LOPTSON ON ANSELM AND DAVIS

STEPHEN T. DAVIS
Claremont McKenna College

This paper is a brief response to Peter Loptson's "'Anselm and Rowe: A Reply to Davis." (That paper was a reply to my "Loptson on Anselm and Rowe," which was a reply to Loptson's "Anselm, Meinong, and the Ontological Argument.") I will not speak to everything Loptson says in his latest paper; let me focus on three points that constitute the crucial differences between us and that are importantly related to the soundness of Anselm's argument (the OA).

First, Loptson doubts that the terms "Greatest Conceivable Being" (GCB) and "Greatest Possible Being" (GPB) are strictly equivalent terms - it is hard at least to see how it could be established that they are equivalent, he says. Now in "Loptson on Anselm and Rowe" I argued that the terms GCB and TBTW (that being than which no greater can be conceived) are equivalent. But that argument applies equally well to the two terms GCB and GPB, so I have no objection to arguing against Loptson that these terms are also equivalent. The argument is this: If ability to conceive of oneself is a greatmaking property, then any GPB (or any TBTW) must be able to conceive of itself, i.e., must also be the GCB. The GCB, then, is necessarily a being that can conceive of itself, and the possibility Loptson raises that the greatest being is simply inconceivable (by itself or any other being) turns out not to be possible after all.

Loptson is unconvinced by all this, however, and raises three objections. The first, in my opinion, is quite irrelevant to the question at hand but the second and third are worth discussing. First, Loptson expresses strong doubt that there even could be such a being as the GCB or the GPB. How is this point so much as relevant to the claim that the concepts "GCB" and "GPB" are equivalent concepts?

Second, Loptson wonders why we should "suppose that greatness will be very readily comparable among individuals, or possible individuals of widely differing type?" (p. 67). Now in fact, the concept of greatness does constitute something of a gap in Anselm's argument — sadly, Anselm never tells us exactly what the term means. But working as it were backward, i.e. by asking what notion of greatness might be required to make the OA work, we can arrive at something useful. If we read greatness as, say, redheadedness or running speed or largeness the OA
will doubtless not succeed. But if we read greatness as, say, power, ability, freedom of action (where the GCB is then omnipotent), the OA has at least a chance of succeeding. (Perhaps other notions of greatness will also make the OA work.) And I believe it clear that degree of power (approximation to omnipotence) is readily comparable among individuals of widely differing type. It is difficult here to be mathematically precise, of course, but we do frequently compare different items as to their power, ability to act, freedom, etc. Geese are more powerful than stones; humans are more powerful than collies; President Reagan is more powerful than Mayor Koch.

Loptson's third objection is also to be taken seriously – he asks why it could not turn out that the GPB is without self-regard, not conceivable by itself or any other being. And here I think the dispute between us is difficult to adjudicate definitively; Lopton's intuitions simply run in a different direction than mine. It seems to me obvious that omniscience is a greatmaking property (of two beings A and B, alike as much as possible except that A is omniscient and B is not, A is greater than B). It further seems to me obvious that ability to conceive of oneself is an ability that is entailed by or included in omniscience; since an omniscient being is aware of all existing beings, it is aware of itself. Ergo, the GCB or GPB must necessarily be aware of itself.

Thus I am still convinced that as long as you are clear what you are doing, it makes little difference whether you structure your OA in terms of possibility (GPB) or conceivability (GCB or TBTW). Of course the three terms do not have identical meanings, but they can be shown to be equivalent in reference.

The second important point where Loptson and I disagree concerns what he calls the ◊G property, i.e., the property of being possibly greater. Loptson distinguishes between an F concept, the analysandum (in this case God), and a ◊G concept, the analysans of F (in this case the unique GPB). He says that in the case of every concept pair F and G, where F is the concept to be analyzed and G is its analysis, there will be a ◊G property. Now a premise in William Rowe's version of the OA (which Loptson, in his initial article, was criticizing) says:

(3) If something exists only in the understanding and might have existed in reality, then it might have been greater than it is.

But wanting to avoid what he considers the Meinongian notion that there are non-existing, property-bearing objects, Loptson prefers to restate (3) as:

(3') If we have the concept of something, and that thing doesn't exist, but it is possible (de re or de dicto) for there to be such a thing as that thing, then the concept can have its ◊G property conjoined to its analysis without absurdity or contradiction resulting (p. 69).

Now I have no objection to this translation of Rowe's (3); my question concerns Loptson's claim that (3') and thus (3) are false because the concept of the GPB provides a counter-example to them. Loptson strongly criticizes the claim in my