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INDIVIDUAL AND ATTRIBUTE IN THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

Brian Leftow

William Rowe has recently charged that Anselm's *Proslogion* 2 argument for God's existence contains a question-begging premise. I offer a reading of the argument on which that premise begs no questions. The reading is based on the suggestion that Anselm's vacillation between talking of that-than-which-no-greater-can-be-conceived as an individual and as an attribute is not sloppiness, but instead reflects a feature of his concept of that-than-which-no-greater-can-be-conceived.

Anselm argues in *Proslogion* 2 that

something than which nothing greater can be thought exists in a mind, since (the Fool) understands this when he hears it, and whatever is understood is in a mind. And that than which a greater cannot be thought cannot exist in a mind alone. For if it exists only in a mind...it can be thought to exist in a thing also, which is greater. If then that than which a greater cannot be thought exists in a mind alone, this same that than which a greater cannot be thought is a thing than which a greater can be thought. But this is certainly impossible. So something than which a greater cannot be thought exists both in a mind and in a thing.¹

William Rowe has recently called question-begging Anselm's claim that

M. something than which nothing greater can be thought exists in a mind.²

(M), Rowe reasons, entails the existence either of some thing than which nothing greater can be thought (henceforth an S) or of an idea of an S. According to Rowe, the second reading is plausible but does not entail the existence of any entity which would be greater if it existed in reality. But on the first reading, Rowe contends, (M) is question-begging, because

on Anselm's view, things that exist in the understanding are exhaustively divided into...those things that exist in the understanding and also exist in reality, and...those things that exist in the understanding but do not also exist in reality...(on) Anselm's concept of God...God...cannot exist in the understanding (alone)... If God does exist in the understanding, therefore, he must...exist in reality as well. *But how can we be sure that God does exist in the understanding?...we may have a coherent idea of an X without it being true that an X exists in the understanding...we can in fact be sure that...God exists in the understanding if and only if He exists in reality.*³

I would like to suggest a reading of Anselm's argument which circumvents Rowe's objection. Let us first note that in the text quoted, Anselm begins by speaking of something-than-which-no-greater-can-be-thought as a thing which is understood and is "in a mind," and can also be "in a thing" (*in re*, translated quite literally). So it is natural to take him as speaking of a description, or an attribute which one grasps by understanding a description. An attribute can be in a mind (by being grasped) and in a thing (by being exemplified), and be in both "places" at once.⁴ An individual cannot be *in* a thing⁵, though one can *be* a thing. Yet though Anselm begins by speaking of an attribute, when he continues, he speaks of an *individual*, a *that* than which no greater can be conceived: his argument must speak of an individual to succeed. For if instead Anselm continues to speak of a property, then his *reductio* must be read as that if this property is not exemplified, this very property, the property of being an S, (a) is the property of being a non-S, or else (b) is a non-S. But (a) would not follow, and (b) is not a contradiction. A contradiction emerges only if a thing which *has* the property of being an S is a thing than which a greater can be thought, not if the property *itself* is a thing than which a greater can be thought. So only if Anselm has shifted to speaking of an individual is his argument cogent. Yet in drawing his conclusion, Anselm once more seems to speak of an attribute.

Anselm's shift between talk of a property and talk of an individual could just be sloppiness. But it might instead be that Anselm is writing in light of a thesis which he makes explicit only later in the *Proslogion*, that an S must be identical with its attributes.⁶ If Anselm has it in mind that the entity of which he writes violates the distinction between individual and attribute, concrete and abstract, it is at least reasonable that he should speak of it sometimes as an individual, sometimes as an attribute, depending on which mode of speech best serves his argument. I propose, therefore, to bring it explicitly into the interpretation of Anselm's argument that

ID. an S = the property of being an S.

I also propose to take Anselm's talk of being "in a mind" as a way to speak about grasping an attribute. On the present reading, in all ordinary cases, what is "in a mind" is just a thought which grasps an attribute—the attribute itself being in the mind only in a derivative way—and what exists "in a thing" is just an attribute as exemplified.⁷ On the present reading, ordinary individuals in no way exist in a mind.⁸ But on the present reading, it is understood that in the unique case of an S, the case (M) concerns, these claims are false: an individual is grasped and is (derivatively) in a mind, because that individual is identical with an attribute. An offer to save (M) and the ontological argument through a claim as bizarre as (ID) may look hopeless. After all, one

may think, anyone who cannot swallow (M) or *Proslogion* 2 will surely gag on (ID). I address this concern below.

Let us first see how the present reading can escape Rowe's charge of question-begging. Given the present reading of "existence in a mind," one knows that the property of being an S exists in a mind if one knows that

1. "S" is a property-expressing phrase,
2. The Fool understands the property-expressing phrase "S," and
3. Whoever understands a property-expressing phrase grasps the property it expresses.⁹

(3) is plausibly taken as a necessary truth. One can know that the Fool understands "S" by listening to him talk. The sole question, then, is over (1). It seems that one could know that "S" is a property-expressing phrase without knowing that an S exists. Suppose, for instance, that strong arguments favor a semantic theory ineliminably including the claim that

- P. every well-formed phrase of an appropriate grammatical type expresses a property.

If this is so, and "S" is of an appropriate type, each such argument is non-question-begging support for the claim that "S" expresses a property. (P) is not wholly implausible. One point in (P)'s favor that it could help to simplify our account of the semantics of natural language. The chief point against (P) is that it commits one to unexemplifiable properties: if every well-formed phrase of the right sort expresses a property, then "being a round square" does so, even though nothing can be a round square. But I am not sure that unexemplifiable properties are the outrage they may at first seem.¹⁰ Like Meinongian objects, such properties can simplify one's account of certain intentional attitudes as well as one's semantics.¹¹ But to say that there is an unexemplifiable property of being a round square does not imply that anything is or could be or has the pure Meinongian *Sosein* of being a round square; in fact it implies that nothing can in any sense be a round square. To this extent, unexemplifiable properties are a bit more respectable than Meinong's unsavory crew. It is not absurd to claim that an unexemplified property exists. An unexemplifiable property is just a property which exists unexemplified not only in the actual world but in every other world.¹²

If a well-justified semantic theory requires (P), or requires some weaker principle which entails that "S" expresses a property, we have warrant to accept that "S" does so, and so can claim to know or at least warrantably believe (1), as well as (2) and (3). Thus on the present reading (M) need beg no questions. Let us next note that given (1)-(3) plus (ID) and one other premise, one can generate a non-modal ontological argument simpler than that of *Proslogion* 2:

1. "S" is a property-expressing phrase,
2. The Fool understands the property-expressing phrase "S," and
3. Whoever understands a property-expressing phrase grasps the property it expresses.
4. The Fool grasps the property of being an S. 2, 3, MP
5. If the Fool grasps a property, the property exists. (premise)
6. If the Fool grasps the property of being an S, the property of being an S exists. (5, UI)
7. The property of being an S exists. (4, 6, MP)
8. The property of being an S = an S. (ID)
9. An S exists. (7, 8, identity)

(5) is a consequence of an extremely plausible ontological thesis, that only existing things have properties or enter into relations. Hence if (ID) is true, this argument will appear sound.

With this simpler argument to familiarize us with (ID)'s impact on ontological arguing, let us now turn to *Proslogion* 2's reasoning:

10. The property of being an S exists in a mind. (premise, (M))
11. The property of being an S = an S (henceforth S*). (premise, (ID))
12. The property of being an S does not exist in a thing. (thesis for *reductio*)
13. S* exists in a mind. (10, 11, identity)
14. S* does not exist in a thing. (11, 12, identity)
15. Conceivably there is an S just like S*, save that this S exists both in a mind and in a thing and S* exists only in a mind. (premise)
16. Necessarily, if there is an S just like S* save that this S exists both in a mind and in a thing and S* exists only in a mind, this S is greater than S*. (premise)
17. Conceivably this S is greater than S* (15, 16, MP)
18. If conceivably anything is greater than S*, S* is not an S. (from df. of "S")
19. If conceivably this S is greater than S*, S* is not an S. (18, UI)
20. S* is not an S. (17, 19, MP)
21. S* is an S. (11, simp)
22. S* is an S and S* is not an S. (20, 21, conj)
23. It is not the case that the property of being an S does not exist in a thing. (12-22, *reductio*)
24. The property of being an S exists in a thing. (23, DN)

Most of this argument is clearly valid; only the move from (15) and (16) to (17) raises questions. But "conceivable" has many senses; it is plausible that

the logic of one of them is enough like the logic of "possible" to warrant the inference. I submit, then, that as here construed, Anselm's *Proslogion* 2 argument is valid; the question is what we make of its premisses, (10), (11), (15) and (16).

We have seen how (10) can be justified. (15) and (16) are initially problematic because existence in a mind and in a thing have so far only been defined for attributes, not for individuals. Since the unique individual of which (15) and (16) speak is identical with an attribute, though, we can say that for it to exist in a mind is for it to be grasped as an attribute is. To grasp an attribute is roughly to understand the sense (truth-condition contribution) of a term or description expressing that attribute. To grasp this individual, then, will be to understand the sense of a term or description expressing that individual. If (ID) is true, one has done this in understanding "an S." For an individual to exist in a thing, we can say, is just for it to exist extra-mentally. With this given, (15) is uncontroversial, for it asserts only that one can conceive that there is an extra-mental S, and both theists and atheists can at least conceive this.¹³ (16) too is uncontroversial because an individual which exists only in a mind does not exist extra-mentally, and so strictly speaking does not exist at all.¹⁴ What does not exist has no "greatness," or any other attribute. Hence any existing S will have to be greater than an S* conceived as non-existent is conceived to be.

This leaves us (ID) to consider. Anselm has at least two arguments for (ID):

(since) whatever you are, you are not through another but through yourself...(you) are the very life by which you live, the very wisdom by which you are wise...

But what are you except that greatest being of all, existing only through yourself, who made all other things from nothing? For whatever is not this is less than can be thought...¹⁵

Anselm's first line of reasoning seems to be that if an S derives its wisdom from an independently existing abstract entity, Wisdom, then the S is less independent and self-sufficient than it could conceivably be. For it is less independent and self-sufficient than an S would be which did not require an independent Wisdom to be wise, but instead was somehow identical with Wisdom.¹⁶ If we can conceive the latter sort of S, and if independence and self-sufficiency are great-making qualities, and if dependence on an abstract entity is a form of real dependence, then, an S dependent on an independent Wisdom turns out not to be an S after all. I think all three premisses can be cogently defended.

Anselm's second line of argument is that to qualify for the title "S," something must be the creator and sustainer of all that is other than itself. That is,

25. necessarily, for any x, if Sx, x creates and maintains in existence every thing distinct from itself.

Anselm backs this claim by noting that if some S did not have this role, it would be less great than an S would be which did have this role, hence less great than is conceivable, and hence not an S. Anselm means "everything" here to include not just concrete individuals but whatever abstract entities there are; he accepts the doctrine of divine ideas, and so holds that if there are attributes, numbers, etc., and if there is an S, they are creations of this S (i.e., of God), eternal "thoughts" in the S' "mind."

(25) states a requisite for bearing the title "an S." Thus it implies that there are such requisites, i.e., that there is a set T of attributes which is such that necessarily, for any x, if Sx , then for any attribute Φ , if $\Phi \in T$, then Φx . By the same token, (25) implies that T has members, for (25) specifies one of these members. Now (25) is plausible; hence one has strong reason to reject any proposition inconsistent with (25). Here is one such proposition:

26. There is an attribute which is a member of the set T and which is distinct from an S.

The conjunction of (26) and (25) entails that an S creates part of its nature. But it seems flatly impossible for something to create part of its nature; it is hard even to see what this could mean.¹⁷ If this is impossible, the conjunction of (25) and (26) entails an impossible state of affairs. If so, (25) and (26) cannot both be true: the two propositions are inconsistent, so that (25) entails $\sim(26)$, i.e., entails that if any attribute is a member of T, then that attribute is identical with an S. The attribute of being an S is a member of T. Hence that attribute is identical with an S: and this is what (ID) asserts. If it is true that nothing can create part of its own nature, then, Anselm's second argument seems quite powerful.

(ID) is not the scandal it seems. That an S = S-hood entails that an S and S-hood are one subject of predication, not two, but does not entail that this single subject of predication has any *particular* subset of the union of the set of S' attributes and the set of S-hood's. One is free to pick a consistent subset of this union-set: and this may not be all that surprising a set, because the concept of God (the S Anselm has in mind) already includes some features usually associated only with some abstract entities, e.g., necessary existence and presence in space without taking up space. But I cannot go into this here. For now suffice it to say that Anselm's *Proslogion* 2 argument appears valid and that of its four premisses, two are clearly true, there is a case to be made for the truth of the other two, and none appear to beg any questions.

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NOTES

1. My translation, of the Schmitt text as reprinted in M. J. Charlesworth, *St. Anselm's Proslogion* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 116.

2. William Rowe, "Response to Dicker," *Faith and Philosophy* 5 (1988), pp. 203-5.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 205.
4. Both nominalist and realist can grant this, for it is true whether to have an attribute is to exemplify some Platonic entity or is rather to be such as to deserve the application of a token of a predicate.
5. Save within mereology, of which Anselm had not an inkling. Of course, Anselm did know Aristotle's *Categories*, and arguably this work allows for individuals in non-substance categories (cf. G. E. L. Owen, "Inherence," *Phronesis* 10 (1965), pp. 97-105), and says of these that they are not "said of" but "in" substances (*Categories* 2, 1a20ff). But Anselm seems plainly to consider his S a substantial individual.
6. *Proslogion* 12, 18.
7. I believe that all talk of grasping attributes which this paper involves is neutral among the various theories of universals.
8. Given the way I read existence in a mind, this commits Anselm to the claim that individuals cannot be "grasped" the way properties are. This seems a way to reflect general NeoPlatonic sentiments about the unintelligibility of particulars, or the Aristotelian claim that individuals have no definitions.
9. (1)-(3) justify the claim that the property of being an S exists in a mind by entailing it. Hence one knows that the property of being an S exists in a mind by knowing (1)-(3) only if one's belief that the property of being an S exists in a mind also meets all appropriate other conditions on inferential justification.
10. Suppose, for instance, that properties are actually sets containing objects which (we say pre-analytically) do or can exemplify them. If this is so, one can argue that at least one unexemplifiable property exists, and is identical with the null set.
11. Cf. Roderick Chisholm, "Homeless Objects" and "Beyond Being and Non-Being," reprinted in Roderick Chisholm, *Brentano and Meinong Studies* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1982), pp. 37-67.
12. Unlike other ontological arguments, the argument above does not premise that possibly God exists. But if the only properties are exemplifiable properties, taking "S" to be a property-exemplifying phrase entails that possibly God exists, and so commits one to defending that claim. If one allows talk of unexemplifiable properties, then, one reaps the further advantage that "S"s being a property-exemplifying phrase will not entail that possibly God exists (provided that for an individual to be possible is for its essential attributes to be exemplifiable), and so avoids all controversy over the latter claim.
13. That an attribute exists in a thing means that it exists and is exemplified extra-mentally. So this reading preserves half of what we assert by saying that an attribute exists in a thing.
14. One might doubt that an individual can exist in a mind if it does not at some time exist in reality; we do not as a rule have the resources to mentally grasp particular non-existent individuals. However, we do have the resources to grasp unexemplified attributes, such as that of being a unicorn. If (ID) holds of an S, then any S is identical with the attribute of S-hood, and so can be picked out and grasped as that attribute can.
15. *Proslogion* 5, 12, my translation, from the text in Charlesworth, *op. cit.*
16. Arguably this would be true even if the S created Wisdom: it could be held that a being which had to create Wisdom in order to be wise would be less wholly independent than one which did not have to create to be wise (and less perfect intrinsically than one

which did not have to act to be wise). Thus on Anselm's picture, God would be relevantly more independent and self-sufficient (and intrinsically perfect) than He is for Thomas Morris and Christopher Menzel, who hold that God creates all His own attributes. (Cf. their "Absolute Creation," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 26 (1986).)

17. Cf. my "God and Abstract Entities," in this issue of *Faith and Philosophy*, and my "Is God An Abstract Object?," read at the Eastern Regional Meeting of the Society of Christian Philosophers, Wofford College, April 1988, forthcoming in *Noûs*.