness of signification depends on the rightness of its *end* and of its *object*, of its *why* and its *what*, which are determined for it by an objective correctness, that is, not one that begins or ends with the act of signifying but which remains when it ceases, changes or is wrong (198. 8ff.).

An *action* is true when it signifies rightly, or as it ought, in accordance with what is the case. It too signifies in a double way, one through a relation of necessity under the determination of the nature of things, and one through a relation of freedom in which it fulfils an obligation demanded of it by a rightness independent of it. The action considered in itself according to the nature of things has a natural rightness, but this can be used to signify wrongly or to tell a lie, thus doing what it ought in a different respect. It signifies rightly or as it ought, and therefore does the truth, when the action is not only *in accordance with what is right*, but is performed *for the sake of rightness itself*. This is a rightness whose receiving is by nature prior to having it or willing it, since having it or willing it is not the cause of receiving it, but receiving it makes possible both having and willing it (*quippe sicut eiusdem rectitudinis acceptatio natura prius est quam habere aut velle illam - quoniam illam habere aut velle non est causa acceptationis, sed acceptatio facit velle illam et habere...*, 195. 18ff.).

There is a difference between the truth of action and the truth of signification, however, not only because their respective rightnesses vary according to the things themselves (*secundum res ipsas*, 197. 11), but because in moral actions it is demanded of us not only to do what we ought in accordance with an objective rightness but to will that rightness for rightness' sake. Nevertheless in both we are concerned ultimately with one and the same rightness through participation in the Supreme Truth or Supreme Rightness of God (196. 28f.; 197. 1ff.; 199. 5ff.).

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