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St. Anselm of Canterbury on Sin and Will. Short Critical Overview

Abstract: A discussion about free choice and its variants, about sinning and the implication of evil, about God and about creature's freedom is to be found in the following pages. A short view over Abelard's position regarding sin should also be useful for a better understanding of the concept as it was viewed in the 12th century through bringing together, in this respect, the thinking of two of the most important theologians of the time, namely Anselm of Canterbury and Abelard.

Key Words: Abelard, Anselm, sin, will, free choice, redemption

Every discussion around the 12th century thinker and theologian Anselm of Canterbury, even if it is about free choice, sin, will or redemption should consider his statement that the rational creature was created just and the purpose for its creation was its happiness through enjoying God, reaching in this respect, immortality.² Nevertheless, this rational creature (including here also the angels) sinned, losing this status and so facing death. But how could it be possible for a rational creature to sin, meaning choosing the bad in stead of the good? Especially when it didn't have only the rational power to discriminate between them but more it was made in order to know, to choose and to possess the goodness and the rightness which come from God. This union with God can only be reached by loving God in the right way which is, in fact, the main purpose of a rational creature.

St. Anselm's view on freedom of choice

It has been stated that there are important similarities between Anselm's concept of will and that of freedom. Both serve human being in order to achieve the ultimate end. Also, both require that rational creatures have the ability to evade the goals imposed to them by God; in other words they must have power of choice. If we were to speak about a difference

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² The idea is to be found three times, in different forms, in *Cur Deus Homo* in Anselm Of Canterbury, *Volume three*, The Edwin Mellen Press, Toronto and New York, 1976, p. 43, 61, 98.

between the two, we would say that unlike will, freedom is not identified with the already mentioned power of choice because it is essentially and only the power to keep justice.³ Still, St. Anselm seems to be more interested in the nature and function of freedom than in the nature of will. Nevertheless he tends to speak about free will (*voluntas libera*) and free choice (*arbitrium liberum*) interchangeably. But he makes it clear that the right order is *libertas arbitrii rationalis voluntatis*: freedom of choice of a rational will.⁴ As Jasper Hopkins claims, by including the word “rational”, St. Anselm wanted to make a distinction between deliberative choice and appetitive inclinations.⁵

In order to answer the question regarding which will is more free, the one that has both alternatives – of sinning and of not sinning – or the one that cannot be turned from the uprightness (*rectitudo*) of not sinning, St. Anselm shows that the latter one is more free. Even if it would seem more logical the other way around – the first one is more free because it has the possibility of *choosing* between the two, still, St. Anselm affirms that someone who possesses something that is right and cannot lose it is more free than someone who possesses the same thing but is able to lose it. God cannot choose evil, but still, He is conceived as being free and from this point of view St. Anselm’s refusal to see free will as the ability to choose between good and evil seems to be legitimate. Freedom is not neutral, but strongly connected to making the *right* decision.

According to St. Anselm, the will has two determinations. The first one is more a personal disposition of the human soul directed by what is advantageous for it (*commoditas*) whereas the second one is strongly related with the rightness, as a gift from God. While the former can be never lost because it is intrinsic to human soul, the second one is lost for the man after sinning and can be recovered only through God’s gift. And man lost it not by aiming at the evil itself but, as Jasper Hopkins underlines, “at the ephemeral good which he detects amidst the evil”⁶. As St. Anselm himself sustains, man essentially desires only what he supposes to be good.

Later on, linking will to sin, he states that the ability to sin is foreign to free choice. Consequently, the following question arises: How did man or the apostate angel sin: by free choice or by necessity? Anselm answers by saying that each sinned freely and of no necessity in spite of having free

³ G. Stanley Kane, *Anselm’s Doctrine of Freedom and the Will*, The Edwin Mellen Press, New York, 1981, p. 156.

⁴ St Anselm of Canterbury, *De Libertate Arbitrii 13*, apud Jasper Hopkins, *A Companion to the Study of St. Anselm*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1972, p. 141.

⁵ Jasper Hopkins, *A Companion to the Study of St. Anselm*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1972, p. 141.

⁶ Jasper Hopkins, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

choice. They sinned not by means of the ability according to which they were able not to sin, but by means of their ability to sin.

Still, before sinning, even if the man and the angel were able to serve sin, sin was not able to master them. In other words, both of them were not prevented by anything to be free or have free choice *before* they sinned. After that though they still kept their freedom of choice but, adds Anselm, were not able to use it anymore; for this they needed the help of grace which was different from the one originally possessed.

But what was the purpose of having freedom of choice? The end, in Anselm's view is uprightness-of-will which he defines as willing what one ought to will (will what God wills one to will). And "rational nature did not receive freedom except in order to keep uprightness-of-will for the sake of this uprightness itself"⁷. So, it was not in order to acquire uprightness-of-will without anyone's giving it (since they did not yet have it), not in order to receive this uprightness and also not in order to desert it after having received it and then trying to recover it by themselves.

What is interesting is that St. Anselm affirms that "no temptation compels one to sin against his will"⁸. And that is because uprightness can be deserted only when one is *willing* to do this. And man can, for example, be bound or killed against his will because he is unwilling to be bound/killed but he cannot will against his will. Unwilling to will cancels, in fact, the will. "For everyone-who-wills, wills that he will"⁹. The will cannot be overcome by any other power, but only by its own. It follows that no temptation is able to overcome an upright will.

At this point Anselm underlines the fact that there are two kinds of will: the one by which we will something for its own sake and the one by which we will a thing for the sake of something else. The examples that he uses are willing health for the sake of health and, respectively, willing to drink absinthe for the sake of health. For St. Anselm, will is a responsive faculty – it responds to the value judgments of reason or intellect. And as reason can make two main value judgments, related to goodness and rightness, will responds to these two¹⁰. As it is emphasized in *De Concordia III - 11*, the will "wills either for the sake of a benefit or for the sake of

⁷ Anselm of Canterbury, *De Libertate Arbitrii* 3, in Jasper Hopkins, Herbert Richardson (eds.), *Anselm of Canterbury. Philosophical fragments*, vol. II, The Edwin Mellen Press, Toronto and New York, 1976, p. 110.

⁸Anselm of Canterbury, *De Libertate Arbitrii* 5, in Jasper Hopkins, Herbert Richardson (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 112.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ Jeffrey E. Brower, *Anselm on Ethic*, in Brian Davis, Brian Leftow (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Anselm*, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 243.

uprightness; and even if it is mistaken, it regards itself as referring what it wills to these two ends”¹¹

As for what is to be considered the powerlessness of will which the student in *De Libertate Arbitrii* defines as “the will’s inability to cling perseveringly to uprightness”¹², St. Anselm rejects it. He supports his opinion by stating that when we say that we cannot do something is not because of impossibility (powerlessness), but because it cannot be done without difficulty. And this difficulty does not destroy or lessen freedom of will.

But still how is it that the will is stronger than temptation even when it is overcome by it? To answer this, St. Anselm makes a distinction between the *instrument* of willing (like the eyes for the sight) and the *activity* of willing (the sight). The first never changes no matter what we will. The will as activity though is multiple. The strength of will is inalienable and resides in the will as instrument whereas in willing (the activity) it is used “now more, now less”¹³. Related to the instrument of willing (*instrumentum volendi*) St. Anselm also speaks about the affection of the instrument (*affectio instrumenti*) and the use of the instrument (*usus instrumenti*). The first one is defined as being “that by which the instrument is so disposed (*afficitur*) to will something even when the person is not thinking of it, that when this thing does come to mind he wills this thing either immediately or for its own proper time”¹⁴. For example, one always wants to be healthy without deliberating upon this matter. As for the third sense of will, that of use, it refers to the actual and specific acts or volitions which the instrument consciously and deliberately performs. So, one of the most important characteristics in this case is that a volition in every instance involves conscious thought.¹⁵ St. Anselm does not refer to occurrent volitions when he speaks about the upright will, about the just person having the will for justice/willing what is right for its own sake. For him will and its cognates have three possible meanings: a faculty or power of the soul (the will), a particular act of that power (choice, volition), and any disposition of that power (intention, attitude, desire).¹⁶

Returning to the uprightness, St. Anselm sustains that not even God can separate it from will because upright is only the will which wills what

¹¹ Anselm of Canterbury, *De Concordia* 11, in Jasper Hopkins, Herbert Richardson (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 217.

¹² *Idem*, *De Libertate Arbitrii* 6, in Jasper Hopkins, Herbert Richardson (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 115.

¹³ *Idem*, *De Libertate Arbitrii* 7, in Jasper Hopkins, Herbert Richardson (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 117.

¹⁴ *Idem*, *De Concordia* 11, in Jasper Hopkins, Herbert Richardson (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 215.

¹⁵ G. Stanley Kane, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

¹⁶ Jeffrey E. Brower, *op. cit.*, in Brian Davis, Brian Leftow (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 247.

God wills that it will. Consequently, the most free is an upright will because no force can remove its uprightness.

If man deserts this uprightness because of the difficulty of keeping it this means that he serves sin. To recover it is only possible with God's help. But still freedom of choice is not lost. A man can be servant (of sin) and free at the same time. He is always naturally free in order to keep uprightness whether or not he has any to keep. On the other hand when man has uprightness he does not have an inability to avoid sinning. St. Anselm makes a parallel with the ability of seeing the sun which would mean keeping the uprightness of will: "For even when the sun is absent we have in us sight, by which to see the sun when it is present; similarly, even when uprightness-of-will is lacking to us, we have in us the ability to understand and to will (...) only when we lack nothing for seeing the sun except the sun's presence do we lack the capability which its presence produces in us".¹⁷

Chapter 13 of *De Libertate Arbitrii* comes with a conclusive tone: "the ability to keep uprightness of will for the sake of this uprightness itself is the complete definition of freedom of choice".¹⁸ Towards the end, St. Anselm makes a clear cut division between God's will and man's will. The first one is based on an unoriginated freedom of choice whereas the second one is given and created (by God). This last one belongs to men and angels and it is of two kinds: the will which does have uprightness to keep in two ways – so as to be able to lose it (the case of the angels before the fall and men before death) and so as not to be able to lose it (the case of the elect angels and men); the second kind of will does not have uprightness to keep and the one who has it can be able or not to recover it.

In *The Fall of the Devil (De Casu Diaboli)* St. Anselm stresses upon the important role of perseverance in keeping the good will. To the apostate angel God did not give perseverance because the former did not receive it (for he rejected it, he did not get it from God). The Devil had from God the ability and will to receive perseverance and the ability and will to persevere, but since he did not will it completely he did not receive it. He freely lost the will which he had. Still, the fact that the Devil did not want what he had to does not mean that there was a deficiency in God's work, in what He gave. By willing what and when he ought not to have willed, "he expelled the goodness from his will"¹⁹. Consequently God did not give perseverance because the devil deserted the upright will in the first place and not the

¹⁷ Anselm of Canterbury, *De Libertate Arbitrii* 12., in Jasper Hopkins, Herbert Richardson (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 123.

¹⁸ *Idem*, *De Libertate Arbitrii* 13, in Jasper Hopkins, Herbert Richardson (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 124.

¹⁹ Anselm of Canterbury, *De Casu Diaboli* 3, in Jasper Hopkins, Herbert Richardson (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 138.

other way around. “If he had perseveringly kept justice, he would have never have sinned or have been unhappy”²⁰. His fatal mistake was to have willed what he did not already have and was also not supposed to have at that time. Thus he extended his will, as St. Anselm says “beyond justice by inordinately willing something more than he had received”²¹. He willed something by an autonomous will, (*propria voluntate*) which was not subjected to anyone else. This will is only the characteristic of God. The Devil placed his will higher than God’s will.

Sin as the consequence of rebellious will

Man also fell because of wanting what God did not will. How was this possible as it seems to be more logical to make the good for which one was created and not the evil that he was created to avoid. Is it, again, a failure of God’s creation? St. Anselm explains this by saying that no one can have a good will if God does not give it, but everyone can do the evil if God merely permits it in the name of free choice. And this entails unhappiness. St. Anselm establishes a strong connection between will and happiness: “not everyone wills justice and not everyone flees from injustice. But not only every rational nature but even everything which is able to sense, wills benefit and avoids disadvantage”²².

Also, each rational nature has the obligation to obey God’s will which is seen as a just debt to God. Consequently, in Anselm’s view, sin is the non-payment of this debt. As the whole personality – mind, will and affections, participate in the enjoyment of God, the same totality is involved in turning the back to God. Furthermore, this is made of man’s own free will and this makes the deed even more serious. This view supports the idea that there is not a sinless intellect betrayed by lustful flesh, but both mind and body express the rebellion of the will which refuses to pay the debt due to God. Man’s will does not subject itself to God’s will and thus man enters a state of guilt – the inability to do what God wants²³. Sin is a disturbance of the natural order of the universe, of the natural human behavior which has obedience to God as a basis. Death is the consequence of this disobedience. Still it is interesting to note that St. Anselm does not accept the definition according to which all men are mortal, or corruptible or incorruptible. The essence of man is not expressed by his mortality, corruptibility or

²⁰ *Idem*, *De Casu Diaboli*4, in Jasper Hopkins, Herbert Richardson (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 139.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 140.

²² Anselm of Canterbury, *De Casu Diaboli* 12, in Jasper Hopkins, Herbert Richardson (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 154.

²³ John McIntyre, *St. Anselm and His Critics. A Re-interpretation of the Cur Deus Homo*, Oliver and Boyd, Edinburgh, 1954, p. 68.

incorruptibility. These can only bring misery or happiness to his existence but cannot affect his *essentia*²⁴. By sinning though man does not become the “property” of the Devil. The latter one is only allowed to harass but not possess him; man belongs to God in any circumstance. It follows that the Devil does not control man in his sinning.

As for God’s reaction to sin, He may choose to punish or to receive satisfaction – *aut poena aut satisfaction*. St. Anselm also brings something new regarding the mentioned concept of *satisfaction*. In his opinion, satisfaction is an additional gift that man must give to God. The best example to explain this is given by him from private life. If one affects the health of someone else, his debt is not only to wholly restore his health, but also make amends for the done harm by an additional action or gift. The gift is “proportionate to the injury done- *secundum exbonorationis factam molestiam*”²⁵. A clear discussion in this direction can be found in the eleventh chapter of *Cur Deus Homo I*, a chapter titled “What sinning and making satisfaction for sin are”. Sin is, as stated before, “not to render to God what is due”²⁶, that is not placing one’s will under God’s will (which is the justice or uprightness of will), dishonoring him and removing from him what belongs to Him. In order to reenter the natural order man has to pay for what he does but still this payment is not enough. One must give back more than one has stolen. Everyone who sins, says St. Anselm, has to repay the stolen honor and this “constitutes the satisfaction which every sinner is obliged to make to God”²⁷. Consequently, the punishment of the sinner honors God and shows man that he is, after all, wholly subjected to God. The punishment comes from God’s decision of taking back what belongs to Him when the sinner does not pay his debt – “as a man by sinning seizes what is God’s, so God by punishing takes what is man’s”²⁸. It is impossible for God to lose its honor. A certain dynamism can be noticed in this man-God relationship as portrayed by St. Anselm.

Abelard and St. Anselm on sin

Whereas St Anselm approaches the problem of sin mainly from the perspective of God’s reaction to it, another theologian of the 12th century, Peter Abelard, discusses sin emphasizing the human mechanism (if we can

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 69.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 77.

²⁶ Anselm of Canterbury, *Cur Deus Homo I-11*, in Jasper Hopkins, Herbert Richardson (eds.), *Anselm of Canterbury*, volume III, The Edwin Mellen Press, Toronto and New York, 1976, p. 68.

²⁷ *Idem*, *Cur Deus Homo I-12*, in Jasper Hopkins, Herbert Richardson (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 70.

²⁸ *Idem*, *Cur Deus Homo I-14*, in Jasper Hopkins, Herbert Richardson (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 72.

say so) in this direction. Still both St. Anselm and Abelard relate sin to will talking about it as an offence to God. As we have seen so far, sin is not willing what God wills. For Abelard who first tries to give definitions negatively (sin is not the bad deed in itself nor is it the will to perform this deed), sin is the fault of the soul by which it earns damnation or is made guilty before God. So, Abelard concludes, we offend God not through harm but through contempt. In Anselm's view man commits this offence by not subjecting his will to that of God and thus he enters the same state of guilt.

What is interesting to mention and what also shows the fact that Abelard mainly analyzes what happens inside the human mind when sinning is that he affirms that the actual deed, the doing of sin adds nothing to guilt or to damnation before God. The action of sin does not increase the sin. Neither the will which precedes the sin nor the doing of the deed which follows constitute sin. Sin consists in *the decision* to do some wrong act. Therefore the merit and the glory of the doer lie in the intention, not in the deed. For instance, Abelard says that often things that should not be done are done without sin but just under coercion or through ignorance. As an example, it is not a sin to lust after another's wife unless you consent to this lust or action²⁹.

Abelard also touches upon the stages that the human being passes through in the process of sinning. Sins or temptation occurs in three ways: in suggestion, pleasure and consent and we are often led through these three to the doing of sin. A suggestive example that he uses is that of the committing of the original sin. First was the persuasion which came from the devil. Secondly, pleasure was felt by the woman when realizing that the fruit was going to be sweet for the senses. Consequently and thirdly, there came the consent. Abelard concludes that deeds in themselves have no moral value. The proper subject of moral evaluation is the agent, via his or her intentions. In this sense, if we think of Abelard's threefold meaning of actions related to will, here we have the great importance of intention as a disposition or state of the power of the soul which is will. And St. Anselm also claimed that it was this meaning that was relevant for the understanding of the rightness of will. We could say that the issue of sin is somehow for both Abelard and St. Anselm, connected with intention. Also, they claim that ignorance is either an excuse for sin (Abelard) or that it lessens the gravity of a sin (St. Anselm). The example of those who crucified Jesus is suggestive in this respect and also underlines what is different between the two views. While Abelard sustains the innocence of the crucifiers, he being the only one to support this idea, St. Anselm, in *Cur Deus Homo* claims that because they did not know that Jesus was God, the ones who killed him are

²⁹ D.E. Luscombe (ed.), *Peter Abelard's Ethics*, Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1971, p. 15.

guilty only of a venial sin and not a deadly one: “For a sin done knowingly and a sin done in ignorance are so different from each other that the evil which these men could never have done knowingly, because of its enormity, is venial because it was done in ignorance”³⁰. For Abelard though sin is consent to what is known to be evil. In his view, because the crucifiers did not know that Christ was the Son of God and because they thought they were doing something right, they did not offend God through contempt and did not consent to evil.³¹

As St. Anselm, Abelard sees punishment as the natural consequence of sin when there is no repentance. The latter talks about two kinds of repentance: *fruitful repentance* of those belonging to the New Law and *unfruitful repentance* of those of the Old Law. The first one, which he considers more important relates to a God who is first of all good, whereas for the Old Law God was first of all just. In St. Anselm’s case as already mentioned the stress is on the concept of God’s satisfaction, on the additional gift that the sinner must give in order to restore God’s honor.

Another common point of the two theologians view on sin is the conviction that the Devil does not acquire any rights over the human being after the sin has been done. Both strongly oppose this view and stress the fact that the Devil only has the permission (from God) to torment people as punishment for their wrong deeds; he is only “a jailer or licensed tormentor”³²

What is of great importance is the fact that in St. Anselm’s view, a man always has the ability to keep uprightness of will. We never lose this ability, no matter if we choose the good or the evil. This could be seen as an optimistic perspective on the possibilities of human nature. When man chooses the evil the problem is not inability to make the good choice, but rather the unwillingness to do it – “he does not use his ability-for-choosing-the-good, but his ability-for-choosing-the-evil”³³. It seems that through the gift of freedom of choice, the human being is given the power of taking one way or another; he is not a marionette in the hands of God. That is why the issue regarding will is so important in St. Anselm’s writing. If, after all, everything depends on man’s will, that would mean in a way that, even if, as St. Anselm claims, we have to choose only the good that God gives us in order to be free, man somehow has absolute freedom; God does not impose anything, but only offers a way that man can choose or not. The

³⁰ Anselm of Canterbury, *Cur Deus Homo II-15*, in Jasper Hopkins, Herbert Richardson (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 118.

³¹ D.E. Luscombe (ed.), *Peter Abelard and Twelfth Century Ethics*, in Idem, *op. cit.*, p. XXXV.

³² Thomas Williams, *Sin, grace, and redemption*, in Jeffrey E. Brower, *The Cambridge Companion to Abelard*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004, p. 264.

³³ Jasper Hopkins, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

personal, intimate work of man though should be that of placing himself in agreement with God's will in order to achieve happiness.

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