

Anslem on Free Will and the (Possibly Fortunate) Fall

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*Anslem of Canterbury is the first Christian philosopher to offer a systematic, libertarian analysis of human freedom, including open options and self-causation. Freedom is valuable for the creature since it enables him to share in the aseity of God. There is a text in *Cur Deus Homo* which would seem to undermine this claim. Here Anslem says that, had Adam and Eve never sinned, their progeny would have been “confirmed in justice” so that they could never sin. But this seems to deny real freedom to the children of unfallen parents. I offer possible ways to deal with this text.*

Anslem of Canterbury, I believe, defends a very robust, libertarian concept of free will. I argue that he is the first Christian philosopher to propose a careful analysis of libertarian freedom, and perhaps the first person on the planet to do so.¹ There is, however, a troublesome text in the *Cur Deus Homo*, which apparently conflicts with my reading of Anslem. Here I would like, first, to offer a quick overview of my understanding of Anslem’s doctrine of free will. Then I will look at the offending text and see why it poses a problem for my interpretation. And then I will propose possible ways of dealing with it. And so to an overview.

I argue that Anslem emphasizes both of the criteria associated with libertarian freedom, open options and self-causation. However, it is self-causation, the view that a choice ultimately originates with the choosing agent, that is primary. For God, open options are not requisite for freedom, since God exists entirely a se, and so everything about Him is “from Himself”. Hence Anslem’s definition of free will, intended to cover all free agents, both created and divine, does not include open options. “Free will” by definition, as he explains in *De libertate arbitrii* 3, is “the power to keep justice.” And “justice” he had already defined in *De Veritate* 12 as “rightness of will kept for its own sake.” Rightness of will consists in willing as one ought to will, meaning willing in accord with the will of God. God, of course, must will as He would will, but this “must” is no sort of limitation. Rather it is the expression of His independent and absolute power as the ultimate standard and source for all that is, and thus for all that is good. Open options have no part to play in divine freedom.

The situation is different with rational, created agents. A lower animal, like a horse or a dog, can have rightness of will when it wills what it ought. But it cannot have the power to keep rightness of will for its own sake. Only a rational being who can step back from its immediate desires and choose to align its desires with the will of God can be said to have free will.² And here is where open options play a role. It is important that the agent (from now on let “agent” stand for “rational, created agent”) choose “from himself.” But everything that he has and is comes from his Creator. The will as a faculty and the desires which it pursues are all from God.

¹ See my *Anslem on Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

² *De Veritate* 12; *De libertate arbitrii* 13.

If God had provided the agent with only one sort of desire, such that the will must inevitably pursue it, the agent could not really be free in the sense required for praise and blame. Thus, as Anselm explains in *De casu diaboli*, God has provided the agent with two sorts of desires which can come into conflict.

The agent always desires benefits—roughly whatever he thinks will make him happy. It is the desire for benefit which provides the basic motive for any choice. But he can also desire justice. I take the desire for justice to be what, in the contemporary parlance, is called a second-order desire, that is, it is a desire about the more basic desires for benefits. It is a desire that the desire for benefits should not be disordered and excessive, but rather should accord with God's will.³ The conflict arises when the agent desires some excessive benefit in opposition to justice. That is, the agent desires some benefit which falls outside the set of benefits it is proper for him to desire, and he also desires that he should limit his desires to what is proper. It is this conflict which allows for aseity in the choice of the created agent. Though the conflicting desires are from God, it is up to the agent alone which desire ultimately triumphs. Thus, because the agent truly has the power to throw justice away, he can be said to have the power to keep it. And so he is free.⁴

It should be noted that the agent is free, even if he *no longer* faces open options, so long as there was a freely made choice in his past, and so it is from himself that he is in his present condition. The good angels are said to be free, although they no longer have the option to sin, but it is through their original choice to hold fast to the good, and hence it is *from themselves* that they are in this situation, and so they are free.⁵

Anselm goes so far as to say that in holding fast to justice, when he could have abandoned it, the agent can be said—albeit in a severely qualified way—to give justice to himself.⁶ Freedom, then, is hugely important. It is what enables the agent to be a genuine imago dei. The horse and the dog can will rightly, and be very good sorts of things, but they do not touch the agent on the metaphysical scale of being, because the agent has been given a tremendous gift. Not only does it possess a share, however dimly reflected, of divine reason, but it also contains a spark of the divine independence.

That, at any rate, is how I read Anselm on freedom. There is, however, this offending text. In *Cur Deus Homo*, written after *De Veritate*, *De libertate arbitrii*, and *De casu diaboli*, in Book I, Chapter 18, Anselm asks whether there are to be more holy human beings than there were bad angels. The answer is indisputably “Yes!” but that is not what's at issue here. He is talking about what the human condition would have been had Adam and Eve not sinned. He writes that, “It seems that if they had triumphed through that justice in which they lived (*erant*),

³ See my “Anselm on Eudaemonism and the hierarchical structure of moral choice,” *Religious Studies* 41 (2005) pp. 249–268, also *Anselm on Freedom* pp. 66–72.

⁴ Chapter 4 of *Anselm on Freedom*.

⁵ *De casu diaboli* 25.

⁶ *Cur Deus Homo* 2.10.

so that although they were tempted they had not sinned, then they, with all their progeny, would have been confirmed so that they would no longer be able to sin.” (...; *in illa tamen iustitia in qua erant videtur quia, si vicissent, ut tentati non peccarent, ita confirmarentur cum omni propagine sua, ut ultra peccare non possent*;... S II p.81, ll.16–19.)⁷

The worry here is not that Adam and Eve would no longer have been able to sin if they had resisted temptation. I noted above that Anselm’s position is that what is required for robust freedom is open options at some point in one’s history as an agent. He explains in *De casu diaboli* 25 that the good angels are free, although now they do not confront open options, because their reward for their original choice to resist temptation is to possess all the benefits they can want. Thus they can never again suffer a conflict between a desire for justice and a desire for some inappropriate benefit, but the confirmation in justice is the product of the angels’ earlier choice. There is debate among libertarians in the contemporary free will literature over whether or not free will of the sort that could ground moral responsibility requires that every choice allow open options. But some, like Robert Kane, do argue the Anselmian line that if one engages in self-forming choices and actions, where one did face open, morally significant options, at some point in one’s past career, then, even if one reaches a stage at which one’s character necessitates one’s choices, if the character itself is the product of those self-forming choices, then the later choices should too be considered free.⁸ This strikes me as extremely plausible.

The problem is with Adam and Eve’s progeny. They are confirmed in justice so that they cannot sin. On my analysis of Anselm’s theory of free will this is very problematic. If the power to *keep* justice requires the power to throw it away, and the children of Adam and Eve do not have that power to throw away justice, it seems they are not free in the way that their parents were. Now, at first glance, one might wonder why this concept is especially troubling given that Anselm certainly accepts the orthodox teaching on original sin, which seems to deny any real choice to Adam and Eve’s descendents. The very next sentence argues for the view that the progeny would have been confirmed in the inability to sin, had Adam and Eve not fallen, by pointing out that, because of Adam and Eve’s fall, their progeny are confirmed in the inability to choose rightly through their own power. And, Anselm goes on, “Who would dare to say that injustice is stronger with regard to binding man in servitude at his consent to the first suggestion, than justice would be at confirming him in his freedom if he had held fast to it at that first temptation.” (*Quis enim audeat dicere plus valere iniustitiam ad alligandum in servitute hominem in prima suasionem sibi consentientem, quam valeret iustitia ad confirmandum eum in libertate sibi in eadem prima tentatione adhaerentem?* S II p.81, ll. 20–22.)

Might one not say that, in accepting the doctrine of original sin, Anselm has lost interest, as far as fallen man goes, in the sort of robust, libertarian freedom that I ascribe to him, in which open options enable a sort of self-causation? And it is certainly true that Anselm holds that fallen

⁷ Latin text is taken from the Schmitt edition of Anselm’s *Opera Omnia*, cited to volume, page, and lines.

⁸ Robert Kane, *The Significance of Free Will* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) pp. 77–78.

man, left to himself, is unable to choose rightly, and so does not have open options. Anselm says that fallen man is free in what seems to me a rather truncated sense. While he has the faculty of the will by which to keep justice, he no longer has the desire for justice, and hence inevitably desires benefits in an excessive and disorderly way.⁹ Were this all to the story, it would be a pretty dismal story indeed, and one in which the “freedom” that Anselm posits no longer seems to allow for the sort of self-causation that is characteristic of the *imago dei*.

But, of course, this is not the end of the story. God offers grace to fallen man. In his book harmonizing grace and free will, Book 3 of *De concordia*, a work written after *Cur Deus Homo*, he explains that saving grace just is the restoration of the desire for justice. Anselm is very insistent—and here he departs radically from Augustine—that free will and grace cooperate. And the cooperation takes the form of the agent being able to reject justice. Thus, if it should cling to justice, when it could throw it away, it does so on its own.¹⁰ It is the same argument as in the earlier works where the importance of open options and self-causation is emphasized. And this freedom does seem to play a key role in *Cur Deus Homo*. In Book 2, Chapter 16, Anselm explains that Christ’s sacrifice is not enough to save the individual. The individual has to choose to commit himself to faith in the sacrifice as his salvation.

Now it is true that Anselm holds that God does not offer grace to everyone. He says it in one quick sentence in *De concordia* 3.3 (S II p.266, ll.24–25), with no attempt to explain or justify the claim. It may be that he felt he had to follow Augustine on this. For Augustine, as a compatibilist, if God had offered grace to everyone, everyone would be saved. But we know that hell is not empty based on Scripture and tradition, and so we know that God did not offer grace to everyone. Augustine has to hold that God just does not want everyone to be saved.¹¹ Anselm’s libertarianism would have allowed him to say that God does indeed offer grace to everyone, without having to insist that everyone goes to heaven, since the agent is free to reject it. This proposal would not do any structural damage at all to his analysis of created freedom and it would have accorded better with his overall analysis of freedom, it seems to me. But in any case, those who do receive grace have the open options restored and hence are again in the position of generating self-caused choices.

But what of the progeny of Adam and Eve had they never fallen? The text in question in *Cur Deus Homo* says that had the first parents chosen to remain just, then their offspring would have been unable to sin. Anselm could call them free because they would have the faculty to hold fast to rightness of will, and they would have the rightness in that they would have the desire to do as God wills without desiring any conflicting benefits. But, if my interpretation of Anselm’s overall analysis of freedom is correct, they would not have open options or self-causation. Not having any option to abandon justice, they would not really have had the power to keep it. And so their freedom would not be of the more robust sort that Anselm ascribes to the

⁹ *De concordia* 3.13.

¹⁰ *De concordia* 3.14.

¹¹ See my, “Augustine’s Compatibilism,” *Religious Studies* 40:4 (2004) 415–435, also Chapter 2 of *Anselm on Freedom*.

angels originally and to Adam and Eve before the fall. And if that sort of freedom is a really good thing, since it is what grounds ascriptions of moral responsibility, as Anselm seems to hold, then the children of the unfallen first parents would be in a metaphysically worse condition than their parents or indeed than Adam and Eve's actual progeny who can receive grace and be restored to a position where they enjoy a robust freedom and can, albeit in a radically limited way, give justice to themselves. This seems a strange conclusion.

What are we to make of this passage in *Cur Deus Homo*? A first possible approach would be to conclude that it shows that my interpretation of Anselm, where I see him insisting that created freedom requires open options, is just wrong from the ground up. Many scholars have read Anselm as essentially a compatibilist, since his definition of freedom does not entail open options, and this proposal would vindicate that alternate interpretation. I take this to be the least desirable approach. The textual evidence that Anselm judges open options to be necessary for created freedom is overwhelming. Take just one example. In *De casu diaboli* Chapter 13 Anselm explains that if God had given an angel only the desire for unlimited benefits he would not choose rightly, but he would not be morally responsible for his choices since he would will inevitably in accordance with the one sort of motivation he had received. In the next chapter Anselm argues that if God had given the angel only the desire to will rightly, he would choose rightly—like the hypothetical progeny of unfallen parents discussed in *Cur Deus Homo*, he would be unable to sin. But Anselm is very clear in *De casu diaboli* that such a creature would not be morally responsible for exactly the same reason that an angel given only the desire for benefits is not responsible. Anselm writes, “Thus, if he should will what is appropriate, his will would not thereby be just, because he had received it in such a way that he could not will otherwise.” (...: *ita hic si vellet convenientia non idcirco esset iusta voluntas, quoniam sic hoc accepisset ut non posset aliter velle*. S I p.258 ll.15–16.).

A second approach might be to suppose that Anselm had changed his mind after writing the earlier dialogues on free will, including *De casu diaboli*. This is probably not a very fruitful proposal. In harmonizing grace and free will in the later *De concordia*, written after *Cur Deus Homo*, the open options seem to play just the role that they played in the earlier works (see 3.12). And in that later work he refers back to earlier work, including *De libertate arbitrii* (3.4), so it seems unlikely he changed his mind. Moreover, *Cur Deus Homo* itself contains one of the best proof texts for the claim that created agents require open options in order to give justice to themselves. In Chapter 10, the question is Christ's freedom given that he is unable to will to sin. Anselm gives the answer mentioned earlier in the paper. The real issue is aseity, and since God is absolutely independent, He always chooses from Himself. For our purposes, what is important is the way the student, Boso, frames the question and how Anselm responds. “Didn’t we agree,” says Boso, “that God gives the angels and man the ability to sin in order that, when they have the power to desert justice, and yet they hold fast to it through free will, they should merit praise and favor, which would not be owed to them if they had been just out of some necessity.” (*Solemus namque dicere deum idcirco fecisse angelum et hominem tales qui peccare possent, quatenus, cum possent deserere iustitiam et ex libertate servarent arbitrii, gratiam et laudem mererentur, quae illis, si ex necessitate iuste essent, non deberentur*. S II p.107 ll.13–17.)

Anselm responds that Boso doesn't have it quite right. "The 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 [now] unable to sin; in this they are, to some extent, similar to God, who has whatever He has from Himself." (*Angeli non sunt laudendi de iustitia sua, quia peccare potuerunt, sed quia per hoc quodam modo a se habent quod peccare nequeunt; in quo aliquatenus similes sunt deo, qui a se habet quidquid habet.* S II p.107 ll.27–29.) So Anselm does not dispute the claim that the angels were, in fact, given the ability to sin or not to sin. This ability enables them to originate the choice to cling to the good, which results in their *having it from themselves* that they can no longer sin, and thus they are praiseworthy. This text from *Cur Deus Homo* serves as a solid proof text for my interpretation of Anselm on freedom, and so the thesis that perhaps he had simply changed his mind does not seem viable.

This text seems to conflict with the difficult text about the hypothetical progeny, and that suggests another approach. Perhaps the problematic text should be treated as an anomaly—an incautious remark on Anselm's part that simply does not fit with the rest of his systematic analysis of free will. Anselm is so careful and so analytic that I do not make the suggestion lightly. And I must note that Anselm says something similar to the worrisome text I've cited later in *Cur Deus Homo*, "...Adam and all of his family would have stood firm through him without the support of any other creature if he had not sinned:..." (*...Adam et totum genus eius per se stetisset sine sustentatione alterius creaturae, si non peccasset:...* S II p.103 ll.7–8). On the other hand, in *De conceptu virginali et de originali peccato*, Anselm repeatedly says that if Adam and Eve had not sinned, their children would have been born in the same condition in which Adam and Eve were created. In Chapter 2 he writes, "Therefore if Adam and Eve had retained their original justice, those who were born from them would have been originally just like them." (*Ergo Adam et Eva si iustitiam servassent originalem: qui de illis nascerentur, originaliter sicut illi iusti essent.* S II p.141 ll.8–9.) "...if [human nature] had not sinned, it would have been propagated just as it was made by God:..." (*...si non peccasset, qualis facta est a deo talis propagaretur:...* S II p.141 ll.19–20.) And in Chapter 10 he says, "If sin had not come first, each man would have been the same as Adam, both just and rational." (*Omnis igitur homo si peccatum non praecessisset, simul esset sicut Adam et iustus et rationalis.* S II p.152 ll.17–18.) But we know, to our sorrow, that Adam and Eve were able to sin. So the texts where Anselm says that the hypothetical progeny of unfallen parents would have been in the same condition in which the parents were originally made seems to conflict with the text which says they would have been unable to sin. So the approach that suggests that the difficult text is an anomaly can be supported. I'd like to think this is the correct position.

There is, though, another possible interpretation. This one strikes me as radical, and not very appealing philosophically, but it can be supported from the text. There is a way of reconciling my interpretation of Anselm's view of freedom with the claim that Anselm really means to say that the hypothetical progeny would have been unable to sin. *Prima facie* that seems impossible. On my interpretation, Anselm holds that in order to have the sort of robust and valuable freedom which could merit praise and blame, the created agent must have open options. It seems to follow that if the hypothetical progeny were to be unable to sin, they could not have

the important sort of freedom. I think it *does* follow. Anselm, however, may disagree, based on his understanding of the relationship of Adam to his children.

A little background is necessary here. The point of *Cur Deus Homo* is to prove that God had to become incarnate. A Christmas card I once received summed it up nicely: “He came to pay a debt He did not owe, because we owed a debt we could not pay.” But a standard puzzle asks how it is that Christ could pay the debt for the rest of humanity. David Brown in his paper “Anselm on Atonement” in the *Cambridge Companion to Anselm*¹² tentatively proposes that perhaps this is possible, in Anselm’s view, because humanity is united as a sort of corporate entity of which Christ may be a member, or perhaps, noting that Anselm is a realist on universals, we share a sort of species unity with Christ. I have argued elsewhere that neither of these suggestions will bear the weight of scrutiny. The text of *Cur Deus Homo* makes it clear that the unity that we share with Christ, such that He is able to pay the debt for us all, consists in membership in the same *biological family*.¹³ Once one becomes alert to the theme of biological family in *Cur Deus Homo* and *De conceptu*, it is striking how frequent and important a theme it is. In *Cur Deus Homo* 2.8, Anselm notes that God could have become incarnate by joining His divine nature to a human nature in a new human being created entirely *ex nihilo*, as Adam was made originally. But, “...it is necessary that the one making satisfaction should be the same one who sinned or a member of his family....no one who is not either they or born from them, ought to make satisfaction for the sin of mankind.” (...*ita necesse est, ut satisfaciens idem sit qui peccator aut eiusdem generis....nullus nisi vel ipsi vel qui de illis nascitur, pro peccato hominum satisfacere debet*. S II p.103 ll.1–5.) The reason that there can be no God-angel to save the fallen angels is precisely that the angels are not united by the relationship of biological family (2.21).¹⁴

The whole argument of *Cur Deus Homo* depends upon family unity, and the theme is, if anything, more striking in *De conceptu*. In Chapter 17, Anselm notes that God could certainly have made new, sinless human beings after the sin of our first parents, but He chose not to because Adam’s procreative nature was so important and valuable that it was better to allow humanity to come from Adam, even at the terrible price of ubiquitous original sin. He holds that all of humanity is literally, physically in Adam. In discussing original sin he writes, “...it cannot be denied that infants were in Adam when he sinned. But they were in him causally or materially, as in a seed, while in themselves they exist personally; since in him they were that seed, while in themselves they are individual, distinct persons. In him they were not different from him, but in themselves they are different from him...”. (...*negari nequit infantes in Adam fuisse cum peccavit. Sed in illo causaliter sive materialiter velut in semine fuerunt, in se ipsis personaliter sunt; quia in illo fuerunt ipsum semen, in se sunt singuli diversae personae. In illo*

¹² *Cambridge Companion to Anselm* edited by Brian Davies and Brian Leftow (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) pp. 279–302.

¹³ “Christ our brother: The importance of family in Anselm’s thought,” in *Saint Anselm: A Legacy of 900 Years* ed. Ralph McInerney and John Fortin O.S.B. (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, forthcoming).

¹⁴ Stan Tyvoll notes in correspondence that it seems possible that God might pay the debt of sin for each angel on an individual basis through a series of God-angels. Anselm, though, seems to hold that, since a God-angel would only be of the same nature as a given angel, and not of the same *family*, a God-angel could not pay the debt for a fallen angel.

non alii ab illo, in se alii quam ille. S II p.163 ll.2–3.) He devotes the next paragraph to insisting that when he says humanity was really there as a seed, it was *really* there!

Perhaps Anselm's position, then, is that the unity of the human family is such that, had Adam and Eve chosen not to fall, and been confirmed in justice so that they could not sin, then they would have made the choice for all of us. Libertarian freedom with open options leading to the sort of self causation that allows the created agent to have justice from itself is perhaps not necessary for each human individual. If the key member of the family keeps justice when he might throw it away, he has justice from himself, and is praiseworthy even if he can no longer sin, since he is the author of his condition. And perhaps, since we are all "in him," we can share that freedom and praiseworthiness. So just as Christ can pay the debt for sin for all mankind, Adam could have confirmed all mankind in justice.

Now, by and large, I think Anselm's commitment to the reality of family as a unified thing is wholesome and right. The popular modern attitude which sees social reality as essentially divided between the individual and the state, with family as an accidental oddity, seems wrong and perverse. Still, it is possible to have too much togetherness. If it is indeed Anselm's view that Adam's agency could have made the choice for justice for all of us, such that we are born unable ever to sin, that does seem to demote us to a less robust form of agency than our first parents possessed. In fact, the fallen human being to whom God has given saving grace would have more freedom and personal responsibility than the hypothetical progeny of the never-sinning parents. Were that the situation, then one might attribute to Anselm the doctrine that the original fall was fortunate in a way. It *is* the event that, in Anselm's view, necessitates Christ's coming. Anselm, to my knowledge, never suggests that God would have become incarnate even had the first human beings never sinned. And, for a Christian, a world without God Incarnate does seem impoverished. On the other hand, Anselm never says that sin might be necessary to bring about some good. So I am not sure what to make of all this. Perhaps in the final analysis it is best not to worry too much over what might have been. The actual world has troubles enough to keep us busy.