

Anselm on Forgiveness, Patience, and Free Will

Katherin A. Rogers
University of Delaware

*Anselm says some seemingly harsh things about forgiveness, for example, that God cannot simply forgive the wrong done at the Fall. I argue that the harshness is only apparent. God cannot simply forgive sin because that would not be best for mankind. Divine forgiveness must be understood in light of the importance Anselm places on human freedom and the virtue of patience. I look at divine forgiveness in *Cur Deus Homo* and the first sin in *De casu diaboli* to explain Anselm's view on why God prefers process to immediate change, in hopes of bringing some new, Anselmian, insight to an old theme.*

The issue of forgiveness looms large in Christian thought. It is a topic on which Anselm has some interesting and seemingly harsh things to say. A key premise in his famous proof for the Incarnation is that God cannot simply forgive the wrong done to Him by mankind at the Fall. In the present paper I would like to argue that the apparent harshness of this claim is only apparent. God cannot simply forgive sin because it is not in the best interests of mankind for Him to do so. I hope to make this case by noting that, in Anselm's system, divine forgiveness must be understood in light of the importance he places on human freedom and the great significance he ascribes to the virtue of patience. It is really the issue of patience that will occupy most of the paper. It is pretty common, and feels quite natural, to become impatient with God. He is omnipotent, after all. Why doesn't He just fix everything by divine fiat? I will look at the question of divine forgiveness in *Cur Deus Homo* and then the discussion of the first sin in *De casu diaboli*, to explain Anselm's view on why God, at least for the time being, prefers to work through a drawn out process rather than to effect change "in the twinkling of an eye". And, if that's the way God chooses to work, it behooves us to be patient. This is not a new theme in Christian thought, but perhaps, looking at Anselm, we can bring some new insight to an old theme.

The question which motivates Anselm's attempt to prove the Incarnation in *Cur Deus Homo* is this: Given that God is omnipotent, it seems demeaning to Him to say that He would choose to undergo all that nasty biological mess of being born of a woman, experiencing hunger and thirst, suffering, and dying. Why not just simply forgive mankind? Here "simply forgive" means to forgive without receiving any sort of payment or recompense from the offender. The term "forgiveness" might be used for the divine healing of the breach between God and man, with or without some recompense, but the issue is not whether or not God can forgive us, but whether or not He can forgive us without some action on the part of humanity. Anselm does not couch it this way, but the question could be seen as at least partially arising out of a sort of impatience. Why should an omnipotent God, Who could presumably save us at a word, go through a process, especially such a messy process, in order to allow mankind to repay its debt to God? Why does God not just decide to forgive us and have done with it?

Anselm argues that, being the best, God must do the best, and simple forgiveness is not the best. Anselm's interlocutor, Boso, is understandably puzzled. Aren't we human beings supposed to forgive those who wrong us without insisting on repayment? (*Cur Deus Homo*, hereafter CDH, 1.12). Is it wrong for God to do what He expects us to do? In this case, yes, Anselm answers. There are two reasons why God cannot simply forgive mankind. First, simple forgiveness would mean God's treating the sinful in exactly the same way He would treat the sinless. But this is injustice. God is the absolute source and standard of all justice and there cannot be, in His actions, the least suspicion of injustice. Were God, *per impossibile*, to act unjustly, the moral fabric of the universe would be destroyed (CDH 1. 13).

Secondly, and this is the reason I want to focus on, it is really better for mankind that, as a human family, we be allowed to pay the debt owed to God. Of course, the debt is more than mere humanity can pay, hence the necessity for the God-man. But why should it be better for us to pay the debt? (Some may find the "debt" language off-putting. Note, first that it is thoroughly biblical. The New Testament is full of "payment" talk regarding the effect of Christ's sacrifice. Also, Anselm's point could easily be recast in terms of estrangement. We have turned our backs on God. The question then would be, why does God not just turn us around and draw us into His presence? Why is it best that we human beings should initiate the "turning" from our side?)

Anselm's argument is this: Mankind was made for happiness. Our sinfulness has rendered us incapable of that happiness. We are unjust, where justice consists in consciously willing in accord with the will of God. We are out of alignment with God and hence with the whole order of things. Anselm gives the analogy of the pearl which has fallen in the mud. It should not be put back in the treasure box in its filthy state (CDH 1. 19). Similarly sinful men, steeped in their fallen condition, should not be just assigned a place among the heavenly host. It would not be the best for us. Assuming that in some way we recognize our estrangement from God and the justice of our trying to make amends, we will either want to pay the debt, or we will not. (Anselm does not question the justice of the expectation that an offender ought to make payment for an offense or—to adopt the estrangement language—ought to mend the breach which the offender created by failing to order himself properly to another, in this case, to God.) If someone does not want to pay the debt then he is unjust and cannot and should not be happy. If someone wants to pay the debt, but is unable to, then, although he may be just, he still cannot be happy. Thus it is better for us that we be allowed to pay the debt (CDH 1. 24). Anselm has it that, as a literal, biological member of our one human family, Christ can pay the debt for mankind. That's why all the biological mess was necessary. But there is one more chapter to the story: The rest of us can participate in that payment by freely committing ourselves to faith in Christ's saving work.

There are a number of underlying assumptions at work here, including the two that I wish to emphasize: We are free, and we should be patient. Anselm, I argue, ascribes to the created agent, including the human being, a very elevated metaphysical status. He holds that God has constructed the created will so that it can choose from itself and hence have a really robust form of freedom. It can choose *a se* in imitation of the absolute independence of God. In this way the

created agent forms his own character for good or ill. Through his freedom he is, albeit in a very limited and reflective way, a co-creator of his very self. In *Cur Deus Homo*, in speaking of the good angels who are free, although now they are unable to sin, he says, “Those angels are not to be praised on account of their justice due to the fact that they were able to sin, but rather due to the fact that, in a way, they have it from themselves that they are unable to sin; in this they are, to some extent, similar to God, who has whatever He has from Himself”(CDH 2.10, translation is my own from F.S. Schmitt’s edition of Anselm’s *Opera Omnia*). This freedom is a great gift from God.¹

If mankind is simply forgiven then the value of human agency is ignored. In that case humanity would play no constructive role at all in its recovery. Moreover, while it is necessary, it is not sufficient for the salvation of each of us that one member of the human family, Christ, should pay the debt through His death. It is important that each of us contribute something. We must choose freely—with the help of necessary and unmerited grace, of course!—to embrace that sacrifice through faith. In *Cur Deus Homo*, Anselm gives the analogy of a rebellious city where the only innocent citizen, one favored by the offended king, agrees to make payment for the city. The other citizens must assemble in order to show that they wish to receive pardon through the sacrifice of the innocent citizen, and those who cannot be present can receive pardon if they acknowledge the sacrifice as payment for them as well (CDH 2.16). In *De Concordia*, Anselm makes it very clear that our faith in Christ’s saving work is initiated in us by grace, but sustained by our own free will (3.4 and 3.10). Thus it is better for us, in that it recognizes our elevated metaphysical status as free agents reflecting divine independence, that we go through this process of our salvation. Through Christ the human family finds a way to pay the debt we owe, and each of us, exercising our freedom, joins in the task of reconstructing our fallen selves. It is good that we are free, and God’s allowing us to act to repay our debt is much better for us than His simply forgiving us.

How, exactly, this might translate into forgiveness on a human plane is a difficult question. We are not, after all, the standards of value, and no danger is posed to the moral fabric if we err on the side of mercy. But even between human beings it may be that allowing for or encouraging some sort of recompense for wrongdoing demonstrates more appreciation for the dignity of the wrongdoer. It shows respect for the freedom and self-responsibility of the agent if, when the agent has wronged another person or the community, he is given the opportunity to work to repair the damage. On an Anselmian understanding this work of reparation would benefit the offender as much as the victim in that it would allow him to rebuild his own character. And, on Anselm’s analysis, our ability to build our own character is how we imitate God and is what freedom is *for*.²

¹ See my *Anselm on Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) pp.56–60.

² On the connection between character creation and forgiveness see my “Anselm on the Character Creation Theory of Punishment” in Volume 4 (2007) of this journal, and (in a more contemporary idiom) “Retribution, Forgiveness, and the Character Creation Theory of Punishment”, *Social Theory and Practice* 33 (2007) pp.75–103.

Because he sees our exercise of freedom as of such paramount importance, the virtue of patience plays a central role in Anselm's thinking. It is hardly surprising to hold that patience is a virtue, but what is at first somewhat surprising is the key role Anselm assigns to it. Note that the practical consequence of the argument of *Cur Deus Homo* is that we should not grow impatient with God over not simply forgiving us. The strange and complex process of the Incarnation serves to benefit us in the long run. We should not chafe at not being simply forgiven, but should busy ourselves in freely participating in the process by which we are saved.

The importance of patience with the divinely established process is expressed even more clearly when Anselm looks at the perennially difficult question of how sin entered the world to begin with. Both Augustine and Anselm deal extensively with the question, and a comparison of the two underscores Anselm's focus on the value of patience. Both Anselm and Augustine discuss the question most fully in terms of the fall of the bad angels, though both make it clear that the mechanics of freedom are essentially the same for the human as for the angelic agent.³

The problem is this: We are told that God made the first angels and men good and knowledgeable. They loved God and acknowledged His sovereignty. This had to be the case, since we cannot suppose that God would have made a naturally bad or failed agent. But then why in the world would such a being choose to sin? Standardly it is said that the first sin is one of pride. The created agent chooses against the will of God and so places his own will above God's. Certainly that is pride. But, at least in the Augustinian or Anselmian view, that doesn't fully express the motivation. What could make the agent, created good, freely choose to place his own will ahead of God's and sin. Famously, Augustine said, "Nothing". But this is not to say that the choices of the bad angels were unmotivated. Augustine and Anselm agree that you do not choose anything unless you find it desirable. Moreover it is God who causes all that has being. God causes every agent, every desire, and every possible object of desire. (I'm using "object" here in its broad sense which could include such things as events and feelings.) According to Augustine the original angels were made with desires for various goods, among them desires for lesser goods. These lower things could not be intrinsically evil, of course, since evil is totally parasitic on the good. There is no evil per se. They were just inferior to the higher goods the angels were supposed to cling to. With extra help from God, the good angels could stay focused on the higher goods. But God chose not to aid the other angels and they inevitably fell, drawn by desire for these lesser goods. For Augustine, then, there are at least three sorts of "nothing" at work in explaining the first sins. It is the fact of being created, being made from nothing, that makes the agent capable of sin. But that is not a sufficient explanation, since the good angels are equally *ex nihilo*. It is the "nothing" which is the absence of God's help that makes the choice for the lower good inevitable. And it is the fact that the desired object has less of the good in it that makes the choice to pursue it wrong. It is lower on the scale of being, and hence closer to "nothing." For

³ Anselm makes a point of the fact that "free will" must be used univocally across human, angelic, and divine freedom (*De libertati arbitrii* 1), and treats the workings of angelic free choice in *De casu diaboli* and of human free choice in *De concordia* as if they are the same.

Augustine, nothing has a sort of power, the power of a vacuum. The agent is drawn to the lower, and God's failure to help means inevitable sin.⁴

Anselm offers a very different analysis of the first sin, one in which impatience plays a crucial role.⁵ Certainly Anselm agrees with Augustine that the angel could not sin if it were not a created thing. So the "nothing" of being made rather than being God has explanatory power in answering the question of why the agent-created good would choose to sin. However, for Anselm, the "nothing" involved in sin does not serve to help explain the choice. This "nothing" comes into being, so to speak, after the choice. The nothing of sin is the injustice, the lack or absence of justice where justice ought to be, when the agent-created good has freely thrown justice away. For Anselm, it is not an attraction to lesser and lower goods that motivates the first sin. And this marks a significant and interesting departure from Augustine's view.⁶ Anselm will not have it that God has created in the original agent a desire for something inappropriate. But we do not choose without desiring some object. What motivates Satan's sin?

Anselm wisely does not try to delve into angelic psychology. He just notes that, whatever it was that Satan chose in disobedience to God, it was something which was good in itself and which would have made him happy. In fact it was something quite appropriate for him to will. So the problem is not that the devil is drawn to some lesser or lower object. Rather He is drawn towards some good which He was supposed to have eventually, but which He was supposed to "grow towards." It is the "wrong" good, not because there is something intrinsically inappropriate about it, but only because it is the wrong time for the angel to have it. The angels who held fast to obedience to God do desire this same good, but, recognizing that it is not God's will that they should have it at first, they do not pursue it. Ultimately they do receive it and achieve a condition in which there is just nothing left for them to want. They cannot sin now because they have all they can possibly desire, and yet they are free because it is through their own choice that they have arrived at their present condition. So the good and the bad angels are created desiring the same thing—whatever that could possibly be. The difference between them is that the good angels are patient. They choose not to pursue the good which they know God does not will for them to have yet. In so doing they cling to justice when they could throw it away, and hence they help in their own creation. They freely engage in the process of "growing towards" the good which they are to enjoy eventually (*De casu diaboli* 6). Thus Satan's sin is one of impatience, as well as pride. And, as in *Cur Deus Homo*, the impatience has to do with wanting to circumvent a divinely established process, where our participation in the process is for our own benefit. The process allows the created agent to make choices and so contribute to its own creation.

It seems to me that focusing on Anselm's insight that it is good for us to be patient and to participate in a divinely ordered process is very enlightening when it comes to making sense of

⁴ See *Anselm on Freedom* pp.46–52.

⁵ I thank my student Elizabeth Nelson for making the suggestion that the first sin might well be considered one of impatience, a suggestion which I subsequently found to be born out in Anselm's work.

⁶ *Anselm on Freedom* p.95.

the Christian world view. We have already looked at how this point contributes to an understanding of Anselm's "proof" of the Incarnation. It also offers an interesting perspective on Christ's activities during His ministry. In looking at Christ's work, an impatient question might arise analogous to the one in *Cur Deus Homo* about why God does not simply forgive us, but rather goes through the process of Incarnation. As fully God, Christ is in some way omnipotent. (This, at least, is Anselm's view and presumably the position of all who adhere to the traditional Christology expressed by the Council of Chalcedon.) But if that is the case, why does He work His miracles through the odd, complex, and sometimes laborious processes that He does? If it is His goal that the lame shall walk and the blind shall see, why not just go "Presto!" and all the earth's lame now walk and the blind now see? That is not the methodology He adopts. Instead, He almost always waits for some input or participation from those He came to serve. He waits for those who need to be cured to ask for His help, or for their friends and relations to do so. (Occasionally He casts out a demon without being asked—in fact, the demons clearly would prefer that He mind His own business—but one could hardly expect a possessed person to contribute freely to the situation.) Often the healing process is initiated when someone in need of a cure touches Him. He does not tell the hungry crowds to just "feel full"; He waits until the disciples bring him loaves and fishes, which He then distributes. His mother has to pester Him and the water has to be brought to Him before He changes it into wine. And his disciples have to wake Him up before He quells the raging wind and quiets the seas.⁷

In the vast majority of the miracles in the New Testament, there is interaction between Christ and the others concerned, such that the free contributions of the others seem to be a necessary, or at least a very important, part of the process. The case of the man born blind (John 9) is a good example. Presumably Christ could just say, "See!", and the man would see. But He doesn't do things that way. He makes a paste out of mud, daubs it on the man's eyes, and then tells the man to go and wash in the Pool of Siloam. The man goes and washes and can see (which proves to be something of a mixed blessing in his case, given the grilling he gets from the authorities). But what if the man born blind had been a bit more cynical and impatient? What if he had assumed that someone who *could* cure congenital blindness would do so immediately with a word, such that someone *claiming* to cure blindness with mud and a bath must be a charlatan? Suppose he had decided not to go wash? We don't know what would have happened. The point is that Christ chooses the more roundabout method which involves responsive action on the part of the man born blind.

Christ does not do many mighty works in His own country because of the unbelief of His countrymen. I have seen this example used as a proof text for the kenotic analysis of the Incarnation. On that view, Christ gives up his divine powers to become man, and so the text would be read to say that in His weakness, He cannot work against the unbelief of his countrymen. But on the Anselmian view, the problem would not be that Christ is weak. The

⁷ I thank my student Thomas Flanagan for his canvas of the New Testament miracles with an eye to the free participation of the people involved.

issue is rather that God, Incarnate or otherwise, prefers to wait for our participation in His work. If we do not participate, the work does not get done.

All of this ties in very nicely with Anselm's points about impatience in *De casu diaboli* and *Cur deus homo*: The first sin consisted in being unwilling to wait to earn an entirely appropriate good which God wanted to give, but only when the created agent had grown enough to receive it. God cannot simply forgive mankind, since it is better for us that we—both as members of the human family and as individuals—be allowed to participate in the payment of our debt.

The moral, I suppose, is that we ought to be patient; patient with God and patient with one another. Nothing new about that. But perhaps remembering Anselm's value for patience will be helpful in those times of extreme frustration when we find our desires to fix the lives of our adult friends and loved ones thwarted. We see very clearly what they need to do, but find we cannot *make* them do it. However much we can help, we cannot choose and act in their place. In situations like this patience can be very difficult. But it may be comforting to remember that, at least if Anselm has it right, even God—because He finds it the best way to go about things—chooses to wait patiently on the actions of others.