

Anselm on Human Finitude: A Dialogue with Existentialism

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The paper discusses Anselm's account of human finitude and freedom through his discussion of what it means to receive what we have from God in De casu diaboli. The essay argues that Anselm is considering the same issue as Jean Paul Sartre in his account of receiving a gift as incompatible with freedom. De casu diaboli takes up this same question, asking about how the finite will can be free, which requires that it have something per se, when there is nothing, as St. Paul asserted in Romans, that we have not received. Anselm's notion that we have two wills, one for benefit or advantage, and one for justice, allows for something to come per se from the individual who wills and also accounts for the willing of the good angels as the acceptance of what they are and have as received and, hence, as finite. The essay concludes with reflection on Sartre and Camus's The Plague taking as the central ethical and existential problem of human life, as Anselm does, the problem of finitude, and comparing their responses.

In what follows, I approach the subject of finitude by talking about it as Anselm does, in the context of what it means to receive a gift. The notion of the gift has become an important topic of recent phenomenology, in such thinkers as Jean-Luc Marion and Jacques Derrida. Much of the discussion has turned on the issue of whether giving or the gift is immediately negated by the requirement to reciprocate, which turns the gift into an exchange, an economic arrangement. Jean-Paul Sartre, famously, held that to accept a gift is to be enslaved. This was, we learn from Sartre's biographer, not just theory but practice, we learn from a story he tells. Sartre went to visit Martin Heidegger to pay his philosophical respects to the philosopher from whom he had learned so much. When he boarded the train into his reserved compartment for the trip home, he found it full of roses sent by Heidegger. As soon as the train pulled out of the station, the stories goes, Sartre threw the flowers out the window. "Sartre's debt to Heidegger," his biographer concludes, "was immeasurable and therefore intolerable."¹ For Sartre, to be is to choose oneself, such that nothing "comes to him either from without or from within himself that he can receive or accept."² Gabriel Marcel, another 20th century existentialist, took Sartre to task for this, noting, "I do not believe that in the whole history of human thought, grace, even in its most secularized forms, has ever been denied with such audacity or such impudence."³

Part I: Sartre and the problem of receiving for independence and freedom

To receive from another, that is, not to have and be everything one is by one's own power, is for Sartre the utter loss of freedom and selfhood. That's why the flowers had to go.

¹ Ronald Hayman, *Sartre. A Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 308. Hayman refers readers to Jean Cau, *Croquis de mémoire* (Paris: Juilliard, 1985), 253-4. I am grateful to my colleague, Richard Cobb Stevens, for this reference and for directing me to Marcel on this topic.

² Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Être et le Néant*, quoted by Gabriel Marcel, *The Philosophy of Existentialism*, trans. Manya Harari, (New York: Citadel Press, 1970, 1956c), 79.

³ Gabriel Marcel, *The Philosophy of Existentialism*, trans. Manya Harari (New York: Citadel, 1956, c1966), 79.

Sartre makes this point in his discussion of receiving and passivity early on in *Being and Nothingness*. To the question, “What is passivity?” Sartre answers, “I am passive when I undergo a modification of which I am not the origin; that is, neither the source nor the creator.”⁴ If created being, he continues, “does not have its own independence, if it is *in itself* only nothingness—then the creature is in no way distinguished from its creator; it is absorbed in him. . . .”⁵ For Sartre, then, there is a choice: “either, indeed I am not passive in my being, in which case I become the foundation of my affections even if at first I have not been the origin of them—or I am affected with passivity in my very existence, my being is a receiving being, and hence all falls into nothingness.”⁶

To be distinct from the creator means to take up one’s being as independent; one must become (even though in one sense one is not) “uncreated.” “If being exists over against God, it is its own support; it does not preserve the least trace of divine creation.”⁷ The question posed by Sartre, which I think Anselm takes very seriously, is how it is possible to be free when what one has or is is received from another. For Sartre, there can only be one path to freedom and autonomy. The “fall into nothingness,” being merely an expression of the creator rather than something for oneself, is prevented only if “created being recover itself, tear itself away from the creator in order to close in on itself immediately and assume its being.”⁸ Marcel noted that on Sartre’s view “to receive is incompatible with being free; indeed, a being who is free is bound to deny to himself that he has received anything.”⁹ For Sartre, the receiver becomes free by *rejecting* his or her status or identity as receiver; he/she must, for Sartre, take up his/her being as independent, as uncreated, must wrest his/her freedom from its origin.

Like Marcel and Sartre, Anselm takes the question of what it means to be the recipient of a gift as central to the human being. His dialogue, *On the Fall of the Devil*, takes the notion of receiving as its topic, exploring in great depth essentially the question posed so many centuries later by Jean-Paul Sartre: how can a being which receives everything it is and has as a gift from another be *free* in any sense since its actions seem to be simply the playing out of those given to it by its author?

Anselm’s dialogue, *On the Fall of the Devil*, begins with the question from first Corinthians, “What do you have that you have not received?” (I Cor. 4: 7). The answer to Paul’s rhetorical question, that there is nothing that is not received, is the answer to why grace is necessary for salvation. Because one cannot earn or merit it, because everything is received, is grace, Paul answers. The whole of the dialogue is in effect a gloss on this passage, laying out the metaphysics of finitude or creaturehood in the condition of receiving. It is not just that creatures

⁴ Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes, (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), lviii.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, lxiv.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Marcel, *Philosophy of Existentialism*, 82.

receive rather than earn salvation, but that they receive whatever they have from God, and have from themselves absolutely nothing. Like Sartre, Anselm realizes that there is a problem with combining freedom, autonomous self-hood (and, hence, responsibility), with the notion of receiving everything from another.

This, then, is where we begin, with created finite being who has “nothing he has not received.” The student immediately sees a problem: if everything is received, then both what creatures *have* and what they *don't have* seems to be God's doing.¹⁰ If we do *not* have it, it must be because God did not give it, and our failure (or success) is really a failure (or success) in God's giving.¹¹ We reach, in effect, Sartre's conclusion, that to be wholly created, to have everything given, is to be absorbed into the creator.

In order to deal with this problem, teacher and student must look more closely at the logic of giving and receiving. Giving, the teacher argues, requires both that the giver offer and that the receiver receive or accept the offer. Hence *not* receiving needn't be caused by God's *not giving* but rather God's *not giving* is caused by the receiver *not receiving*, i.e., not accepting. The receiver has the power to accept (or reject) the gift, and the giver's gift is ungiven unless the receiver accepts. That means that giving, though active, and receiving, though passive, are not wholly so. True, the activity of the receiver is limited to a negative act—he has the power only of *refusing* or *not refusing* what is offered; and the passivity of the giver is also limited—all he can suffer is the rejection of his giving. Nonetheless, the teacher argues, the giver can offer without successfully giving, and the receiver can be offered something without accepting/receiving.

2. How a being which receives all can be a self and be free

Now we might think (unlike Sartre) that this is not problematic. God gives the creature a free will and the creature has it and uses it; he's free. End of story. Anselm does not think that answers the objection raised by Sartre. The lion's share of this complex dialogue is devoted to trying to respond to it. Anselm agrees with Sartre that freedom is a kind of self-defining act. Freedom, and hence, responsibility, requires that willing be free, and in order to be free, it must be *per se*, that is, really something belonging to the creature and, hence, for which he can be held responsible. This is the central problem of *De casu*: how a finite being who has received everything can have a free act, an act which is *per se*.¹²

It is in order to make the case for this apparent oxymoron, a created but free will, that Anselm makes a distinction between two wills or inclinations: that for benefit or advantage and that for justice. If the devil had only the will for advantage or happiness, the teacher argues, his willing could not be unjust (because then he could and would will only what is or brings

¹⁰ Anselm of Canterbury, *De casu diaboli*, in *S. Anselmi Cantuariensis archiepiscopi Opera Omnia*, 5 vols., F.S. Schmitt, ed., (Stuttgart: Friedrich Fromann Verlag, 1984, repr. Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson & Sons, Ltd. 1940-1961, Seckau, 1938), v. I, 1, 233-4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 2, 235.

¹² Anselm, *De casu* 12, 252.

advantage, which cannot be unjust any more than an animal's will can be unjust).¹³ The will for advantage is doing what it ought when it wills whatever is beneficial; hence, it cannot be unjust. If the devil had only the will for justice, the teacher continues, his will could not be unjust either, because the will for justice only wills what is just and would will justice by necessity.¹⁴ The issue here is not being able *only* to will justice—God can only will justice—but rather only being able to will justice when that will is *received*. If someone else gives justice to me (along with everything else I have) and I simply enact that will, then the giver is the one who is just, not me.

Anselm's view, then, is that free choice for a finite being is possible if there are two wills, both given to creatures by God, so that the choice between which to will is an act that genuinely belongs to the creature. Anselm's notion of freedom, then, does not fall prey to one kind of absurdity critics of libertarianism make, that freedom is self-contradictory, requiring, as Thomas Nagel remarks, that "we act from a standpoint completely outside ourselves, choosing everything about ourselves, including all our principles of choice—creating ourselves from nothing, so to speak."¹⁵ Nagel argues that an utterly self-determining freedom is an oxymoron of self-creation; he argues, in other words that Sartrean freedom is illusory. For Nagel this kind of complete freedom for any being is self-contradictory. Anselm does, of course, think that God can have the kind of complete freedom Nagel finds incoherent, though he would articulate it in a different way. Anselm's account in *De casu* is, then, a kind of response to both kinds of objections; he takes freedom to be essential to a being capable of moral action and takes seriously the difficulty of making sense of freedom for a being who is not self-caused but created and, hence, *receives* its principles of choice, receives, in other words, that out of which it makes itself.

With the notion of the two wills and the notion of receiving as involving the *acceptance* as well as the giving of the gift, we can understand the act of Satan as both free and as sin. *What* didn't the devil receive or accept? And *why* didn't he accept it? Those are the student's questions. What he did not receive/accept is the ability to persevere in his God-given just willing. Why he did not accept is because he failed to will fully to keep the justice he was given, because he wanted something else more. That something more was to be like God. The failure is both in *what* the devil willed and in *how* he willed it: he willed to be God or be something more or other than God willed for him, and he willed by his own will (*propria voluntate*), not subject to God's

¹³ Ibid., 13, 256. In the lead up to this account of the will for benefit, Anselm writes, "not only do all rational but all that can sense will advantage and avoid disadvantage. For no one wills anything unless he thinks it is beneficial to himself." Ibid., 12, 255. Rogers takes Anselm's claim here to mean that human beings will whatever they will (even justice) as beneficial in some respect. But Anselm is just noting that the will for benefit is universal—everyone wills what is beneficial, even animals and unjust human beings, whereas only some will justice. I think he does mean, as well, that no one ever loses the will for benefit, even when it conflicts with justice, we still will benefit even when we will to limit the will for benefit to just benefits. However, Rogers argues that because we are still willing our benefit but only those we ought to have, "there can be no opposition between willing benefit and willing justice." Katherin A. Rogers, *Anselm on Freedom*, (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 67, 72.

¹⁴ Anselm, *De casu*, 14, 258.

¹⁵ Thomas Nagel, "The Problem of Autonomy," in *Agents, Causes and Events*, ed. Timothy O'Connor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 40 (excerpted from Nagel's *The View from Nowhere*, and cited in Rogers, *Anselm on Freedom*, 106).

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will. In other words, Satan acted on the will for benefit or advantage (to be God, to be more or other than what God willed for him) over the will for justice.

What Satan did, according to Anselm, was will “by his own will (*propria voluntate*) not subject to anyone.”¹⁶ Some have argued that this is like a kind of arbitrary limit on the angelic will, a version of what is seen as an arbitrary prohibition on eating of one tree in the garden of Eden.¹⁷ As one commentator argues, “the just act of the good angels turns out to be nothing more than obedience to the arbitrary ruling of a God jealously guarding his own honor.”¹⁸ I don’t think this is a silly or baseless complaint, and we can easily see how Sartre would concur; one can, for Sartre, only be free by rejecting such limits on one’s action. However, I think there’s another way to understand Anselm’s view here. What is willing to be God and willing by one’s “own will”? It is willing not to have a *received* will. It is willing that the will not be given, that it be utterly one’s own, that one be, in other words, self-made. The fallen angel’s sin, then, is acting in a way that denies that he is what he is: a being who, as St. Paul put it, has nothing which he has not received, that he is, to gloss it once more, finite, a creature. The choice before the angels was whether to receive. Receiving is harder than it seems. We have all had the experience of not wanting to ask for what we need, of wanting others to magically intuit and give without our asking or having to acknowledge its having been given, of wishing not to be in the position of *needing* something from others, of not being willing to admit that we cannot get it ourselves. Receiving a gift imposes the humiliation of owing something to another and brings with it the obligation to gratitude. To receive is not only to get something but to accept it. And accepting means acknowledging that you did not have it/earn it/get it for yourself. It is this acknowledgement Satan and, we might add, Sartre was unwilling to make.

Satan’s act, we might say, is like Napoleon’s act of crowning himself. What Napoleon (or Satan) could not tolerate is that his rule (of empire or self, respectively) be conferred by another; they could not find their autonomy in acceptance but only in the myth of their own self-making. Both will to be *sui generis*. What the good angel wills, by contrast, is to accept what is given *as given*, not as self-generated. The language of giving, even self-giving, is a reminder of the *received* possibility for self-rule, that one does not, as the saying goes, pull oneself up by one’s own boot straps. The choice, then, is neither contrived nor trivial; it is the choice to accept or reject creaturehood or finitude. Crowning oneself, crediting oneself with pulling oneself up by one’s own bootstraps is wrong because it’s a lie. It is the biggest, most basic lie of which a creature is capable: denying its being as a creature. In this way, Anselm maintains the link to the Pauline notion of everything being received/given even as he argues for the act of keeping (or failing to keep) justice as the angels’ own.

The objection that might be made here, however, is that Anselm requires a return for the gift in the recognition of it *as gift*, thus what is really going on here is an exchange on an

¹⁶ Anselm, *De casu*, 4, 242.

¹⁷ G. Stanley Kane, *Anselm’s Doctrine of Freedom and the Will*, (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1981), 94-5.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 95.

economic model, rather than the giving of a gift. And Anselm is, famously or rather infamously, willing to speak of a *debt* incurred by creatures who sin. To sin, Anselm asserts, is to fail to render to God his due (*debitum*).¹⁹ What is due to God, Anselm explains in *Cur Deus homo*, is that “every act of will (*voluntas*) of the rational creature be subject to the will of God.”²⁰ This is, it seems to me, to make the same point as *De casu diaboli*: that to sin is to will by one’s *propria voluntate*, that is, as I have glossed it, to will *as if* everything has not been received, *as if* one is one’s own creation.

I think Anselm has in response two lines of defense. First, he is not claiming that there is either a need or even, indeed, the ability on the part of the creature to “pay back” or reciprocate the gift, but only that the creature is obliged to recognize the gift *as gift*. This is an obligation which is not a debt in the strict sense of a *quid pro quo* but an obligation to the truth of the receiver’s contingency and dependency on the giver. For Anselm what is adumbrated first, last, and always in being one who receives is the relationship to the giver. Thus, for him, to accept the gift as gift is to recognize the truth of the creature’s relatedness to Creator. In human interactions, we can make sense of the refusal of a gift as the refusal of a certain kind of relationship. I think it might be possible to understand most, if not all, cases of refusing a gift as the refusal of a certain relationship that accepting would imply.

3. First Consequence of Receiving: Desire

In Anselm, that which makes freedom possible for the creature, the co-presence of the will for advantage and for justice, sets up a condition in which when the good angel wills not advantage but justice, he thereby gets the very advantage he willed to forsake for justice. Conversely, when Satan chooses advantage, forsaking justice, he thereby loses the very advantage for which he forsook justice.²¹ One commentator objects that this set of rewards and punishments has a kind of perversity: “the reward that God gives is precisely the good thing which he initially forbade the angels to will. God deliberately withheld this from them so that they could prove themselves by obeying him in refusing to will it.”²² The good angels, it seems, get what they want by *not wanting or willing* it, and the bad angels lose all possibility of getting what they want by *wanting or willing* it. There is in this, it sounds like, a kind of indictment of desire—that the right thing is *not* to want, that you don’t get what you want unless (paradoxically) you don’t want it. This sounds, we might say, something like Sartrean bad faith or inauthenticity, a condition of not being aware of one’s own desires, like Sartre’s example of the young woman invited on a date who refuses to notice—all the while wanting and enjoying—the sexual attraction of her male companion.²³ Bad faith, Sartre explains, “stands forth in the firm

¹⁹ Anselm, *Cur Deus homo*, in *S. Anselmi Cantuariensis archiepiscopi Opera Omnia*, 5 vols., F.S. Schmitt, ed., (Stuttgart: Friedrich Fromann Verlag, 1984, repr. Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson & Sons, Ltd. 1940-1961, Seckau, 1938), v. II, Bk. I, 11, 68.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Anselm, *De casu* 6, 243; cf. *De casu* 25, 272-3.

²² Kane, *Anselm’s Doctrine of Freedom*, 94.

²³ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 55-56.

resolution *not to demand too much*, to count itself satisfied when it is barely persuaded, to force itself in decisions to adhere to uncertain truths.”²⁴ “The first act of bad faith,” Sartre concludes, “is to flee what it cannot flee, to flee what it is.”²⁵

I think, however, that Anselm’s account of what the good angels refrain from willing and the bad angels do not is not a rejection of or inauthentic hiding from desire. To see why, we have to go back to Anselm’s analysis of receiving. The receiver has the power to accept or reject, the power of whether to receive. But receiving is also accepting the truth, as we saw above, that one does not have already that which is being bestowed. The condition of being a receiver brings with it the condition of desiring. Only one who is and has everything is beyond receiving. Thus, to be in the condition of receiver is to be in the condition of not having and wanting what one doesn’t have. And just as the good angels were true to and the bad angels attempted to deny their status as receivers, one can accept or attempt to deny the condition of desire. Thus, the mixture of passivity and activity in both giving and receiving—that giver might be rejected and receiver must decide to accept—is mirrored in the condition of desiring.

Ancient accounts fled the passivity of desire, projecting it onto female as opposed to male desire, and modern depictions of desire have focused on it as active, as the drive toward acquisition and on its successful outcome. There is in Anselm, by contrast, a recognition of the uncomfortable parts of desire—from the passivity in the activity of desiring, as unable (wholly) to satisfy itself by itself. For Anselm, then, what characterizes the good angels is not the *absence* of desire (that they only get what they want by not wanting it), but that they accept their *not having* and *not being able to get for themselves* what they want. When the good angels will justice, they will to be what they are, creatures, not creator; they will to accept from the creator rather than to take for themselves. That is the limiting or, to use Anselm’s word, the “tempering” that the will for advantage ought to have in a creature.²⁶ Yes, this tempering is a *limit* on desire, on the will for advantage, but it is a limit on *what* is willed because it is a limit in willing *how* advantage or benefit will come about—as received rather than seized or achieved, as the happiness of creature not creator.

There is a sense in which the good angels accepting the gift and, thereby, their condition as receivers and desirers is, *contra* Sartre, a kind of *authenticity* rather than inauthenticity because the good angels reject the pleasant but false notion that they are self-sufficient and self-created. Authenticity, on this view, is giving up the illusion that what one is is proper to oneself. To be gifted means that what one is is not one’s own but given. The finite self, then, begins as divided, as not quite itself.²⁷ Anselm’s version of Neo-Platonism, which holds that beings emanating from the One are characterized by composition and, hence, fragmentation, means that finite beings are never wholly what they are. It is a metaphysics that receives its most emotional,

²⁴ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 68.

²⁵ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 70.

²⁶ Anselm, *De casu*, 14, 258.

²⁷ Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 290-1.

existential formulation in Anselm's prayers, whose persistent theme is the distance between himself as defined by desire for forgiveness and union with God and the self-sufficient but beneficent God.²⁸

4. Receiving and Vulnerability

And just as being in the condition of receiving brings with it the discomfort of desire, so also it brings with it vulnerability to suffering for Anselm. While Anselm doesn't go into this consequence in great detail in *On the Fall of the Devil*, it does come up in a distinction he draws between angels and human beings. While it would be unfitting for the angels to suffer by foreknowing the fall of others, for human beings, Anselm argues, suffering at the fall of another is laudable, even graced.²⁹ Moreover, the student adds, the more just someone is, the more he or she suffers in sympathy for another's downfall; and the more just he or she is, often the greater his or her unjust persecution. Vulnerability to suffering is a consequence of sin for Anselm, and though he does not say precisely why, we can see the reason without having to go too far afield. If it makes sense to describe the first sin (whether for human beings or angels) as the attempt to reject one's creaturehood, then vulnerability is a fitting consequence, a way of living out the truth of not being self-sufficient, self-made. In the case of human beings, living out that vulnerability over time becomes a possible path toward its opposite, the teacher contends, toward "incorruptibility."³⁰

There are a number of responses to human finitude and vulnerability we could, drawing with broad brush strokes, contrast with Anselm's. Greek tragedy depicts the struggle against vulnerability and finitude, and though the struggle never succeeds, we are deepened by watching those desires and their failure play out as we both identify with those who make the attempt to overcome limits and those who see and experience the folly of this attempt. The Stoic response, used by St. Augustine to convince us to turn toward the infinite rather than finite goods, councils us to withdraw our affections for anything we can lose against our will. I have, though only in the most perfunctory way, adumbrated Sartre's attempt to defy those limits more radically in his rejection of finitude, creaturehood, and the gift more broadly.

If there is some sense in which for the Greeks the human attempt to become divine, to overcome the limitations of human being, though flawed and fated to fail, is nonetheless admirable, it is clear that the same attempt undertaken by Satan has, for Anselm, nothing to recommend it. Sartre's phenomenology, one might say, takes that Promethean attempt as a model.³¹ Prometheus, we remember, is the human who steals fire from the gods to bring back to

²⁸ See Anselm, *The Prayers and Meditations of St. Anselm*, ed. and trans. Benedicta Ward (London: Penguin Books, 1973, repr. 1988), and Eileen C. Sweeney, "The Rhetoric of Prayer and Argument in Anselm," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 38, no. 4 (2005): 355-78.

²⁹ Anselm, *De casu* 21, 268.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Epimetheus*, in *Ecrits de jeunesse*, ed. Michel Contat and Michel Rybalka (Paris: Gallimard, 1990). *Epimetheus* is a one act play written in 1929 in which one of the characters, an engineer, is named Prometheus. Sartre also talked in an interview in 1965 of planning to write a play entitled *Prométhée* "which will

earth. His punishment is to have his liver eaten by day, grow back every night, only to have it eaten again. Nonetheless, he is in Greek mythology and tragedy a heroic though flawed figure. What provokes admiration from Anselm is rather the human who unjustly suffers that vulnerability, a figure whom, by contrast, the Greeks would see as worthy of pity but surely not admiration. While some ethical responses to the condition of finitude are, in some sense, an escape from or rejection of vulnerability, as in not just Sartre but some versions of Stoicism, Anselm's ethics is to move toward embracing it, leaning into it rather than rebelling or attempt to minimize its effects. Embracing rather than fleeing vulnerability means, for Anselm, embracing one's dependence on, one's need of, God.

I make these contrasts not to claim that Anselm is "right" and the others wrong. I consider all these responses deep and compelling in their own way. It is just to say that Anselm is engaged in this conversation, one of the most important conversations we can have about who we are, what we want, and what to do when (inevitably) we can't get it.

Conclusion: Plato, Anselm and Camus

The subject of *On the Fall of the Devil* is created being. The world of finite things, the world of coming to be and passing away, is both being and not being; the world is both impossible and possible; freedom is both given by God and self-given. Beings whose reason and will are received are free and not free, are those to whom everything is given and who are able to act *a se*.

My argument here has been that Anselm doesn't just give an account in terms of finite creatures as being but also as non-being, as incomplete and limited. There is in this a kind of rejection of Plato's notion that we make sense of material things only by understanding their immaterial forms. Anselm's view is that understanding their finitude, their non-being, is central to understanding them. It's not that Anselm thinks that Plato (or Heraclitus for that matter) was wrong about the impossibility of knowing change *qua* change or was wrong to claim that the intelligibility of finite material things is not in themselves but in their source. Anselm is, after all, a kind of Platonist. Rather, Anselm might say, the intelligible objects Plato does seek to know, the eternal forms, don't adequately represent finite being. Plato's point, of course, is that material things don't adequately represent the forms, and he leaves them behind without a backward look to get to the forms. But unlike Plato, Anselm really does want to understand material, finite being *as finite*. Strangely or perhaps not so strangely, it is this focus on the finite as finite that brings Anselm into dialogue with the existentialists, because he, like them, is interested in finitude.

I teach a year-long service learning course at Boston College, and one of the most important books we read is Camus's *The Plague*. What attracts me to the book and makes it so

contain everything he has lived through for thirty years." Michel Contat and Michel Rybalka, eds., *The Writings of Jean-Paul Sartre*, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 7, 469.

important to the students as they wrestle with their limitations and the limitations of the people and organizations they serve is that Camus's characters, caught in the maelstrom of the plague, are struggling with their limitations, with their finitude. The journalist Rambert must decide, as Dr. Rieux already has, between justice and self-interest/personal happiness (recall Anselm's two wills, for benefit and for justice); they all, in their own ways and whether theists or not, must decide whether they will be "the ones who stay," that is, whether they will be like the single monk who stayed during the outbreak of the plague Fr. Pannetoux describes in his second sermon, rather than fleeing like his fellows, who tried to make themselves invulnerable to infection by escaping or walling themselves away. Fr. Pannetoux himself must give up the comfortable theology of his first sermon, by which the virtuous faithful can escape vulnerability by means of their virtue; what he learns by being with those who suffer is his lack of power, his lack of understanding; thus he comes to accept in a radical way his own vulnerability to suffering. The characters of *The Plague*, most especially Dr. Rieux, reject, even as they continue to work to cure disease, the modern notion that we can escape vulnerability by, as Descartes put it, "becoming masters and possessors of nature." The myth of modernity and progress is that we *can*, if not now then later, not just improve human life (not a goal I want to reject) but transform it beyond suffering, that it can be redefined in terms of independence, autonomy, and strength.

Unlike Camus, of course, Anselm's interest in finitude is ultimately in the service of adumbrating how finite being might return to its infinite source. But a condition of that return is an understanding and acceptance of its own incompleteness and dependence. Only in this way does the being that receives everything come to have something of its own. Even though for Camus all there is is finite being with infinite and unquenchable desire, what Anselm shares with Camus and even with Sartre (insofar as he highlights the problem), is a rejection of all the stories that would make human, finite being invulnerable, independent, self-made.