

Augustine and Anselm on the Essence of Moral Responsibility

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In the first chapter of the Monologion, Anselm claims we can know that God exists through reason alone, as well as through faith. He says that, although this can be done in many ways, he will present the way most easily understood. He then goes on to present an argument based on the degrees of goodness found in the things of our experience and how this diversity in the goodness of things suggests a highest good, which is God. This argument is essentially the same as the fourth way of Aquinas. In this paper, the focus will be on those other “ways” to which Anselm refers. My questions are two: what basis can be found within Anselm’s writings for these other ways, and how do they compare to the famous five ways of Aquinas?

It is easy to get off track in explaining the causes of moral failure, especially when that failure is one’s own. We can point to all sorts of factors outside our control which can be used as excuses—material conditions, circumstances, other people, even God. Although all these may be significant, they do not get to the heart of the matter. Using quite different methods, both Augustine and Anselm do: they force the reader to confront the essence of moral responsibility. In his *Confessions*, where he pours out his heart before God, Augustine is unrelenting in his meditation on his own sin in the famous episode of stealing the pears. He will not allow himself to get off the hook by providing some reasonable explanation or excuse for his action. Any reason (*qua* reason) would be something good and so not in itself evil; yet he knows his act was evil. Anselm’s confessional beginning to the *Proslogion*, although similar in method, does not reflect quite the same unbending focus on his culpability. But when Anselm applies his logical method to the question of moral culpability in Chapter 12 of *On Truth*, he is unrelenting in his pursuit of the essence of moral responsibility, rejecting any explanation of justice short of a will in perfect conformity with the good. Thus, both Augustine and Anselm, although influenced by the Platonic identification of virtue with knowledge and of sin with ignorance, in the end place the origin of virtue and sin (justice and injustice) not merely in the mind (as if knowledge makes us good and ignorance makes us evil), but in the rational will.

In the first section of the paper, we shall consider Augustine’s reflection on the pear-stealing episode, examining his several attempts at explaining his behavior. In the second section, after a brief look at Chapter 1 of the *Proslogion*, we shall examine Anselm’s systematic analysis of moral responsibility in Chapter 12 of *On Truth*. Finally, we shall compare the two passages with a look at what they have in common in terms of identifying the essence of moral responsibility.

Augustine, Pears, and Responsibility

In Book Two of the *Confessions*, Augustine recounts an episode in which, as a boy of sixteen, he stole some pears. He asks himself why he did it. As he begins his analysis, he states that he did evil with no purpose, that there was no cause for the evil but evil. What is impressive

about the reflection that occupies him for the next few chapters is his rejection of all explanations for his evil action other than his own will; that is, he refuses to dodge his responsibility for sin.

Behind Augustine's effort to answer this puzzling question of why we intentionally do what we know we should not do is the well-known Platonic claim that we can only choose what is good. No one, according to Plato, ever intentionally chooses evil.¹ This is because evil has no metaphysical status: it is simply the absence of good.² Since it is impossible to choose nothing, we must choose something good, albeit a lesser good than we might have chosen. We do evil because we are ignorant of what is really good. Thus, the solution to the problem of moral evil in our actions is education. If we only knew what was really good, then we would do it. Augustine, as he begins his reflections, is loathe to take this route, and this for two reasons. In the first place, Augustine believes that there is an objective right and wrong, available to us in the natural law and from divine revelation. "Surely, Lord, your divine law punishes theft, as does the law written on the hearts of man, which not even iniquity itself blots out."³ In the second place, Augustine's own conscience denies this doctrine's implications in terms of mitigated responsibility:

Nor did I wish to enjoy that thing which I desired to gain from theft, but rather to enjoy the actual theft and the sin of theft.... Behold, now let my heart tell you what it looked for there, that I should be evil without purpose and that there should be no cause for my evil but evil itself."⁴

Nevertheless, it is certainly puzzling to say that the cause of some action is in itself nothing. And so Augustine looks around for some explanation. He tries out three basic candidates.

First, he wonders whether the cause of his action was simply some lesser good attracting his attention. In Chapter 5 he lays out a litany of goods, from bodily things and pleasure, to honor and the beauties of this world, to friendship. As good, each of these things is worth loving, for we should love what is good and hate what is evil. Thus, we are not evil for loving these things but for loving them immoderately. Again, apparently no one loves what he or she judges to be evil. "Therefore, not even Cataline himself loved his crimes, but something else for the sake of which he committed them."⁵ On these grounds Augustine was wrong because he chose something attractive or pleasurable (the pears) over the higher goods of justice and following the

¹ Plato, *Meno* 88c–89a.

² Augustine will discuss this point in more detail in Book VII, Chapter 12, and also in his work *On Free Choice of the Will*, Book II, Chapter 13.

³ Augustine, *Confessions* 2.4, trans. John K. Ryan (New York: Doubleday, 1960), p. 69: *Furtum certe punit lex tua, domine, et lex scripta cordibus hominum, quam ne ipsa quidem delet iniquitas. Sancti Augustini Confessiones Libri XIII, in Corpus Christianorum: Series Latina, Vol. 27 (Turnholt: Typographi Brepolis Editores Pontificii, 1981), p. 21.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 70: *[N]ec ea re uolebam frui, quam furto appetebam, sed ipso furto et peccato.... Dicat tibi nunc ecce cor meum, quid ibi quaerebat, ut essem gratis malus et malitiae meae causa nulla esset nisi militia (CCL 27, 22).*

⁵ Augustine, *Confessions* 2.5 (p. 71): *Nec ipse igitur Catilina amavit facinora sua, sed utique aliud, cuius causa illa faciebat (CCL 27, 23).*

commands of God. Here he is much in line with the Platonic doctrine that vice is ignorance and virtue is knowledge.

But this will not do: he insists that what he loved was the act of theft itself, not the product achieved by it. In this act, he can find no beauty or goodness:

There is no loveliness in it. I do not say such loveliness as there is in justice and prudence, or in man's mind, and memory, and senses, and vigorous life, nor that with which the stars are beautiful and glorious in their courses, or the land and the sea filled with their living kinds, which by new births replace those that die, nor even that flawed and shadowy beauty found in the vices that deceive us.⁶

The act of theft is none of the beautiful things in creation, all of which are good. Augustine sees that if he says that the cause of his sin is something in the world, then he must say that some created thing (which, as created by a good God, is good) caused his evil: that is, he must not say that good is the cause of evil, which is nonsense (at least as a sufficient cause).

As a second candidate to explain his behavior, Augustine wonders whether his sin, although vicious on the human level, might not be an imitation (admittedly perverse) of God, and so to that extent understandable and even impressive—after all, it is good that we try to be like God. Analyzing various sins, he compares them to God's action. The sin of pride imitates loftiness of mind, and the highest mind is God. Ambition seeks honor and glory, which are so good in themselves that they are found perfectly in God. The mighty are cruel only so that they may exercise power over others, but true power is so good that it is identical with God. Lust seeks the comfort of caressing, but there is nothing more caressing than God, who is love. He goes through all the seven deadly sins and more in this manner. Thus, he entertains the possibility that his mistake is not to have acted proudly or greedily, but to have failed to see that real loftiness of mind (that pride seeks) and real possession of things (that avarice seeks) can only be found in God. Even if sinful actions do not clearly choose a good object, they are good in some way because they show that we are trying to be like God. In fact, this seems an even better explanation for our sin: since God is much better than created things, our trying to be like God is superior (as an excuse) to our choosing the lesser good over the greater. As God says, "You must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5.48). "In a perverse way, all men imitate you who put themselves far from you, and rise up in rebellion against you."⁷

But again, this will not do. It is absurd to say that we imitate God (and so do what is good) by rebelling against God. Apparently Augustine sees that this explanation fails, for after this meditation he claims that he did the action for no other reason than that it was unlawful, not

⁶ Augustine, *Confessions* 2.6, (p. 72): [E]cce species nulla est: non dico sicut in aequitate atque prudentia, sed neque sicut in mente hominis atque memoria et sensibus et uegetante uita, neque sicut speciosa sunt sidera et decora locis suis et terra et mare plena fetibus, qui succedunt nascendo decedentibus; non saltem ut est quaedam defectiua species et umbratica uitii fallentibus (CCL 27, 23).

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 73: Peruerse te imitantur omnes, qui longe se a te faciunt et extollunt se aduersum te (CCL 27, 24).

because it was a weak imitation of the laws of God. “Could a thing give pleasure which could not be done lawfully, and which was done for no other reason but because it was unlawful?”⁸ God is not unlawful by being above the law (as we are when we break the divine and natural law); rather he is the source of all law—perfectly just in himself and in all his actions.

Finally, Augustine suggests friendship as an explanation for his evil action, insisting that he would not have stolen the pears alone. Thus friendship, a greater good than pleasure or pride, explains his action. It was in order to establish community with others—the real good of friendship—that Augustine decided to do evil with them. “[A]lone I would never have done it. Therefore, I also loved in it my association with the others with whom I did the deed.”⁹

But Augustine will not accept this as a mitigating circumstance, for this friendship is friendship only ambiguously. True friendship is caring for the other for the other’s own sake. And if doing evil is bad for oneself, then doing evil is bad for one’s comrades, too. Thus, the communal act was not friendship. “Then was it not only the theft that I loved? No, truly, nothing else, because my association with the others was itself nothing.”¹⁰ Quite the opposite of taking away some of his responsibility for the action, Augustine insists that his seeking cooperation in such an action is a sign of an even deeper sin since he became also the cause of another’s sin.

Thus, in all this, Augustine refuses to shift the blame for his evil action to other things or to other people (God or friends). This is very impressive, and morally correct, for if the sufficient cause of my evil choice is something good, then it is neither an evil choice nor really mine. Good, as such, is not evil. If one says, with Augustine in some places, that the evil is in preferring the lesser good over the greater, one still has to explain what is wrong with this. What is wrong, presumably, is intentionally choosing what is evil—that I should prefer what I know to be worse. And if the cause of my evil choice is to be located in something else (as opposed to my will), then it is not my choice. If one wishes to say that the something else is only a partial explanation of my evil choice, then one still has failed to point out the essential cause of the evil choice.

Anselm, Truth, and Responsibility

Anselm adopts the confessional style of Augustine in Chapter 1 of his *Proslogion*.¹¹ He wants to know God, but does not know how. Only if God shows him can he know where and how even to seek God. Nearly in despair Anselm invokes God: “What shall he do, most high Lord, what shall this exile do, far away from You as he is? What shall Your servant do,

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 73: Potuitne libere quod non licebat, non ob aliud, nisi quia non licebat? (CCL 27, 24).

⁹ Augustine, *Confessions* 2.8, (p. 74): [S]olus omnino id non fecissem. Ergo amaui ibi etiam consortium eorum, cum quibus id feci (CCL 27, 25).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 74: Non ergo nihil aliud quam furtum amaui; immo uero nihil aliud, quia et illud nihil est (CCL 27, 25).

¹¹ On this confessional method in Augustine and Anselm, see my paper “Faith and Reason in Anselm: Two Models,” *The Saint Anselm Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Fall 2004).

tormented by love of You and yet cast off ‘far from Your face’ [Ps. 31: 22]?”¹² Like Augustine, he recognizes his absolute need for God. But unlike Augustine’s personal confession of sin in the passage analyzed above, Anselm here makes only some general observations of the distance that exists between him (and all humanity) and God. He comments on the difference between the unfallen Adam and his (Anselm’s) present fallen state. Why did Adam not resist? If he had, all would now be well:

He groaned with fullness; we sigh with hunger. He was prosperous; we go begging.... Why, since it was so easy for him, did he not keep for us that which we lack so much? Why did he deprive us of light and surround us with darkness? Why did he take life away from us and inflict death on us.¹³

This is a fairly standard lament over the fall, and a fairly standard account of Adam’s blame for it. Still, there is a certain deflection here from Anselm’s own responsibility for his alienation from God. The doctrine of original sin is indeed mysterious, but it cannot mean that we are off the hook for our evil choices because Adam was to blame. This is not to say that Anselm refuses to recognize the depths of his own sin and his responsibility for being alienated from God. Near the end of the chapter, he acknowledges how his own actions have obscured the image of God in him: “But this image is so effaced and worn away by vice, so darkened by the smoke of sin, that it cannot do what it was made to do unless You renew it and reform it.”¹⁴ And his conclusions in this chapter—that we can do nothing without God and that our position must be one of faith seeking understanding—are identical to Augustine’s. However, Anselm does not penetrate to the center of moral responsibility here.¹⁵ But he does elsewhere by a very different method.

In Chapter 12 of *On Truth*, Anselm is unrelenting in his logical analysis of moral responsibility. Let us turn now to an account of that analysis. The context for this analysis is a discussion between a teacher and student about the different kinds of truth. Anselm runs through a number of places where truth can be found: grammatical signification, opinion, will, natural objects, sense experience, and the essences of things. He ends up equating truth with rectitude, that is, things being what they ought to be. But this rectitude is ambiguous, having four main meanings: it can mean that we conform our thought to the ways things really are; it can mean that things are or act in conformity with their natures; it can mean that things (non-voluntary and voluntary) act in conformity to God’s providence; or it can mean moral obligation. It is this last

¹² Anselm, *Proslogion, Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 85. Quid faciet, altissime domine, quid faciet iste tuus longinquus exsul? Quid faciet servus tuus anxius amore lui et longe proiectus “a facie tua”? *S. Anselmi Cantuariensis Archiepiscopi Opera Omnium*, Vol. I (Seccovii, 1938), p. 98.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 85: Ille ructabat saturitate, nos suspiramus esurie. Ille abundabat, nos mendicamus.... Cur non nobis custodivit cum facile posset, quo tam graviter careremus? Quare sic nobis obseravit lucem, et obdixit nos tenebris? Ut quid nobis abstulit vitam, et inflixit mortem? (98–99).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 87: Sed sic est abolita attritione vitiorum, sic est offuscata fumo peccatorem, ut non possit facere ad quod facta est, nisi tu renoves et reformes eam (100).

¹⁵ It is not really his purpose. He is trying to prepare himself to think about God. Part of that preparation is to confess his sinfulness, but more central is the prayer of petition that God come to his aid as he tries to understand Him.

meaning that is our concern in this paper. In chapter 12 Anselm adds justice to the identification of truth and rectitude. But he soon moves to distinguishing moral justice from these other meanings. “I see that you seek a definition of justice as that which merits praise and of its contrary, injustice, as that to which blame is due.”¹⁶ That something be done willingly is critical to this definition. Thus the justice of a stone, whereby it is true to its nature of seeking to be below when it is above (gravity), is not what we are looking for. Nor is the justice of a horse, even though in some sense the horse’s action of seeking food is a matter of will. Clearly we do not praise the horse for such an action, for we do not think that the horse is deliberately pursuing what it ought to. Therefore, the kind of justice we seek to understand is that which requires a will guided by knowledge. “Therefore the rectitude that earns praise for the one having it is found only in the rational nature, which alone perceives the rectitude of which we speak.”¹⁷

Although Anselm focuses the discussion on rectitude and justice, searching for the criteria which make acts good (as opposed to Augustine’s analysis of what made his own act evil), the discovery of one is really also the discovery of the other. We praise good behavior and we blame evil behavior. The presence of good in the will deserves praise, and its absence (when it ought to be there) deserves blame. Evil is the absence of what makes an act good. As Anselm says in *On the Virgin Conception and Original Sin*, “evil is nothing but the absence of the good that ought to be there.”¹⁸

Having narrowed down the focus of truth/rectitude/justice to the action of a rational nature, Anselm asks where, in human beings, the justice we are seeking is found. Is it in deed, or in knowledge, or in will? To answer this, we have only to ask whether we praise someone for rectitude of deed, knowledge, or will. The dialogue between teacher and student continues: “*T*. What if someone understands rightly or acts rightly but does not will rightly: should such a one be praised for justice? *S*. No. *T*. Therefore justice is not rectitude of knowledge or action, but of will.”¹⁹ This conclusion passes quickly, but it is of enormous import. In our most usual way of speaking, we apply the categories of just and unjust to deeds. This is because we see the deeds and are therefore moved to judge them. But if a deed were done unknowingly or unwillingly, we would not praise the agent. If I accidentally, that is unknowingly, help an innocent person escape a murderer by happening to drive by in my car at precisely the right moment so that the murderer is frightened off, I do not deserve to be praised. Even if I know that intervening for the sake of the innocent is what I should normally do and therefore am prepared intellectually to do it, if I do not deliberately choose to do so in this case, I do not deserve to be praised for this saving deed. Anselm is not saying that deeds and knowledge should not be called just or unjust. The fact that a deed helps another is a good thing, even if the deed is unintended. And it is good for a person

¹⁶ *On Truth*, 12, in Davies and Evans, p. 167. Queris ut video definitionem iustitiae cui laus debetur; sicut contrario eius, scilicet iniustitiae, debetur vituperatio (192).

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 167: Rectitudo igitur quae tenenti se laudem acquirit, non est nisi in rationali natura, quae sola rectitudinem de qua loquimur percipit (193).

¹⁸ Anselm, *On the Virgin Conception and Original Sin* 5, in Davies and Evans, p. 365. “...[I]niustitia non est aliud quam absentia debitae iustitiae... (Vol II, 146).

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 167: M. Quid si quis recte intelligit aut recte operator, non autem recte velit: laudabit eum quisquam de iustitia? D. Non. M. Ergo non est ista iustitia rectitudo scientiae aut rectitudo actionis, sed rectitudo voluntatis (193).

to know clearly that the innocent ought to be protected and why this is so. However, if the agent of a good deed lacks a right will, the deed is not just in the strict moral sense and is therefore not worthy of unconditional praise. A morality based on facts alone (the Utilitarians try this) is insufficient; and so, too, is the Platonic identity of knowledge and virtue. In both these insights Anselm is in full agreement with Augustine.

But even now, we have not sufficiently identified the locus of justice (and by implication injustice). We must analyze the will more deeply. For it is possible that one might knowingly and willingly do what is right but for the wrong reason.²⁰ The just act is one that is done because it is right, not for some other reason. It is done for its own sake. If one is forced to do the right thing, then one's action does not deserve praise. If one does the right thing out of vainglory or self-interest or pleasure, then one does not deserve to be praised. And if one does not deserve to be praised, then one's action is not just in the strict sense. Up to this point, Anselm has been ruling out meanings of truth, rectitude, and justice that are *not* essentially good, that are not deserving of unconditional praise. The student in the dialogue sums up the progress of the argument: "Such rectitude ought not to be praised and therefore does not suffice for the justice we are seeking. But show me now what would suffice."²¹

Here Anselm shifts to a positive account of what makes an action just. Anselm in the voice of the teacher distinguishes two parts of every choice: what is willed and why it is willed. "Every will wills both something and for the sake of something."²² This could be read as referring to means (what is done) and end (the purpose of the deed): for a choice to be just, both the means and the end must be good. Just as Augustine does in the *Confessions*, Anselm presupposes here the content of just actions (means and ends); that is, he accepts the content of traditional morality expressed in the Ten Commandments and the natural law tradition. This again is contrary to Utilitarian reasoning where the goodness of the means is determined by the end. But Anselm is after something deeper, and it is here where he approaches, in his analytic way, the depth of moral insight that one finds in Augustine's reflections on stealing the pears. Anselm is not so much talking about an end as a certain state of affairs, or as an object to be willed; rather he is talking about a perfect act of willing. Beyond choosing the right means and end in the order of objects to be chosen, the fully moral act chooses in such a way that its motivation (its purpose or end) is merely to preserve rectitude of will. "Therefore justice is rectitude of will preserved for its own sake."²³

For true justice, every aspect of the choice must be good: its object (both means and end) and the motivation (the preservation of a just will). The justice of the action depends on the

²⁰ Kant makes a similar point about the difference between doing the right thing (i.e., that which is according to duty) from duty and for some other reason (self-interest or direct inclination); see *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, First Section, trans. Lewis White Beck (New York: Macmillan/Library of Liberal Arts, 1990), pp. 12–15.

²¹ Anselm, *On the Virgin Conception and Original Sin* 5, p. 168: Non est huius rectitudo laudanda, et ideo non sufficit ad iustitiam quam quaerimus. Sed ostende iam quae sufficiat (193).

²² Ibid, p. 168: Omnis voluntas sicut vult aliquid, ita vult propter aliquid (193).

²³ Ibid, p. 169: Iusitata igitur est rectitudo voluntatis propter se servata (194).

rectitude of the will, and the rectitude of the will does not depend on the outcome of the action. Anselm goes so far as to say that the essence of justice, which is rectitude of will preserved for its own sake, can exist even if what the will wills cannot be achieved. “Rectitude of will, even if it is impossible that what we rightly will come about, does not lose the name of justice.”²⁴ There is no substitute for real rectitude of will. One cannot be forced to have it; one cannot fake having it (seeking it for self-satisfaction or vain-glory); and one cannot have it without willing to preserve it.

It seems that one can only have it by tapping into its source, justice itself, which is ultimately God. We can only preserve justice if we have it; we can only have justice if we acquire it; and we can only acquire it if it is given. Although there is no temporal priority (acquiring, having, and preserving justice happen simultaneously²⁵), there is a metaphysical priority: we can only preserve what we have; we can only have what we have acquired; and we acquire everything from God.²⁶ Thus, as Augustine said, true justice is only possible if we are acting in God. Just as the essence of sin turns out to be rebellion from God, so the essence of good action is obedience to God:

It [truth, rectitude, justice] is improperly said to be ‘of this or that thing,’ since it does not have its existence in or from or through the things in which it is said to be. But when those things are said to be according to it—which always excels them—it is because they are as they ought to be, and then truth is said to be of this or that thing, e.g., the truth of will, the truth of action.²⁷

As we said above, Anselm defines justice as “rectitude of will, which rectitude is preserved for its own sake.”²⁸ For a definition of injustice, we have only to turn the phraseology around: injustice is preserving (or intending) evil for its own sake. This does not quite work metaphysically, since evil has no metaphysical status and so is not literally something that can be chosen. However, one must not explain evil as chosen for the sake of something else (which, insofar as it exists, is good), for then it would not be evil. In his work *On the Virgin Conception and Original Sin*, Anselm writes: “nothing is considered just in itself but justice, and nothing is thought unjust or sinful but injustice: not substance nor action, nor even the will in which justice or injustice resides” (p. 362). It is the act of turning from the ultimate good in rebellion that is evil, just as it is the act of turning to the ultimate good in obedience that is good.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 169: Rectitudo autem voluntatis, etiamsi impossibile sit fieri quod recte volumus: tamen nequaquam nomen amittit iustitiae (194).

²⁵ Ibid, p. 169.

²⁶ Ibid, p. 170.

²⁷ Ibid, p. 173: Improperie ‘huius vel illius rei’ esse dicitur, quoniam illa non in ipsis rebus aut ex ipsis aut per ipsas in quibus esse dicitur habet suum esse. Sed cum res ipsae secundum illam sunt, quae semper praeesto est iis quae sunt sicut debent: tunc dicitur ‘huius vel illius rei veritas’, ut veritas voluntatis, actionis (199).

²⁸ Ibid, p. 170: ...rectitudo voluntatis, quae rectitudo propter se servatur (196). He gives the same definition in *On Free Will*, Davies and Evans, p. 179.

Conclusion

To study such passages as these by Augustine and Anselm is to confront the essence (if one can call it that) of moral choice, which is primarily, though not exclusively, a matter of intention. It is perfectly possible, when we try to judge the intentions of someone else who does something just or unjust, that we will be mistaken in our judgment. Since we do not approve of what the person has done, either because it has hurt us or because it has led to consequences that we think are unjust, we judge the person to be wrong. Or, if we witness a deed that benefits ourselves or others, we judge the agent of that deed to be right. However, since we cannot know with certainty the intentions of other people, we can never be absolutely certain about whether their acts are good or evil in the strict sense, that is, intentionally done as acts of justice or injustice. Of course, in our individual lives, legal system, and politics, we must make judgments about the justice or injustice of other people's actions based on our best estimate of their motivations. Nevertheless, we are aware that our judgments could be imperfect, and that we should take care lest we condemn others unfairly.

But we cannot miss, Augustine is showing us, the presence of evil in our own unjust actions. We can try to cover it up or deflect it by various excuses (blaming others, or the circumstances, or God's neglect to give us the grace we need), but careful self-reflection will tell us that such attempts are disingenuous. We may not be able to fathom why we do evil, but we must face the fact that we do. Otherwise, we will not seek help, which for Augustine is to be found, not in defending ourselves by making our actions seem plausible or understandable, but in turning ourselves to the source of correction, which is the natural law written in our hearts²⁹ and, ultimately for Augustine, the divine law, revealed by the fount of all truth, goodness, love, and healing—the living God.

And, as Anselm has shown us, we cannot be sure of, beyond any doubt, the presence of a purely just will in ourselves. Anselm's project of showing the heart of what is worthy of praise is slightly different, but the essence of moral insight is the same. Anselm works through a negative method first, ruling out what, though appearing to be rectitude or justice, is really not so. If the act is done unknowingly, or unwillingly, or if it is willed for some reason other than because it is just (such as fear, or hope of reward, or vanity), then it is not really just. No amount of empirical study will guarantee that our own motives are perfect. Ultimately, we must acquire justice from God.

Whether we follow Augustine's confession or Anselm's analysis, we are turned in our moral life to an openness to the grace of God, the source of all goodness. Following Augustine's meditation, we find ourselves puzzled by the sin we do. Repentance from this sin is only possible with grace from God. But we will only make this turn if we are uncompromising in our facing up to the evil that we do. Following Anselm's analysis, in which justice is only found where we do what is just for its own sake, we can never be absolutely sure that we do not have ulterior

²⁹ See beginning of Chap. 4, 69.

motives for our good deeds—to be praised, to avoid trouble, even to please God. A just action is done for its own sake, for the sake of justice, which ultimately means for the sake of God. Both methods, because they are uncompromising, lead one to turn to God, which is the only way we can ultimately avoid evil and fulfill the demands of justice.

Each way ends up in a kind of mystery. In Augustine’s existential confrontation with sin, he runs up against the mystery of iniquity. There is no way to say why one does evil. This is because evil, as defect, has no metaphysical status. As we saw, to give it one is to remove it from the category of evil committed by a free act of will. How, then, do we deal with evil? As St. Paul says (and Augustine follows him): there are two wills—by one I do what I want (good), by the other I do what I do not want (evil). The turn from the evil, although something that we know we should do, is something we actually can do only by the grace of God, in covenantal union with the divine. Augustine makes this point clear in his account of his conversion:

Suffering from a most fearful wound, I quaked in spirit, angered by a most turbulent anger, because I did not enter into your will and into a covenant with you, my God. For all my bones cried out for me to enter into that covenant, and by their praises they lifted me up to the skies.³⁰

Oddly enough, Anselm’s more analytic way also leads to mystery. Augustine’s insight is that we know that we sin, but do not know exactly why we do it or how to cease doing it. Anselm’s insight is that we know what would not count as a fully just act, but we do not know exactly what doing a fully just act would be like. Nothing short of choosing so that a just will may be preserved for its own sake will count as a just action in the strict sense. But have we ever acted in such a way? And if we ever do, how do we preserve such a just will? How can we be sure of our motivation? As the Psalmist says: “But who can discern his Errors? Clear thou me from hidden faults” (Psalm 19.12; RSV). Conscious of the choice as being my choice, innumerable possible motives crowd in, the hardest ones to displace being those which have to do with my own moral good.

It seems that only if we take complete responsibility for our evil choices (as Augustine counsels) and take no credit for our good actions (as Anselm counsels) can we live morally upright lives. This does not mean that we do not freely choose the good we do: there are no human acts without freedom of choice. But only if we keep emptying ourselves of credit for such actions (that is, only if we do them for the sake of justice itself, for their own sake) can we possibly preserve a good will. We can act justly, but only in communion with the one who is truth, rectitude, and justice—God.

³⁰ *Confessions* 8.8 (195): Ego fremebam spiritu indignans indignatione turbulentissima, quod non irem in placitum et pactum tecum, deus meus, in quod eundum esse omnia ossa mea clamabant et in caelum tollebant laudibus (CCL 27, 125).