Anselm on Grace and Free Will

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Anselm is the first philosopher to attempt a systematic analysis of libertarian freedom. Regarding grace, he embrace's the position that grace is necessary for salvation and unmerited, while preserving a role for human freedom that is not in the least Pelagian. This paper sketches the problems with Augustine's compatibilism and with Pelagianism, and shows how Anselm reconciles human choice with classical theism, which entails that God is the source of everything that has ontological status. The paper concludes with an argument that, although Anselm holds that God does not offer grace to everyone, he could and should have done so.

I take Anselm to be the first philosopher to attempt a genuinely systematic analysis of a libertarian brand of free will.[1] The problem that confronts him regarding grace is this: there are very good theological reasons to toe the Augustinian line that grace is absolutely necessary to save fallen man and cannot possibly be merited in any way at all. But if it is grace which saves, and if it is not given in response to some free choice on the part of the created agent, then the importance of human freedom seems to be exhausted with the story of the original fall. The task before Anselm is to defend post-lapsarian human freedom without falling into the error of Pelagius. A sketch of the problems with Augustinian compatibilism, and then a quick survey of Pelagianism and Semi-Pelagianism with their attendant difficulties, will show why it is so vital that Anselm reject both sides of the earlier debate and carve out a third way which ascribes all saving power to divine grace, but which retains a small, but decisive, causal role for created freedom.

In his controversy with the Pelagians Augustine spells out his view that God's will is the only ultimate cause at work in the story of the final destiny of the human being. Fallen man is inevitably bound for damnation unless God should step in and save him, either by "drawing" the will through desire or simply by "turning" it from evil to good. Grace is absolutely necessary, it is entirely unmerited, and it is irresistible. Of course Augustine is not saying that one could be saved "against one's will" as if one might persist in choosing evil and be thrust through the Pearly Gates under protest. The elect will turn from their sinful condition because they want to, but they will want to because God determines their wills.

This is a compatibilist view in that Augustine insists that the created agent is morally responsible for his choices even though those choices are determined by God for His own good purposes, and I argue elsewhere that Augustine was always a compatibilist and that he is a compatibilist on pre-lapsarian as well as post-lapsarian freedom. This is problematic in that, while it insists upon responsibility for the created agent, it places the *ultimate* responsibility for all human choices for good and for evil in the hands of God.

[1]This paper is a much shortened version of a book chapter on Anselm on grace from a book currently in progress on Anselm's views on free will. The working title of the book is *Anselm on Freedom for Theists.*

Not only does this raise questions about God's goodness and justice, but there is also the practical problem of human motivation. If all human choices and actions are caused by God for the greatest good, then there is not much point in struggling against one's own baser inclinations or against the evil-doing of others. If one attempts to be good, that is God's work; if one doesn't, that is God's work, too. If evildoers are contained, that is the will of God; if they prosper, *that* is the will of God. We don't need to *try* to conform to God's will because, no matter what we choose, we always and everywhere *do* conform to God's will. The practical concern that such teaching would encourage moral laziness seems a reasonable one.

Given these problems with the Augustinian position, one might suppose that the Pelagian side of the debate had in fact gotten the better of the theological argument. But the difficulties with the views associated with the cluster of so-called Pelagian positions are deep and many. Pelagius himself disagreed with Augustine over the effects of the first sins of Adam and Eve. Pelagius allowed that we cannot be good without the grace of God, but by "grace" he meant the natural endowments of freedom and reason and the subsequent divine gifts, such as the Law and Christ's example, which are within the natural ability of the human being to enjoy. Human nature was not wholly and universally damaged at the Fall and so it does not now need any supernatural, transforming grace.

The later "Semi-Pelagians" (for want of a better term) were less willing to deny the necessity of a special, saving grace, but they could not accept Augustine's analysis. They asked the obvious questions: how could it possibly be just that God save some and not others, if there is absolutely no difference between them? And how can heaven be viewed as any sort of reward, when, of ourselves, we have done nothing to merit it? The Semi-Pelagians proposed, in various ways, that the human agent can initiate the process that will result in God's giving the required grace.

John Cassian, for example, suggested that, in some cases, grace would be given in response to prayer initiated by the fallen agent.[2] Faustus of Riez held that God offers grace to everyone, and then it is up to the human agent to choose on his own to accept or reject the grace. Grace is like a fountain in the middle of the world. If someone refuses to drink, it is his own fault. But the choice to drink, which precedes the reception of the necessary grace, comes from the agent himself.[3]

Some of the Semi-Pelagian opponents of Augustine advanced a sort of proto-Molinism. In the case of infants who die before baptism, God foreknows what they *would have* chosen had they lived. And foreknowing that they would choose ill, He does not organize the world to produce their being baptized, as He does for those He foreknows will or would do good. So, even though the agents may die at birth, somehow the giving of divine grace follows upon their own choices.[4]

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[2] Harden Weaver (1996) pp.71-116.
[3] Ibid. pp.165-180.
[4] Harden Weaver (1996) p.46. Abelard, too, adopts this Molinist solution to the problem of infants who die before baptism. See John Marenbon, *The Philosophy of Peter Abelard* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) p.325.

And therein lies the problem. Even setting the issue of grace aside, the classical theism shared by Augustine and Anselm insists that *all* goods come from God. The created agent cannot, from itself, generate any good, even the good of a good choice. The Pelagian and Semi-Pelagian views entail that the creature can be the originating author of its own good. Furthermore, the Christian understanding is that Christ came into the world to save sinners. What grace *is* is a participating in the saving work of Christ which effects an inner transformation, requisite because of original sin. If there is no original sin, or if we are good enough on our own, before receiving grace, that we can initiate the process of salvation by choosing the good such that God "owes" us the gifts that will get us into heaven, then we do not need Christ. Augustine criticized the Pelagians because he saw that philosophically and theologically Pelagianism undermines the Christian worldview in a fundamental way.

Moreover, while Augustine's compatibilist analysis of grace and free will posed a practical danger in terms of moral laxness, Pelagianism also posed a practical danger, though of a very different sort. In the thought of Pelagius himself, and in that of the later Semi-Pelagians, the insistence on the primacy of human freedom was not an abstract metaphysical point, but rather a consequence of their vision of the goal of a Christian life. Pelagius called upper-class Roman lay folk to a program of personal asceticism which would aim at the perfection of the individual, such that the community of the Church would be an elite, isolated from and vastly superior to the ordinary mass of men.

The Semi-Pelagians were monks from Southern Gaul who feared that Augustine's defense of the primacy of grace rendered their own efforts at self-perfection pointless. This can be viewed in an uncharitable light, as a self-absorbed elitism, which could hardly avoid the dual sins of pride and contempt for others. Augustine consistently opposed any view that reserved heaven for those who had, by especially good behavior, carved out their own privileged status.[5] And his sort of practical egalitarianism is appealing to modern sensibilities, whereas the inwardly-focused elitism of Pelagianism is likely to strike the contemporary person as distasteful. It is a good thing that Anselm, in parting company with Augustine over created freedom, does not adopt Pelagianism in even the most "Semi-" or qualified way.

To see how Anselm reconciles created freedom with grace we need first to look at his understanding of original sin, since, in his view, what grace restores to fallen man is what was lost by the sins of our first parents. The first sins of Adam and Eve consisted in abandoning their original justice by willing some good that they were not then supposed to will. "Justice" being "rightness of will kept for its own sake." What the first people destroyed was more specifically their *affectio* for justice, the *desire* for rightness of will. Why say that it is the *affectio* that is lost? In *De concordia* Anselm makes the distinction between three aspects of will: the will as the instrument of willing, that is the faculty of the soul; the will(s) as the two *affectiones*, the desires for benefit and for justice; and the will as use, the actual choice of the will.[6] If the first sins destroyed the will for justice, "will" must refer to one of these three aspects of willing. Anselm holds that we can discern which it is by pinpointing what the unjust person lacks that the just person possesses. Both the good and the bad

[5] R. A. Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) pp.45-62.
[6] *De concordia* 3.11.

have the will as instrument. Otherwise they would not be able to choose anything at all. So it is not the will as instrument that is lost at the Fall. And it cannot be the use of the will which is in question, since we recognize the distinction between the good and the bad even when they are asleep and so not actively making choices.

But one can have an *affectio* sleeping or waking, since it is a fixed desire of which the agent need not be presently conscious.[7] What Adam and Eve destroyed within themselves was the original God-given desire for justice. And with the desire for justice gone, the will as instrument which remains cannot move towards its' properly ordered objects, and is itself unjust.[8]

Anselm does not stop to explain why a single instance of choosing the wrong good should have so thoroughly killed the desire for justice within the first human beings, but the language he uses suggests that his view is similar to Augustine's. In abandoning the proper ordering of desire the soul is overwhelmed by a crowd of lusts which fill the motivational landscape such that there is no room for the desire for the original rightness. And once the desire was gone it could not be regenerated short of divine intervention. Given Anselm's understanding of what motivates choice, there is no way for an agent who does not *want* justice to choose it, and so the will that has abandoned the desire is powerless to be just.

But why is it that the loss of justice in the first people should have had such dire consequences for their progeny? Earlier discussions of the transmission of original sin, including Augustine's, had tended to treat sin as a sort of quasi-something, a taint radically changing human nature and passed down through carnal lust. Anselm resolutely insists that original sin is simply the loss of the original justice that ought to be there, and so his question is not why and how some positive stain of corruption gets passed along down the generations, but rather why the original justice, which our first parents lost for themselves, is lost to their children as well.

His answer is that God gave Adam and Eve the great gift of a reproductive nature such that not only the existence but also the justice of succeeding generations would depend upon their free will.[9] The danger inherent in the gift is that, if the parent destroys his own justice, he cannot retrieve it on his own, and he does not have it to pass on to his offspring. The child is still human. He is rational and free in that he has the *ability* to preserve justice. What he is missing is the justice itself to preserve (we will unpack this claim below). Being human the child still owes justice to God, but justice can be restored only through grace. What, then, is the role of human freedom?

Setting aside the unhappy topic of Anselm's views on infants who die unbaptized, our concern here is with the created agent who has achieved the age of reason. Anselm accepts the importance and indeed primacy of divine grace. In fact, most of the story of human salvation, as Anselm sees it, lies in the Incarnation, Crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ. But the fact of the Incarnation does not entirely complete the story of man's salvation because human beings must

[7] *De concordia* 3.11. S II p.283 ll.3-13.
[8] *De concordia* 3.13. S II p.287 ll.3-6.
[9] *De conceptu* 11-12.

choose to recognize and embrace Christ's work as the means of their salvation.[10] And that is where free will comes in.

Without the *desire* to associate oneself with God and His work, even if one believed the fact of the Incarnation, mere belief is dead faith. But what was lost to mankind at the first sins is precisely this desire, the *affectio* for justice. Clearly the restoration of this desire cannot be achieved, or even *begun*, by man for himself. We would have to *want* the will for justice in order to make any choice in that direction. But wanting the will for justice is itself the will for justice, and that is precisely what fallen man does not have. Thus even the most qualified Semi-Pelagianism is ruled out. It is divine grace, and grace alone, that restores the lost *affectio* for justice to the will of the fallen human agent. But what of free will?

A first try at reconciling grace and free will might go like this: God gives the necessary grace, but it is up to the human being to maintain it. This is what Anselm ultimately concludes, but we must unpack the claim carefully. At first glance it could lend itself to a Semi-Pelagian interpretation along the lines of Faustus of Riez: grace is the flowing fountain from which we can choose to drink. But then that choice to accept grace, prior to grace, is the originating good which begins the process of salvation. Anselm does not read the interplay between freedom and grace this way.

Anselm insists that fallen man is still free, according to his definition of freedom. Freedom of will is "the power to keep justice." In one sense, we do have the *ability* to keep justice; the problem is that we have lost the justice itself. The will as the instrument of willing has not been destroyed. Nor has the power of reason, which would enable one to recognize some benefits as appropriate and others as inappropriate, if one were interested in investigating the question. What is gone is the *desire* to keep rightness of will for its own sake. As soon as the desire is recovered, the will as instrument moves to follow it, which proves that the intrinsic power was always there, even if the motive required to exercise it was lacking.[11]

The key work of divine grace is to restore justice, the *affectio* for rightness, in the fallen soul. But in order for a created agent to have the power to keep justice he must exercise the ability on his own and not just as the instrument of God's power working through him. God's restoring justice to the fallen creature entails that it now actually desires to keep rightness of will for its own sake. But the created agent is actually *keeping* the justice, only if he is able to throw it away. As Anselm explained in *De casu diaboli,* "to cause" can be said in many ways. We may be said to cause or to

[10] *Cur Deus Homo* 2.16.

[11] *De libertatii arbitrii* 3-4. Jasper Hopkins (1972) holds that Anselm's argument here does not make sense because it depends upon an illegitimate hypostatization of "rightness of will" (pp.155-156). Hopkins writes that, "The presence of uprightness in the will is nothing more or nothing less than the will's continually willing uprightly.… The statement that the will *could* keep uprightness were it available amounts to saying that the will could will uprightly if it could will uprightly (though it cannot)." This misunderstanding on Hopkins' part arises from his failure to see that the "will" in question is the *affectio*, a point which Anselm does not really clarify until *De concordia.*

do something when we could *fail* to cause or do it, but we do not. We *keep* justice by not throwing it away when we could.[12]

To enable the rational creature to keep justice on its own, God has given us two sorts of desire which can come in conflict: the desire for benefits and then the desire for justice which is actually a second-order desire that our desire for benefits be governed by what is appropriate in the eyes of God. This scenario conforms to the fundamental claim of classical theism that absolutely all that is comes from God. No thing, that is nothing with any kind of ontological status, originates with the created agent. In any morally significant choice, for example, in the choice to keep or abandon the justice restored by grace, it is indeed up to the creature that one of its conflicting, God-given desires wins out over the other, but the "winning out" is not some new existent *thing* added to the process of choice. God gives fallen humanity the grace that is necessary for salvation, and we choose, on our own, to keep it or to throw it away. Since all the requirements for salvation come from God, the scope for the causal power of the created free will is small, and yet it is decisive.

Anselm has offered a successful reconciliation of grace and free will, avoiding both the difficulties with Augustine's compatibilism and those with Pelagianism. Created freedom has a genuine role to play, but it is not one which infringes upon divine omnipotence as classical theism understands it, or which renders Christ's work unnecessary, or which allows the agent to judge himself superior to the mass of mankind. The best the fallen human being imbued with grace can say for himself is that perhaps he is managing to refrain from being so stupid and so wicked as to throw away the entirely unmerited divine gift.[13]

But there is another criticism of Augustine's views on grace that we have not yet touched on. It is one to which Anselm, too, is subject. I will argue, though, that the problem is ineradicable in Augustine's theory while it can be solved within Anselm's analysis of free will without structural damage to his system as a whole. Augustine holds that God does not will that all should be saved, and He offers saving grace to some and not to others without any difference in merit on their part. These conclusions follow inevitably from four premises on which Augustine will not negotiate. First, grace is necessary. Second, it is unmerited. Third, it is irresistible. Fourth, as Scripture and the Church teach, not all are saved. Augustine's compatibilism forces him to conclude that if God chose to save everyone, everyone would in fact be saved and without any infringement on their (compatibilist) freedom. If not all are saved, that can only be because God chooses that some should be damned.

In *De concordia* Anselm follows Augustine in the problematic claim that God extends grace to some and not to others. He makes the point in one quick line, citing Scripture, without any attempt

[12] *De casu diaboli* 18.

[13] Later in the history of the debate over grace and free will the questions arose of whether or not one could experience grace in oneself and further recognize with certainty that one is saved. Anselm does not really address these issues. Clearly he holds that receiving grace initially does not, *ipso facto*, entail salvation since grace can be rejected. The Catholic Church today holds that grace, as a supernatural gift, cannot itself be experienced, but that its effects can be, and perhaps this would be Anselm's conclusion had he studied the question. The actual *giving* of the *affectio* for justice would be the grace itself, and perhaps, as an act of God, would fall outside the range of human experience. The *affectio* would be the effect, and would presumably be something one could notice in oneself.

to defend or even explain it.[14] The idea that God does extend grace to everyone was apparently in the air in Anselm's day, since we find it in Abelard, but he does not tell us why he fails to accept or even entertain it.[15] But considered in the ahistorical context of the reasoned attempt to reconcile grace and a robust, libertarian free will, Anselm would have done better to hold that God offers grace to everyone.

This move has the dual advantage of preserving the importance of free will in fallen man in general and of circumventing the problem of divine cold-heartedness and arbitrariness. Anselm argues that after the Fall, even though we do not have the justice to keep, we are free in that we have the *ability* to keep it. But given the importance he ascribes to choosing from oneself, which entails open options, a critic might find it difficult to accept Anselm's analysis and still judge fallen man, without grace, free in the robust sense which grounds moral responsibility. As fallen and without grace, we are inevitably drawn by our unbridled desire for benefit. So how is the unjust choice truly from oneself?

Without denying any of the premises constitutive of his views on freedom and grace, he could have said that all human beings, through God's gratuitous gift, reacquire the *affectio* for justice which entails the open options which Anselm believes are requisite for created choice to be truly *sponte* and *a se.* And then for all those who are not saved, the ultimate causal responsibility would not lie with God for failing to restore justice, nor with Adam for throwing justice away for his children, but with the individual agent. This seems to accord well with his analysis of freedom in *De libertati arbitrii* and *De casu diaboli.* On this view God does not seem cold-hearted or arbitrary. He does indeed will that all should be saved, and He takes steps to achieve that end. As a matter of fact, not all are saved, but that is the fault of the free human will, which is intrinsically a great good.

This view does entail the difficult conclusion that the human agent can thwart the will of God, but Anselm has already faced and consciously accepted that consequence. If God extends grace because He wants an individual to be saved, and if grace can be rejected and the rejection is genuinely up to the fallen will, then God's desire for the salvation of that person is not fullfilled. More fundamentally, Anselm's very definition of sin, which is to will what God wills that you not will, entails that the human agent can act against the will of God. There are only two options, either God controls all created choices or He leaves us free to originate some choices on our own. Anselm chooses the second option. His reconciliation of grace and free will insists upon a genuinely decisive role for created freedom, and the proposal that God offers grace to everyone squares better with his overall views on freedom.

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[14] *De concordia* 3.3. S II p.266 ll.24-25.

[15] The Roman Catholic Church today continues to reject Pelagianism. "No one can merit the initial grace which is at the origin of conversion." *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994) Section 2027. But it eventually accepted the view that God offers grace to all. Papal encyclicals of the mid-1960's express the view that God can and does offer "...to all the possibility of being made partakers, in a way known to God, of the Paschal mystery." *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994) Section 1260; *Gaudium et spes* 22.5; cf. *Lumen gentium* 16; *Ad gentes* 7.