

The Quality of Mercy is Not Strained: Justice and Mercy in *Proslogion* 9-11

**Michael Vendsel
Tarrant County College**

Abstract: In Proslogion 9-11 Anselm discusses the relationship between mercy and justice. There is no precedent for that discussion in the Monologion, yet the discussion anticipates the issues that are raised in Cur Deus Homo. In this paper I crystallize the position Anselm takes in those chapters and offer thoughts as to how that position might contribute to discussions of the problem of evil.

The *locus classicus* for Anselm's view of the relationship between justice and mercy is undoubtedly *Cur Deus Homo*. In that dialogue he claims that every creature that fails to honor God takes from God what is rightly His and that, in order for justice to be satisfied, that stolen honor must be restored. Yet any honor the creature might show toward God is already owed in the first place, so there is no surplus of honor from which to draw and no means of making restitution. In the incarnation and death of Christ, however, God is given something on behalf of the creature that is of infinite value and that He was not already owed—namely, the life of Christ. That is sufficient compensation for the honor that was stolen, and that enables God to extend His mercy to the creature without thereby suffering any compromise to His justice. Because of the life and death of Christ, therefore, Anselm can say along with Portia that the quality of mercy is not strained.

In *Proslogion* 9-11, however, Anselm argues that the inclination of God to show mercy to the creature is not merely *consistent* with justice but itself a *demand* of justice—that in a very real sense God *had* to be merciful. That is a much stronger claim, and this paper explores Anselm's defense of it. Part One offers an overview of *Proslogion* 9-11. Part Two argues that the view of those chapters is 1) that it is impossible for God not to show mercy, 2) that His mercy may only be shown to some, and 3) that the choice to show mercy to one person as opposed to another is entirely free and uncompelled. I conclude by mentioning some possible implications of this view for the problem of evil in both its logical and evidential forms.

Part One

Proslogion 9-11 comes in the middle of Anselm's attempt to draw out the implications of the fact that God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived. Chapters 1-4 make the well-known argument that, as that than which nothing greater can be conceived, God must exist and cannot not exist; then chapter 5 observes that by the same logic God must be whatever it is better to be than not to be. On that basis Anselm concludes

that God is “just, truthful, [and] happy”¹ as well as “percipient, omnipotent, merciful, and impassible.”² He is quick to notice, however, that that list contains paradoxes: “how can you perceive if you are not a body? How can you be omnipotent if you cannot do everything? [And] how can you be both merciful and impassible?”³ He addresses those questions in chapters 6 through 8 respectively; then in chapter 9 he asks “how do you spare the wicked if you are completely and supremely just?”⁴ That introduces the question of the relationship between justice and mercy, and he focuses on that question through the end of chapter 11. His analysis proceeds in three stages: 1) in the first half of chapter 9 he gives an argument for the consistency of justice and mercy; 2) in the second half of chapter 9 he gives two arguments for mercy as a function of justice; and 3) in chapters 10 and 11 he calls attention to two differences between mercy and punishment. In what follows I will explore each of these stages more closely.

In the first stage Anselm offers an argument that justice and mercy must be in harmony with each other because each is implied by divine goodness. God is supremely good, and

you would be less good if you were not kind to any wicked person. For one who is good both to the good and to the wicked is better than one who is good only to the good, and one who is good to the wicked both in punishing and in sparing them is better than one who is good only in punishing them. So it follows that you are merciful precisely because you are totally and supremely good.⁵

The argument in this passage is that it is impossible for God to be any better than He is; so since it is better to show goodness to the good and to the wicked than to show it only to the good, it follows that God must show goodness to the wicked. And since there are two ways of showing goodness to the wicked—punishing and sparing—it follows that God must show goodness to the wicked by sparing them. Sparing the wicked is the very definition of mercy, however, so it follows that mercy is a consequence of God’s goodness. But justice is equally a consequence of God’s goodness: Anselm writes that “out of goodness you repay the good with good and the evil with evil . . . [and] the very nature of justice seems to demand this.”⁶ Since God’s goodness implies both justice and mercy, it follows that the two must be in ultimate harmony.

¹ Anselm, *Proslogion*, 5 in *Anselm: Basic Writings*, ed. and trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), p. 83.

² *Ibid.*, 6, p. 84.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, 9, p. 85.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

⁶ *Ibid.*

As the second stage unfolds, however, Anselm makes the stronger claim that “you are merciful *because* you are just.”⁷ He arrives at that statement by observing that “there is no goodness apart from justice”⁸ and inferring that “you are . . . supremely good only because you are supremely just.”⁹ He realizes, however, that if divine goodness proceeds from justice and mercy proceeds from divine goodness, then there is a sense in which mercy proceeds from justice. That, of course, is a puzzling claim, so Anselm spends the remainder of chapter 9 offering two arguments in defense of it. In the first he says:

it is just for you to be so good that you cannot be understood to be better, and to act so powerfully that you cannot be thought to act more powerfully. For what could be more just than this? And this would certainly not be the case if you were good only in punishing and not in sparing, and if you made only those not yet good to be good and did not do this also for the wicked. And so it is in this sense just that you spare the wicked and make them good.¹⁰

According to this argument, it is a matter of justice for God to be so good and powerful that it is impossible to conceive of His goodness or power being increased. Therefore, since there is a form of goodness and power that involves sparing the wicked and making them good, it is a matter of justice that those two things be found in God. And if that argument is not sufficient, Anselm offers a second one:

what is not done justly should not be done, and what should not be done is done unjustly. So if it were not just for you to be merciful to the wicked, you should not be merciful; and if you should not be merciful, you would act unjustly in being merciful. But since it is wrong to say this, it is right to believe that you act justly in being merciful to the wicked.¹¹

The point here is that, however strange it might seem that mercy is premised on justice, it *must* be that way because the alternative is impossible. Whatever does not proceed from justice, after all, must proceed from *injustice*, and whatever proceeds from injustice should not be done. Therefore, if the act of showing mercy does not proceed from justice, then it proceeds from injustice and should not be done. But if showing mercy should not be done, then by showing mercy God would be doing something that He ought not to do. Anselm takes that to be an obvious absurdity—for him it is clear that God shows mercy and that there is no wrong in doing so. The only conclusion, therefore, is that mercy must proceed from justice.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

With those two arguments in place, then, the third stage calls attention to two differences between the way that justice gives rise to mercy and the way it gives rise to punishment. The first difference is the subject of chapter 10. Having explained that it is just to show mercy, Anselm notes that it is also just for God to punish. This seems paradoxical to him—one would expect the opposite of whatever is just to be unjust and vice versa—but he resolves the paradox by arguing that punishment and mercy are just in different ways:

you justly punish the wicked in one way and justly spare them in another. For when you punish the wicked, this is just because it accords with their merits; but when you spare the wicked, this is just, not because it is in keeping with their merits, but because it is in keeping with your goodness. In sparing the wicked you are just in relation to yourself but not in relation to us. . . . [Y]ou are just, not because you give us our due, but because you do what is fitting for you who are supremely good.¹²

The idea here is that the justice of mercy and the justice of punishment have distinct grounds: punishment accords with the merits of the wicked while mercy accords with the goodness of God. Of course, punishment also accords with the goodness of God: Anselm goes on to ask, “is it not also just in relation to yourself, O Lord, for you to punish the wicked?”¹³ To be more precise, then, punishment accords with the merits of the wicked *and* the goodness of God while mercy accords *only* with the goodness of God. And there is a further difference which Anselm takes up in chapter 11. Mercy and punishment are both just in relation to God’s goodness, but they relate to that goodness differently. We saw earlier that supreme goodness has at least three components: the extension of goodness to the good, the extension of goodness to the wicked, and the extension of evil to the wicked. The punishment of the wicked satisfies the third of these components, but mercy satisfies the second. Therefore, while mercy and punishment both satisfy the demands of God’s goodness, they satisfy very different components of those demands.¹⁴

All told, then, the progression from *Proslogion* 9-11 could be summarized as follows: 1) Anselm argues that mercy and justice must be in harmony with each other because each is implied by divine goodness; 2) he argues that mercy must be a *result* of justice because justice is *presupposed* by divine goodness; 3) he offers a model of how justice might give rise to mercy and argues that, even if no such model is satisfying, the alternative is impossible; and 4) he notes that mercy, unlike punishment, derives its justice

¹² *Ibid.*, 10, p. 87.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 11, p. 87.

¹⁴ One might still ask how God is able to set aside what justice calls for in relation to the wicked. To say that He does so for the sake of His mercy and that mercy is also a requirement of divine justice is less an answer to the question and more an admission of the fact that there is a tension in what justice requires. One sees here, then, some of the residual questions that would motivate Anselm to write *Cur Deus Homo*.

solely from divine goodness and in response to a very different demand of that goodness. With that summary in place, therefore, there are three conclusions we can draw.

Part Two

First, it is clear from what we have seen that, for Anselm, *it is impossible for God not to show mercy*. He has repeatedly said that God cannot fail to have any form of goodness and that there is a form of goodness that involves sparing the wicked. It follows, therefore, that God cannot fail to spare the wicked, which is to say that He cannot fail to be merciful.¹⁵ Of course, the necessity at work here is an *internal* necessity: it is coming from the nature of God rather than being imposed on Him by something else. And furthermore, it is a *conditional* necessity: it is only present insofar as there is wickedness, and there is no necessity that there actually be any wickedness.¹⁶ But even with those qualifications it remains the case that, insofar as there is actual wickedness, the justice and goodness of God make it impossible for Him to refrain from extending mercy.

Having said that, however, the logic behind the necessity of mercy equally implies that there is a limit to that mercy—that *it may only be shown to some*. One of the forms of goodness mentioned earlier, after all, was repaying evil with punishment; and if God showed mercy to *all*, then He would fail to display that form of goodness. It follows, therefore, that God *cannot* show mercy to all, a point which Anselm makes explicitly in chapter 11:

it is . . . just for you to be so just that you cannot be thought to be more just.
And you would by no means be so just if you only repaid the good with
good and did not repay the wicked with evil. For one who treats both the

¹⁵ If a further argument is needed, we might juxtapose *Proslogion* 3 with *Proslogion* 12. In chapter 3 Anselm says that the divine essence cannot be thought not to exist while in chapter 12 he says that God's essence is identical with His attributes, including "the very goodness by which you are good to the good and the wicked" (p. 88). From the latter statement it is clear that the goodness that gives rise to mercy is identical with God's essence; so if that essence cannot be thought not to exist, then neither can the goodness and the mercy that flows from it.

¹⁶ Given the way Anselm has arranged things, one might think that there is some kind of necessity both to creation and to the advent of evil within that creation. He has said that God cannot fail to possess any form of goodness, and he has identified two forms of goodness that require the existence of wickedness—the offer of mercy to the wicked and the dispensation of justice to the wicked. Combined, those statements appear to imply that just as it is an internal necessity that God show mercy when confronted with wickedness so it is an internal necessity that He create something good and allow wickedness to emerge within it. I think, however, that that would be a mistaken inference. First, one could argue that it is better to have the power to create or not create than only to have the power to create. If so, then as that than which nothing greater can be conceived God would have to have the power to create or not to create. And what is more, if the nature of God necessitated the creation then one could no more think of the creation not existing than one could think of God Himself not existing. Anselm thinks that is false—in *Proslogion* 3 he says everything other than God can be thought of as not existing. Clearly then, he must not think that the nature of God necessitates the creation. Taking those factors into consideration, I think the best reading is that the goodness of God is such that He *must* respond with mercy *if confronted with wickedness* but that there is no necessity that there be such a confrontation in the first place.

good and the wicked as they deserve is more just than one who does so only for the good.¹⁷

And when those two conclusions are juxtaposed, they lead to a third: that *God's choice to show mercy to particular persons is entirely free*. We have seen that, when confronted with wickedness in general, God's nature compels Him to show mercy at some point and to punish at some point. That means, however, that God's nature is consistent with either course of action with respect to any particular wicked person. It follows, therefore, that He is at perfect liberty to punish or spare in any particular case. And this is not merely an inference—Anselm says as much as he closes chapter 11:

even if someone can grasp why you can will to save the wicked, certainly no reasoning can comprehend why, from those who are alike in wickedness, you save some rather than others through your supreme goodness and condemn some rather than others through your supreme justice.¹⁸

The only alternative reading of this passage would be that, while human reason cannot comprehend why one person is shown mercy rather than another, some necessitating basis still resides within God. Yet it is doubtful that that is what Anselm is saying. As we have already seen, he thinks that God is equally just with respect to Himself both when punishing and when sparing. However, if something internally compelled His choice to extend mercy in one case as opposed to another, then the options of punishing and sparing would not be equally just—one would be at cross purposes with His nature while the other was in keeping with it. Therefore, if it is true that God is equally just with respect to Himself whether He chooses to punish or to spare, then there cannot be anything about the nature of God that necessitates mercy toward any particular person.

All told, then, *Proslogion* 9-11 argues that God 1) cannot fail to show mercy, but 2) may only do so in some cases, and 3) does so by means of a free choice. In what follows, therefore, I want to suggest some implications of that analysis for both the logical and the evidential problem of evil.

In literature on the problem of evil, it is typical to distinguish between the logical and the evidential forms of the problem. The logical problem maintains that the existence of evil and the attributes of God are logically contradictory while the evidential problem claims that the sheer amount of evil in the world renders the existence of God improbable even if the two are not in formal contradiction. On the analysis just offered, however, it seems that neither of these two claims would be correct.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 11, pp. 87-88.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 88.

In the first place, Anselm has said that God would not be supremely good if He only ever showed goodness to the good and never showed punishment and mercy to the wicked. To be supremely good, therefore, God must show punishment and mercy to the wicked. For that to be possible, however, there must actually *be* wickedness—God has to create something good and allow for wickedness to manifest within it. Rather than being in tension with divine goodness, therefore, the existence of wickedness may actually comport with divine goodness by allowing it to express itself in a display of justice and mercy. It is important not to overstate this point, of course, for God is not dependent on evil to be God, and nothing about the nature of God *requires* that there be evil. But even so, the existence of evil might allow for an especially perspicuous expression of divine goodness, and as such the existence of evil may be in keeping with divine goodness rather than contradicting it.

And a similar claim could be made with respect to the evidential problem of evil. If evil is really meant to allow for the full expression of God's goodness, then one would expect an amount of evil that is commensurate to that goal. The goodness of God, however, is a goodness than which none greater can be thought, and it is hard to imagine goodness of that degree coming to vivid expression in a world that contained nothing but misdemeanors and peccadillos. Therefore, if God's objective in allowing the advent of evil is the full expression of His infinitely great goodness, then perhaps it makes sense to assume that the degree of evil He will allow will be quite significant. Again, it is not that God is internally *compelled* to bring about evils of this magnitude or that He must do so in order to be God. But contrary to what the evidential problem of evil suggests, perhaps doing so would be in keeping with His nature, perhaps even significantly in keeping with it.

Conclusion

To conclude, then, I have shown that the *Proslogion* claims that mercy and justice both flow from divine goodness, that mercy also flows directly from justice itself, and that mercy and punishment have different relationships to justice. I went on to show that Anselm's analysis in these chapters implies that God cannot refrain from showing mercy, that it is equally impossible for Him to show mercy to everyone, and that His choice to show mercy in particular cases is always a free choice. Finally, I showed that this analysis, if correct, would problematize the assumptions that drive both the logical and the evidential problems of evil. In short, I have argued that it is as true for the *Proslogion* as it is for *Cur Deus Homo* that the quality of mercy is not strained, and perhaps even more so. After all, not only is mercy compatible with divine justice in the *Proslogion*, but it is actually motivated and compelled by that justice. It is an inevitable overflow of the divine nature itself and, as such, it is "an attribute to God."