

Anselm on Evil¹

This is a preprint of an essay that appeared in The History of Evil: Volume 2: Evil in the Middle Ages, ed. Andrew Pinsent, Routledge).

Anselm was deeply indebted to Augustine, so it is not surprising to find Anselm rehearsing standard features of Augustine's account of evil: the doctrine that evil is a privation, the appeal to free choice as the origin of moral evil, and the claim that human suffering is justified punishment for the sin of our first parents. Accordingly, many scholars treat Anselm's account of evil as little more than a recapitulation of Augustine's.² Yet it is characteristic of Anselm to adopt the formulations of his authorities while giving them meanings of his own, hiding conceptual disagreement by means of verbal echoes; and as I shall argue, Anselm adopts standard Augustinian language without intending merely to repeat the views that Augustine had used that language to express. Anselm's account of evil is narrower, more technical, and arguably more tentative than Augustine's. In particular, Anselm clearly has qualms about whether the privation theory can do all of the work to which Augustine had tried to put it.

¹References to Anselm's works use the following abbreviations: *De veritate* (*On Truth*), DV; *De casu diaboli* (*On the Fall of the Devil*), DCD; *Cur Deus Homo* (*Why the God-Man*), CDH; *De conceptu virginali et de originali peccato* (*On the Virginal Conception, and On Original Sin*), DCV; *De concordia* (*On the Harmony of God's Foreknowledge, Predestination, and Grace with Free Choice*), DC; *Lambeth Fragments*, LF. They are followed by a parenthetical reference giving the page number of my translation in Anselm 2007. Citations of Anselm's letters are followed by a parenthetical reference giving the volume and page number of the edition in Anselm 1968. All translations are my own.

²Gareth Matthews (2004: 80–1), for example, simply sets two passages side by side, one from Augustine and one from Anselm, both expressing the view that evil is a privation. Katherin Rogers (2008: 24–9) takes a more nuanced approach, noting ways in which Anselm's account, though broadly Augustinian, departs from Augustine's, largely because of differences in their understanding of free choice.

Injustice and Misfortune

We must be careful about attributing an elaborate taxonomy of evil to Anselm. Certainly his vocabulary is not notably fine-grained: he mostly makes do with *malum*, which has to do the work of “bad,” “evil,” “wicked,” “vicious,” “immoral,” “illicit,” and (substantively) “misfortune.” Given that Anselm understands evil as a privation of good, we can expect there to be different kinds of badness corresponding to different kinds of goodness, and Anselm does distinguish between justice (*iustitia*) and advantage (*commodum*) as irreducibly different kinds of goods.³ In *On the Fall of the Devil* Anselm identifies two general dispositions, or “affections,” in the will of every rational creature. The affection for advantage disposes us to will happiness and whatever we think will contribute to our happiness; the affection for justice disposes us to will what is right or just. Willing advantage and willing justice need not conflict, but they can; and even if on a particular occasion the two affections incline us to the same object or action, willing something for the sake of advantage remains irreducibly different from willing something for the sake of justice. According to Anselm, someone who wills *x* for the sake of *y* is more properly said to will *y*, rather than *x*; thus, to will something for the sake of advantage is really to will advantage, and to will something for the sake of justice is really to will justice.

Unfortunately, the distinction between advantage and justice is not quite parallel to the distinction between disadvantage or misfortune (*incommodum*, or occasionally *incommoditas*) and injustice (*iniustitia*). Anselm treats justice both as an object of first-order willing – the action that ought to be done, the state of affairs that ought to obtain –

³How to construe the distinction between *iustitia* and *commodum* is a contentious matter in contemporary scholarship. The account given here follows the interpretation argued for in Visser and Williams (2009). Rogers (2008: 62–72) argues for a radically different reading. I have replied to Rogers’s arguments in Williams (forthcoming).

and as a quality of the will that wills such objects for the sake of justice itself; but he speaks of injustice only as a feature of a will. Such injustice is purely a privation, the lack of the justice that ought to be present in the will, whereas not all misfortunes are privations.

To begin with misfortune, Anselm clearly distinguishes between misfortunes that are purely privative and misfortunes that have some positive ontological status. For example, in *On the Fall of the Devil* he writes, “the evil that is misfortune is undoubtedly sometimes nothing, as in the case of blindness, and sometimes something, as in the case of sadness and pain.”⁴ Now the primary aim of the privation theory of evil is to avoid impugning God’s character while retaining the claim that God creates everything other than himself; if evil is not a “something,” God’s being the creator does not entail God’s being responsible for evil. So Anselm’s acknowledgment that some misfortunes are something requires him to argue that God acts properly in causing (not merely permitting, but ultimately bringing about) such misfortunes: “When this evil is something, we do not deny that God brings it about, since he ‘brings about peace and creates evil’ [Isaiah 45:7], as we read. For God himself creates misfortunes by which he disciplines and purifies the just and punishes the unjust.”⁵ In taking upon himself the human condition, even the God-man, sinless though he was, had to share such misfortunes. But they did not make him unhappy, Anselm argues: “For just as having something advantageous against one’s will does not make one happy, so too experiencing some misfortune wisely, willingly, and not under necessity, does not make one unhappy.”⁶

⁴*DCD* 26 (210). See also *DCV* 5 (335–6) and *DC* 1.7 (371) for similar formulations.

⁵*DC* 1.7 (371).

⁶*CDH* 2.12 (304).

Unlike misfortune, injustice is always a privation:

We ought to believe that justice is the very good in virtue of which both angels and human beings are good, that is, just, and in virtue of which the will itself is said to be good or just; whereas injustice is the very evil that we claim is nothing other than a privation of good, which makes them and their will evil. And consequently, we hold that injustice is nothing other than the privation of justice.⁷

The mere absence of justice, however, does not automatically constitute injustice. Only something that is capable of justice is unjust if it lacks justice. Since Anselm defines justice as “rectitude of will preserved for its own sake,” only a being that has the power to preserve rectitude of will for its own sake – the power that Anselm calls “free choice” or “freedom of choice” – can be just or unjust.⁸

The Cause of Moral Evil

One component of Augustine’s privation theory of evil is his occasional recourse to what scholars have called “deficient causality.” As John Rist explains,

In a number of his middle and late works . . . [Augustine] suggests that in unfallen man there was no ‘efficient cause’ of moral evil, but a weakness, or ‘deficient cause’ or *declinatio*. The soul *qua* free created being . . . is just not strong enough to stand out. Its weakness, which is a weakness of the ‘will’ (*vita voluntario defectu deficiens*’, *True Religion* 11.21), is due to the very fact of its being created from that nothing to which all created existents tend and which forms for them, as it were, the localization of weakness. (Rist 1994: 105–6)

Anselm occasionally sounds like Augustine on this score. For example, we find this exchange near the end of *On the Fall of the Devil* between the teacher, who is clearly Anselm,⁹ and the student:

⁷*DCD* 9 (183).

⁸See in particular *DCD* 13–14 (192–5) and *DCV* 3 (332).

⁹In many cases it is a contentious interpretive issue whether a particular speaker in a philosophical dialogue is meant to stand in for the author, but not here: at the beginning of *DV* (119), the

Student: So I ask this: from what source did the evil that is called injustice or sin first enter the angel who had been created just?

Teacher: You tell me: from what source does nothing enter something?

S: Nothing neither enters nor goes away.

T: Then why do you ask from what source injustice entered, given that injustice is nothing?

It appears that Anselm is following Augustine in using something like an appeal to deficient causality, or to the nothingness of injustice, to explain – or perhaps instead, to beg off explaining – the origin of moral evil; but the appearance is misleading. Anselm is actually objecting to the terms in which the student has formulated his question.

Rather than saying that injustice or evil (which is nothing) entered the angel, we should instead say that justice (which is something) departed from the angel. It is better still to use a verb that locates the agency where it really belongs: the angel *abandoned* justice.

He did so by willing what he ought not. The teacher clarifies:

T: In saying that he abandoned it by willing what he ought not, I indicate clearly both why and how he abandoned it. He abandoned justice *because* he willed what he ought not to will, and he abandoned it *by* willing what he ought not to will.

S: Why did he will what he ought not?

T: No cause preceded this will, except that he was able to will.

S: Did he will it because he was able to will it?

T: No, because the good angel was likewise able to will it, but he didn't. No one wills what he can will simply because he can, with no other cause, although no one ever wills anything unless he can will it.

S: Then why did he will it?

T: Simply because he willed it. For there was no other cause by which his will was in any way incited or attracted. Instead, his will was its own efficient cause, if I may put the matter that way, and its own effect.¹⁰

Note that Anselm does not merely attribute the origin of moral evil to a created will. By

first in the trilogy of dialogues of which *DCD* is the third, the Student attributes the authorship of the *Monologion* to the Teacher.

¹⁰*DCD* 27 (211).

insisting that “there was no other cause by which [the angel’s] will was in any way incited or attracted,”¹¹ he rules out any appeal to a primordial liability to fall that besets all things that were created from nothing, a sort of ontological counterpart to original sin. The angel’s will to abandon justice is attributable entirely to the angel: nothing in his nature (as angel, or more generally as created *ex nihilo*), his power of will, or the circumstances of his creation can be blamed for his unjust choice.

Recall that a principal motivation for the privation theory of evil is the doctrine that whatever is something, whatever has being, comes ultimately from God. Saying that evil is nothing, that it lacks being, means that it need not be attributed to God. Anselm’s argument that the angel alone is responsible for his abandoning justice reinforces the conclusion that evil is not to be attributed to God. But the same considerations that motivate the privation theory would seem to require a further conclusion: not only is the evil of the angel’s choice (its injustice) nothing, but the evil choice itself is nothing. For if the angel’s choice is something, and the angel’s will is wholly causally responsible for that choice, then there is something that owes its being wholly to a creature and not to God.

Anselm sets the reader up to expect that he will uphold privation-theory orthodoxy on this point. At the beginning of *On the Fall of the Devil*, the student brings up Paul’s question in 1 Corinthians 4:7, “What do you have that you have not received?” Paul clearly expects the answer “nothing,” and the teacher initially gives the expected answer: “No creature has anything from itself.”¹² But over the course of the dialogue it becomes clear that Anselm’s actual answer is that rational creatures have their free choices from themselves. They receive their choices from God only in the

¹¹“incited or attracted” translates *impelleretur . . . aut attraheretur*. The idea is that the will was being neither pushed nor pulled toward injustice.

¹²*DCD* 1 (169)

sense that God gives them the *power* of will by which they choose and permits them to exercise that power as they please:

Indeed, any given person has from God not only what God spontaneously gives him, but also what he steals unjustly with God's permission. And just as God is said to do what he permits to be done, so also he is said to give what he permits to be stolen. Therefore, since it was with God's permission that the angel stole his exercise of the power God had spontaneously given him, he had this exercise of power—which is nothing other than the willing itself—from God. For willing is nothing other than exercising the power to will, just as speaking is nothing other than exercising the power to speak.¹³

An exercise of free choice is something, and an evil volition is no less something than a just volition (*DCD* 8), so Anselm is affirming (though understandably without fanfare) that creatures do after all have something from themselves.

In his argument that creatures are the efficient cause of their own wrongdoing, Anselm speaks of God's *permitting* creatures to exercise their faculty of will. Permission is a kind of voluntary inaction. In the Lambeth Fragments, Anselm explains what he calls "permissive will" (*permittens voluntas*) in this way:

It is also a common way of speaking to say that someone wills what he neither approves nor concedes, but merely permits, although he could prevent it. For example, when a ruler does not will to crack down on robbers and plunderers within his domain, we complain that he wills the evil things that they do, even though they displease him, because he wills to permit them.¹⁴

¹³*DCD* 28 (212). Similarly, at *DCD* 20 (201–2) Anselm understands the claim that the devil's evil choice came from God as meaning no more than that God permitted the devil to exercise his power of free choice in that way: "So when the devil turned his will to what he ought not, both that willing and that turning were something, and nonetheless he had this something from no source other than God, since he could neither will anything nor move his will unless permitted by God, who makes all natures, substantial and accidental, universal and individual."

¹⁴*LF* 8 (411). Anselm consistently understands God's hardening of hearts (e.g. Pharaoh's heart in the story of the Exodus) as an instance of permissive will. It's not that God brings it about that someone's heart is hardened; rather, God has the power to bring it about that someone's heart is softened but refrains from doing so. See *DCV* 25 (355), *DC* 2.2 (373), *LF* 8 (411–12).

Perhaps one could question whether the ruler acts rightly in permitting the bad acts that he deplores but does not prevent, but there is no room for such doubt about God's permissive will:

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

S: There is nothing I am more certain of.

T: 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.¹⁵

Anselm's confidence that God "acts wisely and well" in permitting evil does not rest on any analysis of the conditions under which one is justified in permitting an evil that one has the power to prevent. It is therefore a mistake to say that Anselm "presents a full-blooded free will defense" according to which "God cannot prevent sin without destroying the freedom of the created agent, and a free creature is so great a good that it is worth the cost in evil" (Rogers 2008: 82). Nowhere does Anselm argue that the value of freedom is so great as to outweigh the evil of wrongdoing; nowhere, indeed, does he provide an argument of any kind to justify God's permission of evil. That God is in fact justified in permitting wrongdoing follows from God's perfect character. Apparently, no more than that needs to be said on the subject.

Why Evil Appears to Be Something

As anyone who has taught Augustine's account of evil knows, a common objection from students is that it seems just as plausible to hold that good is a privation

¹⁵DV 8 (129).

of evil as it does to hold that evil is a privation of good; evil seems to be something, not a mere absence of something. Anselm explicitly engages with such an objection, putting it (appropriately enough) in the mouth of the student:

I grant what you say about evil's being a privation of good, but I equally see that good is a privation of evil. And just as I perceive that in the privation of evil something else comes about that we call "good," so also I notice that in the privation of good something else comes about that we call "evil."¹⁶

The student acknowledges that there are arguments for the claim that evil is a privation and even rehearses a standard Augustinian argument, but he says he cannot accept that view unless someone refutes his contrary arguments for the conclusion that evil is something. He offers two; we can call them the *argument from signification* and the *argument from efficacy*.

The argument from signification is as follows:

when we hear the name 'evil' there would be no reason for our hearts to fear what they understand to be signified by that name if in fact it signified nothing. Moreover, if the word 'evil' is a name, it surely has a signification; and if it has a signification, it signifies. But then it signifies *something*. How, then, is evil nothing, if what the name 'evil' signifies is something?¹⁷

The teacher tries to dismiss this argument by observing that it could equally well be used to prove that nothing is something:

I imagine you're not crazy enough to say that *nothing* is something, even though you cannot deny that 'nothing' is a name. So, if you cannot prove that nothing is something based on the name 'nothing', how do you think you're going to prove that evil is something based on the name 'evil'?¹⁸

¹⁶DCD 10 (183).

¹⁷DCD 10 (183).

¹⁸DCD 11 (184).

The student replies that he does not know how to account for the signification of ‘nothing’ either, so the teacher sketches an account of how privative terms like ‘nothing’ and ‘evil’ can genuinely signify even though what they signify is not something.¹⁹ According to the standard medieval definition of signification, which derives from Aristotle’s *De interpretatione* in the translation of Boethius, to signify is to “establish an understanding” (*constituere intellectum*).²⁰ That is, a word signifies because it makes one think of something; and what it signifies is what it makes one think of. ‘Nothing’ signifies – makes one think of – everything that is something, although it signifies this “by excluding” (*destruendo*) rather than in the more usual way, “by including” (*constituendo*). In this way ‘nothing’ has a signification and functions grammatically as a noun; but it does not include anything in the understanding, and so it does not name anything. In the same way, ‘evil’ has a signification but no significate; it functions as a noun but does not name anything.

The student’s second argument for the conclusion that evil is something, the argument from efficacy, is as follows:

consider what peace there is, what rest, while justice endures: so that in many cases it seems that justice, like chastity and forbearance, is nothing but restraint from evil. But when justice is gone, what varied, troublesome, and multifarious feelings take possession of the soul; like a cruel master they force their wretched slave to be anxious about so many depraved and wearisome deeds and to labor so painfully in doing them. It would be astonishing if you could show that *nothing* accomplishes all this.²¹

¹⁹A full treatment of Anselm’s account of the signification of privative, indefinite, and empty names would take us too far afield here. See Visser and Williams (2009), 34–7, for details.

²⁰Even if Anselm did not know *De interpretatione*, he knew the Aristotelian-Boethian slogan, as we can tell from his use of variations on the expression *constituere intellectum* in *DG* 14, *DCD* 11 (184–7), and *LF* 10 (415–16).

²¹*DCD* 10 (183–4).

The teacher postpones his answer to this argument until he has laid out the psychology of the primal angelic fall, including the distinction between the two affections. As we saw earlier, the objects of the two affections, justice and advantage, are two irreducibly different kinds of good, with two different kinds of evil – injustice and misfortune – corresponding to them. Injustice is always nothing, but some misfortunes are something.

Drawing on these distinctions, the teacher notes that “we always hate the misfortune that is something.” Moreover, evils that are nothing, such as injustice and blindness, can cause misfortunes that are something and are therefore rightly feared. Despite appearances, to say that evils that are nothing *cause* misfortune is not to ascribe any causal efficacy to nothing:

Now when we say that injustice causes robbery, or that blindness causes someone to fall into a ditch, we must in no way understand this to mean that injustice or blindness causes something; rather, it means that if there had been justice in the will and sight in the eyes, neither the robbery nor the fall into the ditch would have happened. It’s like when we say that the absence of the rudder drives the ship into the rocks or that the absence of the reins causes the horse to run wild; that simply means that if there had been a rudder on the ship and reins for the horse, the winds would not have driven the ship and the horse would not have run wild. For in the same way that a ship is controlled by the rudder and a horse by the reins, the human will is governed by justice and the feet by vision.²²

This counterfactual analysis seems a plausible enough way to save ordinary-language ascriptions of causal efficacy to purely privative evils without making ‘nothing’ into a quasi-something with causal power. But it seems at first glance to miss some of the force of the student’s original objection (the details of which have perhaps faded in the reader’s mind over the intervening fifteen chapters). In the absence of justice, the student had said, “varied, troublesome, and multifarious feelings take possession of the

²²DCD 26 (210). A similar analysis is given in DCV 5 (335).

soul” and “force their wretched slave to be anxious about so many depraved and wearisome deeds.” Such misery seems to be too much for *nothing* – the mere absence of justice – to cause, even under the counterfactual analysis the teacher has proposed. In fact, however, the teacher’s answer has the resources to meet the objection even in its original form. Just as a ship is steered by its rudder but moved by winds or rowers, the human soul is steered by justice but moved by its various desires. In the absence of the rudder to steer the ship, wind will drive the ship off course; and in the absence of justice in the will, desires will carry the soul into anxiety and depravity.

Original Sin²³

It was not originally part of human nature that we should have such desires. It was true of our first parents, as it was true of the angels, that there was nothing either pushing or pulling them into sin. Nonetheless, they did sin, and as a consequence of their sin human nature itself was corrupted: “because the whole of human nature was in them, and nothing of human nature was outside them, the whole of human nature was weakened and corrupted.”²⁴ This corruption involved not only their bodies, which became subject to ungoverned appetites of the sort that had previously characterized only the lower animals, but even their souls, which “were infected with carnal affections from the corruption of the body and its appetites, as well as from the lack of the goods that it lost.”²⁵ Yet although Adam and Eve were able to change human nature in this way, there was something about human nature that they could not change: the fact that human nature *ought* to possess the justice with which God had originally endowed it.

²³For a detailed examination of Anselm’s account of original sin, see Visser and Williams (2009: 241–51), to which this section is indebted for some of its formulations.

²⁴DCV 2 (330).

²⁵DCV 2 (330).

Natural procreation (as opposed to the supernatural procreation of the human nature assumed in the Incarnation) transmits human nature in both of these aspects. That is, it passes along not only the corruption resulting from the sin of our first parents but also this ought, this “debt,” as Anselm likes to call it. As a consequence, human nature in infants is, from the time of their birth, subject to two debts: “the debt of making recompense for the first sin, which it had the power to avoid always, and . . . the debt of having original justice, which it had the power to preserve always.” Human nature in its fallen state can neither make such a recompense nor recover original justice, but its powerlessness does not excuse it, because human nature brought such powerlessness on itself through the sin of Adam and Eve, “in whom the whole of human nature existed.”²⁶ The name for this condition, in which we culpably owe two debts that we cannot repay, is “original sin.”

Anselm upholds Augustine’s teaching that those who die in a state of original sin, including unbaptized infants, are damned. He recognizes that such punishment is not obviously just:

There are some whose minds are unwilling to accept that infants who die unbaptized ought to be damned solely on account of this injustice of which I have spoken, since no human being judges that they deserve to be blamed for some other person’s sin, and because infants are not yet just and capable of understanding at that age; and they do not think that God should judge innocent children more strictly than human beings would judge them.²⁷

His first reply is that in fact God *should* judge children more strictly than we do; God is right to demand something that we would not be right to demand. For we did not confer justice on infants (or on human nature as it subsists in infants). Infants therefore do not owe us justice, and we would be wrong to demand it from them. But God did

²⁶DCV 2 (331).

²⁷DCV 28 (357).

grant justice to human nature, and that justice is owed to him, so he is right to hold human nature accountable for lacking justice—even when that human nature subsists in infants.

This first reply concedes, for the moment, that God’s judgment in this case is stricter than human judgment. The second reply is more ambitious. Anselm attempts to convince us that our own moral intuitions actually support a strict judgment in a recognizably analogous case. He writes:

Suppose a man and his wife who have been promoted to some great dignity and possession, not by their own merit but by grace alone, together commit some serious crime for which there is no excuse, and because of this crime they are justly dispossessed and reduced to servitude. Who would say that the children they have after their condemnation do not deserve to be subjected to servitude as well, but rather should by grace be restored to those good things that their parents justly lost?²⁸

One can imagine that this analogy would have been more persuasive in Anselm’s day than it is in ours. We might agree that the children should not be restored to the rank and possessions that their parents justly lost—certainly in practice we would not restore them—but we would not think it fair to *punish* the children. And if, as they grew up, they were able to throw off their parents’ disgrace and rise to wealth and respectability, so much the better; we would not dream of trying to stop them.

Anselm could nevertheless argue that this criticism leaves the central claim unscathed. We have acknowledged that we would not in practice restore the children to their parents’ former status. Surely, he would say, this is because we think it is *just* for them to participate at least to that degree in their parents’ degradation. So we do after all believe that they are justly deprived of some good on account of a sin that is not their own. When it comes to this central claim, the case in Anselm’s story is perfectly

²⁸DCV 28 (358).

analogous to the case of human nature as it subsists in the descendants of Adam and Eve. Moreover, any disanalogies, he could argue, tell in favor of the strict reckoning for original sin that the story is intended to justify. The children in the story are able in principle to work their way back into prosperity and respectability because they have not been deprived of the capacity to do so (though they have been justly deprived of the resources that might enable them to do so with ease). But the unmerited dignity that our first parents threw away was not merely prosperity or respectability; it was justice itself. We, their children, are justly deprived of that justice, and it is a consequence of that deprivation that we are powerless to work our way back into the dignity that our first parents culpably renounced.

Anselm intends his analogy to elicit intuitions that are favorable to the Church's teaching on original sin, but he does not claim to have a decisive argument in favor of that teaching (Visser and Williams 2009: 241). Instead, he takes it as a datum; and Anselm is convinced that the only way to make sense of the Church's teaching and practice is to affirm that infants are in a state of sin. For the Church teaches that unbaptized infants are damned, and only the sinful are damned. What, then, of those who have been baptized? Anselm does not think that baptized infants possess rectitude of will, because rectitude of will requires a degree of understanding that infants do not and cannot possess. So baptized infants, every bit as much as unbaptized infants, lack justice and are powerless to acquire it by their own efforts. The difference is that once they have been baptized, their condition is no longer culpable, and God no longer requires justice from them. Since injustice or sin is the absence of *required* justice, baptized infants are not unjust or in a state of sin. If they die in that state, they are admitted to heaven "through the justice of Christ, who gave himself on their behalf, and through the justice of the faith of their mother the Church, which believes on their

behalf.”²⁹

Notice that baptism brings about no intrinsic change in its subject. Baptism does not erase the corruption that has been inherited from Adam. It does not confer virtues or change the will. Anselm does not speak of it as inaugurating a new life: it is a washing, and nothing more.³⁰ The only change brought about by baptism is relational. God ceases to demand what he had previously demanded; he accepts as innocent the powerlessness that he had previously treated as culpable.

Bringing Good out of Evil

Anselm affirms that “God’s incomprehensible wisdom . . . orders even evils in a good way.”³¹ He attempts no systematic account of how God does this – God’s wisdom is, after all, incomprehensible – but he offers a few hints. For example:

although a human being or an evil angel may be unwilling to be subject to God’s will and ordering, he has no power to escape it. If he flees from God’s commanding will, he runs into God’s punishing will. And if you ask by what path he runs from one to the other, the answer is just this: by God’s permitting will. And supreme wisdom transforms the sinner’s perverse will or action into order and beauty for the universe.³²

Anselm frequently appeals to the idea that God aims at a kind of aesthetic perfection – the beauty of a perfectly ordered universe.³³ The mere fact of a sin’s being punished is, by itself, a contribution to this beautiful order. Perhaps punishment is not the only way

²⁹*DCV* 29 (359).

³⁰With one possible exception in the Prayer to St Peter, Anselm always treats baptism purely as a cleansing from sin, rather than as the beginning of a new, supernatural life.

³¹*CDH* 1.7 (251).

³²*CDH* 1.15 (266).

³³For the importance of beauty in Anselm’s thought, see Visser and Williams (2009: 196-200) and Williams (2012).

in which God “transforms the sinner’s perverse will or action into order and beauty for the universe,” but it is the only one Anselm explicitly mentions.

Anselm has more to say about how God brings good out of affliction – and indeed affliction of God’s own making, since “God himself creates afflictions by which he disciplines and purifies the just.”³⁴ In one letter Anselm offers instruction to Hernost, a monk who would later become bishop of Rochester, about how to treat sickness as chastisement:

We ought to ponder, most beloved, how much consolation these sufferings bring with them. As they outwardly purge the sins of us on whom outward torments are imposed, they convey to us the destiny of children of God, who have been promised the joys of the heavenly kingdom. And while our outward person, which must daily waste away, sighs and groans under the pressure of chastisement, our inward person, which ought to be renewed day by day [cf. 2 Corinthians 4:16], rejoices and breathes freely when the oppressive weight of sins is lifted – which will surely happen, provided that the inward person does not impatiently attempt to sidestep outward affliction but gratefully consents to the hand that strikes one down. . . . Therefore, most beloved, because Scripture says that “we have to enter the kingdom of God through many tribulations” [Acts 14:22], when we are being chastised, let us hold fast to the opinion of blessed Job concerning us and God. Beset as he was by afflictions beyond measure, he said, “Let this be my consolation, that in afflicting me, he spares me no pains” [Job 6:10].³⁵

Here Anselm is speaking of chastisement that is visited on someone for his own sins, but he also envisions the possibility that God would punish a whole community for the sins of one of its members. Writing to the monks of Canterbury, he urges them, “Let

³⁴DC 1.7 (371).

³⁵Letter 9 (III:112). In Letter 53 he writes again to Hernost, now near death, with similar advice. See also Letter 425 (V:371), in which Anselm reminds Ernulf, Abbot of Troarn, “Nowhere do we read that the illnesses of the saints worked to their detriment; we always read that through their trials they made progress toward better things.” In all three of these letters Anselm quotes Hebrews 12:6: “God chastens every son whom he accepts.”

each one diligently examine his private and public life, and, if he finds anything, hasten to offer worthy satisfaction, lest God punish the whole community for his guilt. For divine judgments often do this, so that a great many people are thrown into distress for the guilt of one." Anselm assures them that he could offer many examples of such corporate punishment, but he declines to do so on the grounds that "it would be extremely tedious."³⁶

In addition to purging sin, affliction can help us fall out of love with this present life and long for the tranquility of the life to come: "It is nothing out of the ordinary for God's servants to be struck by many kinds of adversities during their sojourn, for they do not belong to this world. The more they are troubled here, the more they recognize this world for what it is and desire to pass from this world to their rest."³⁷ And some affliction is simply the natural result of the fact that the worldly goods we often desire cannot bring the kind of happiness they seem to promise.³⁸

There are two noteworthy features of Anselm's discussion of the ways in which God brings good out of evil. First, Anselm approaches this issue chiefly as a matter of practical advice rather than of theory; we find it in his letters, not in his philosophical or theological treatises. Thus Anselm's interest is in encouraging believers to cooperate in God's purposes by making the right use of sickness and suffering, not in offering an abstract account of the conditions that must be met in order for God's permitting – or even causing – suffering to be consistent with God's perfect character. And the second point is closely connected with the first: Anselm's concern is with the suffering of *believers*. If he has any thoughts about why the suffering of unbelievers is justified, apart

³⁶Letter 332 (V:268).

³⁷Letter 312 (V:239).

³⁸Letter 418 (V:363).

from their inherited participation in the injustice of our first parents, he does not share them.

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