

Interpreting Anselm of Canterbury as a Virtue Ethicist

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To those who read and appreciate Anselm of Canterbury's works beyond the oft-excerpted *Proslogion* (mostly philosophers, concerned with proofs for God's existence), and *Cur Deus Homo* (mostly theologians, concerned with the atonement), it becomes clear that this great Benedictine thinker of the 11th and early 12th century makes a number of notable contributions to moral theory. One prime example is his definition of justice as "rectitude of will maintained for its own sake" developed in *De Veritate*.¹ He develops that conception of justice yet further through additional explanations, examples, and analyses in his subsequent works. One might also think of his further development of the notion of evil as privation, his helpful distinction between different modalities of the will, or his theory of the two main orientations of the will.

Anselm never authors a treatise articulating a fully developed moral theory in a systematic manner, and relatively little attention has been devoted by scholarship to what the moral theory undergirding,

1. *De Veritate*, ch.12, p. 194. Dom Pouchet rightly points out, "*rectitudo voluntatis propter se servata . . .* appears, alongside . . . *id quo maius cogitari non potest*, as one of Saint Anselm's most central thoughts [intuitions majeures]." Dom Robert Pouchet, "Existe-t-il une synthèse Anselmienne?," *Analecta Anselmiana* (Frankfurt am Main: Minerva, 1969), v. 1, p. 6. All translations from Anselm's treatises are the author's (I have consulted and greatly benefited from translations by Hopkins and Richardson, Williams, Deane, and Charlesworth) and are either from *S. Anselmi Cantuariensis Archiepiscopi opera omnia*, ed. Dom F. S. Schmitt, O.S.B. 5 vols. (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons. 1940–1961), or from *Memorials of Saint Anselm*, R. W. Southern and F. S. Schmitt, O.S.B., eds. (London: Oxford University Press. 1969). All citations of Anselm's texts will give the chapter number (prefaced where appropriate by the book number), and the page number of the appropriate volume of the *Opera Omnia* or *Memorials*. References to Anselm's letters are from *The Letters of Saint Anselm of Canterbury*, 3 vols., trans. and ed. Walter Frölich (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications). References to Anselm's prayers or meditations are from the *Prayers and Meditations of Saint Anselm with the Proslogion*, trans. Benedicta Ward, S.L.G. (New York: Penguin 1973).

and emerging by glimpses from, his written works would be.² My intention here in this paper is not to exegetically reconstruct Anselm's moral theory in a systematic and comprehensive way. That requires a considerably longer study, at which I have been laboring slowly for a number years. What I would like to do instead is to focus on one central feature running throughout and providing some measure of greater unity and intelligibility to his moral teachings, an aspect that has been mostly overlooked and at times denied. Simply put, this is that Anselm's moral theory is best understood as being a type of what in contemporary moral philosophy we term "virtue ethics." That claim is, to say the least, one that should require a good bit of clarification, textual support, and argument.

This paper is divided into six parts. First, I consider whether Anselm's moral perspective might not be better classed among one of the other main approaches in moral theory typically distinguished and discussed in contemporary ethics. I argue that although there may be some initial plausibility to placing Anselm's perspective into several of these other approaches, when examined more closely, none of them really provides an adequate fit. Second, I suggest that virtue ethics could make a better fit, and clarify what construing Anselm as a virtue ethicist would involve and require.

The subsequent sections of the paper are devoted to exegesis of Anselm's writings, looking for passages and doctrines that would support classing his moral theory as a type of virtue ethics. In the third part, I focus on the treatises published during Anselm's lifetime, which taken on their own provide some, but not conclusive, support. The fourth part turns to other texts within the Anselmian corpus. Several

2. Particularly relevant literature examining aspects of Anselm's moral theory includes: G. Stanley Kane, *Anselm's Doctrine of Freedom and the Will* (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1981); Dom Robert Pouchet, *La Rectitudo chez saint Anselme: Un itinéraire augustinien de l'âme à Dieu* (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1964); Katherin Rogers, *Anselm on Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Calvin G. Normore, "Anselm's Two 'Wills,'" in *Les Philosophies morales et politiques au Moyen Âge* (Ottawa: Legas, 1995); Eugene Fairweather, "Truth, Justice and Moral Responsibility in the Thought of St. Anselm," *L'homme et son destin, d'après les penseurs du moyen âge. Actes du premier Congrès international de philosophie médiévale* (Louvain: Nauwelaerts, 1960); Dom Paschal Baumstein "Saint Anselm and the Prospect of Perfection," *Faith and Reason*, v. 29; Phillippe Delhay, "Quelque aspects de la morale de saint Anselme," *Spicilegium Beccense*, v. 1 (Paris: Vrin, 1959); Jeffery E. Brower, "Anselm on Ethics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Anselm* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); and Daniel Rakus, "The Dynamics of Love in Anselmian Ethics," *The Downside Review*, n. 421 (2002).

of these not only conclusively show that Anselm is centrally concerned with virtues and vices in his moral theory, but also indicate the specific lines his thought takes on these matters. In the fifth and sixth parts, I turn to Anselm's letters, focusing first on general discussions, and then on discussions focused upon specific virtues and vices. The letters not only include the most references to virtue and vice (both in general and as specific states of character), but also provide additional developments of key lines of Anselm's thought on these matters.

1. ANSELM'S THOUGHT AND MAIN APPROACHES OF MORAL THEORY

Over the last two centuries, several main approaches in moral theory have become dominant within literature on ethics. There is certainly some usefulness to this, since that development assures us a more or less common vocabulary for theorizing about, teaching, or applying ethics. When we get down to particulars and specifics, to be sure, differences do emerge over precisely how to understand these broad designations of approaches in ethics or moral theory, how they fundamentally differ from each other, where they overlap, and so on. But there is at least enough consensus at the level of broad generalities to justify employing these terms for approaches in moral theory without getting bogged down here in controversies over precisely what they encompass.

Consider, to start with, Anselm's doctrine of the "two wills,"³ especially when coupled together with his definition of justice as "rectitude of will maintained for its sake." One of these two wills is the will-as-inclination⁴ for happiness, directed at the range of "useful" or "beneficial" goods,⁵ always present in us, sometimes rightly structured and oriented, sometimes not so. The other is the will-as-inclination for justice, directed at the good of that very justice. This second will can

3. This distinction between two wills, aiming at distinct modalities of goodness, is first explicitly articulated in *De Casu Diaboli*, ch. 12. He uses a language of the "fitting" (*quod convenit, conveniens*) or "befitting" (*quod decet*) consistently in apposition with "useful" or "advantageous" (*quod expedit*) throughout his work, as early as *Proslogion*, in conjunction with distinguishing between justice and happiness/the beneficial.

4. Anselm first makes it explicit that these two wills represent *affectiones*, i.e., "inclinations" or "affections" (or, if you like, "affective orderings" or "orientations") of the will in *De Conceptu Virginalis*, ch. 4.

5. Anselm will develop this explicitly draws the distinction between those two different modalities of goodness in *De Casu Diaboli*, ch. 12, p. 255.

be lost and regained, but trumps the first will in value and priority. In fact, lacking the second inclination towards justice, the will for happiness inevitably becomes deformed and disordered. Clearly, Anselm's moral theory is not any sort of hedonism. Nor is it likely to align well with utilitarian or other broadly consequentialist perspectives, since these presumably would focus largely upon what he terms "beneficial" or "useful" goods. If they do not make considerations of justice secondary, those sorts of approaches in moral theory certainly do not accord justice (particularly in the will) the absolute priority Anselm repeatedly asserts it possesses.

The broadly deontological approach looks as if it might provide a much more congenial home for Anselm. In fact, at a first reading, certain passages of Anselm about the will to justice, the nature of justice for that matter, and the relationship between human freedom and maintaining justice, sound almost like a Kantianism *avant la lettre*. Justice or moral uprightness, the rectitude for which people are praised, as they are blamed for the opposite or privation, seems similar to Immanuel Kant's understanding of the good will in its own relationship to duty, rationality, and freedom. Once we expand our purview to other passages where Anselm connects right human willing with the divine will, as well as other passages that do articulate eudaimonist concerns and arguments, his moral teachings then appear hopelessly heteronomous from a Kantian perspective. Prospects do not appear much better for other types of deontological approaches, with one exception.

Although some moral theorists treat divine command theory as something distinct from deontological approaches in ethics, others view it as a variant of deontology. In either case, what is distinctive to that approach in ethics is that it derives what is good or right ultimately from the divine will, manifested in some sort of command or imperative. Perhaps, given that Anselm does deliberately clarify the meaning of justice by reference to God's will, for instance in saying that "keeping rectitude of will for the sake of that very rectitude is, for each person, to will what God wills that person to will,"⁶ he should be viewed as espousing a type of divine command theory? That interpretation becomes implausible, however, when we consider the passages where Anselm rejects any sort of voluntarist view on God and morality. Consider his intransigent insistence upon the superlative rationality of

6. *De Libertate* ch. 8, p. 220. Cf. also *Cur Deus Homo*, bk. 1, ch. 11, p. 68: "Every rational will of the creature should be subject to the will of God."

the divine will,⁷ and the impossibility of God's willing making anything that is wrong to be right.⁸

Another interesting possibility is that Anselm might be interpreted as holding something like a natural law theory, perhaps as a precursor of sorts to a much more explicit formulation in thinkers such as Thomas Aquinas and his later followers. The occasional references to the "law of God" (and other variant language) coupled Anselm's high regard for human rationality in moral decision-making do provide some initial plausibility to that interpretation, but there simply is not much direct textual support for interpreting him along those lines.⁹

2. VIRTUE ETHICS AS A POSSIBILITY

In his biography of Anselm, his student and friend Eadmer offers us an alternate interpretative option. He tells us that Anselm "uncovered the origins and, so to speak, the very seeds and roots and process of growth of all virtues and vices, and made it clearer than light how the former could be attained and the latter avoided or subdued."¹⁰ This suggests Anselm's moral theory might be best interpreted as falling within that extensive family of approaches now termed "virtue ethics." That common rubric encompasses a wide variety of thinkers and specific approaches associated with them. Virtue ethics approaches in the West include, just for a few examples, Platonist, Aristotelian, Stoic, and Christian traditions of moral enquiry. These differ considerably on a number of points, but as broad currents of virtue ethics, they do share certain central features in common. We will shortly pick out and discuss several of those as criteria for deter-

7. This is evident from *Monologion*, ch. 15 and 16 onward.

8. Anselm first formulates this in *Proslogion*, ch. 7, and that theme emerges again at other points, in particular in *Cur Deus Homo*, bk. 1, ch. 12, p. 70.

9. Eadmer provides one example: "For even then reason taught him that all the riches of the world were created by our common Father for the common good of all mankind and that by natural law the belonged no more to one man than to another." Eadmer, *Vita Anselmi*, 1:23, pp. 40–41. A question can be raised, however, whether we ought to take this as Anselm's actual verbatim teaching, or as Eadmer's own interpretation of it.

10. Eadmer, *Vita Anselmi*, p. 13. Southern takes this enquiry to be the *De Humanibus Moribus*, which is a plausible conjecture, save for two snags. First, the DHM does discuss virtues and vices, but in a rather unsystematic manner, certainly not setting them out in great depth or detail. Second, given its central focus on monks and monastic life, it seems a far better candidate for being the product of Anselm's resolution of "understanding the rational basis of the monastic life, and expounding it to others," *Vita Anselmi*, 1:21, p. 36.

mining whether Anselm really does espouse a virtue ethics perspective or not.

Prior to that, however, there is another more basic challenge to address. A reader who focuses solely on Anselm's treatises might reasonably raise an objection. Anselm rarely discusses (or even uses, for that matter) the terms "virtue" and "vice" in those works.¹¹ So then perhaps Eadmer's report reflects more what he thought Anselm should have been up to, or is just a matter of invoking conventional virtue-language on his part, or even represents a divergence between Anselm's face-to-face teaching and counsels on the spot and his more seriously and rigorously thought-through moral theory.

One response suggests itself almost immediately to any reader conversant with the literature Anselm would likely have read. Since he belongs to an intellectual tradition and broader culture in which virtues and vices clearly had central place in ongoing development and applications of moral theory, we might arguably assume that doctrines articulated by certain of his philosophical and theological predecessors provide an unarticulated but relied upon background to his own thought on moral matters. Given that Anselm not only had access to, but studied and taught, a range of Christian and pagan writers who discuss the virtues and the vices, in considerable detail, it would be tempting to simply assume that he would have assimilated a basic virtue ethics orientation as an inescapable dimension to his intellectual milieu and practical activities. Might we not just assume Anselm to be in basic agreement with key theorists of the virtues and vices such as Augustine, John Cassian, Boethius, or Gregory the Great?¹²

11. This line of objecting to viewing Anselm as developing a virtue ethics, focusing on the treatises, was articulated recently by Thomas Williams, in his critical essay on Katherin Rogers' work, *Freedom and Self-Creation*. He claims, implausibly as this paper will soon demonstrate, "Anselm has no doctrine of character formation or habituation. . . . [T]here is no text in the philosophical or theological works to support a doctrine of character formation in Anselm, and . . . the vocabulary of character, habituation, and virtue is almost entirely absent from his works." Thomas Williams, "Anselm on Free Choice and Character Formation," *Faith and Philosophy*, v. 34 n. 2, (2017), p. 223. One can find similar claims, bearing specifically upon justice in John R. Sheets, "Justice in the Moral Thought of St. Anselm," *The Modern Schoolman*, v. 256 (1947).

12. We might add, as well, other authors such as Ambrose, Bede the Venerable, Alcuin, and Isidore of Seville. Anselm also would have been familiar with discussions of virtue and vice as habits from Boethius' translation of Aristotle's categories, as well as Boethius' commentary. Cf. "Appendix 2: A Provisional List of Books likely to have been in Bec Library in the Eleventh Century" in Giles E. M. Casper, *Anselm of Canterbury and His Theological Inheritance* (London: Ashgate, 2004).

That approach possesses some plausibility, and quite likely does reflect what was indeed the case, but unless support is lent to it from some other quarter, it also strikes me as a bit dicey for several reasons. One of these resides in the very originality of Anselm's own method. Although he clearly has an admirable command of Scripture and a variety of Christian and pagan authors, he very rarely weaves the fabric of his thought out of citations or commentary on authorities.¹³ Because of this, determining the degree to which he might agree with, wholeheartedly endorse, or incorporate another author's specific views on virtue and vice becomes rather speculative. When Anselm does discuss virtues and vices, it should be noted, those discussions do depart from commonplaces of medieval virtue ethics. For example, though he is doubtless aware of the scheme of the four cardinal virtues and the three theological virtues, he very rarely refers in writing to that scheme, and only occasionally to certain of those virtues.¹⁴ The virtues he does discuss most frequently include justice, prudence, and charity, but also those of humility, obedience, and patience. He also makes no use of the by-then popular scheme of the seven deadly sins or eight capital vices, though he does make pride or self-will the origin of the other vices.

Fortunately for our understanding of his views on virtue and vice, we do possess a fairly extensive Anselmian corpus that extends beyond the treatises considered in isolation. The *Letters*, deliberately copied and preserved by Anselm's own orders, provide a source equally authoritative as the treatises, and they will turn out to be particularly important to understanding Anselm's views on virtue and vice. We can add to that body of work the *Prayers* and the *Meditations* determined to be genuinely authored by Anselm. To those works, we should also add the *De humanibus moribus* reconstructed out of the longer *De similitudinibus* by Richard Southern. In my view, Eadmer's *Vita Anselmi* and the *Dicta Anselmi* would also provide useful supplementary discussions of Anselm's views on virtue and vice.¹⁵ Even if these

13. One very interesting exception is afforded by Letter 161, indicating that Anselm would engage in authority-citing when he felt it necessary. It appears that this was not often the case, at least when it comes to his written communication.

14. On this account, István Pieter Bejczy notes that although Anselm is "doubtless the most formidable Benedictine theologian of his age," nevertheless "[h]is principal interest for virtue theory lies in his idea of justice." István Pieter Bejczy, *The Cardinal Virtues in the Middle Ages: A Study in Moral Thought from the Fourth to the Fourteenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 93.

15. In this paper, I will make very little reference to the *Dicta Anselmi*. Although it is a considerably richer work than the *De humanibus moribus* when it comes to discussions of virtue and vice, some readers might worry that it is less

last three works, as Southern points out, are not “pure and perfect Anselm,” but rather “Anselm incomplete, or as others heard or thought they heard him,”¹⁶ we can still incorporate their passages as faithful to Anselm’s teaching on moral matters.

As will be demonstrated in the following sections, when we examine the full Anselmian corpus, it is clear that Anselm does consistently employ both language and moral frameworks of virtue and vice in some of his works. The treatises, where he employs alternate language, can and ought to be read in light of the portions of his work where he does articulate his moral perspective explicitly in terms of virtue and vice. Some clarification is needed at this point, though, about what virtue ethics involves. For those whose understanding of “virtue ethics” derives primarily from the 20th century “revival” of virtue ethics, or largely from Aristotle (or alternately Thomas Aquinas), Anselm’s moral perspective could appear to be missing certain key doctrines viewed as essential to virtue ethics, for instance the doctrine of the mean. The same, of course, could be said of Stoic virtue ethics or even Plato’s own virtue ethics, so arguably those differences with Aristotelian or neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics need not exclude Anselm from virtue ethics more generally.

What then should we take the core to any real virtue ethics approach to be? It is important to be able to distinguish traditions or perspectives of virtue ethics, however varied they may be, apart from other approaches that, while they may employ the vocabulary of virtue and vice, ground those within a framework of some other principles or bases. Immanuel Kant, Thomas Hobbes, John Stuart Mill, and David Hume, for example all not only employ the language of virtue and vice, but even devote some analysis to both the general concept and specific examples. But their moral theories do not represent examples of virtue ethics, since virtue for each of them represents something derivative, a value that can be understood and even measured in terms of something more basic to their moral theory.

Let us say for the moment, since this is controversial matter, that in order for a moral theory or practical perspective to deserve to be called a “virtue ethics,” several features must be present. First, there has to be some developed conception of virtue and vice, as states of

reliable, in parts potentially representing Eadmer’s own perspective rather than Anselm’s. For my own part, I do not share those concerns, but anticipating them, I aim to make as little of the argument and exegesis rely upon texts others may find questionable.

16. Southern and Schmitt, *Memorials of Saint Anselm*, 2.

character developed within a person, displayed within their choices and actions. Second, virtues and vices must figure centrally into the ways in which moral evaluation takes place, as positively and negatively valued on their own account, rather than as merely a shorthand for some other more fundamental principle(s). Third, there has to be some account either developed or robustly implicit, providing some sense of what virtue and vice are in general. Fourth, there must be some identification and differentiation of particular virtues and vices and the specific sorts of matters to which they pertain. Fifth, there must be some account of how a person develops virtues or vices, and how doing so moves us towards or away from the realization of human nature, flourishing or happiness. As we turn now to examination of Anselm's texts, and reconstruct outlines of his moral theory, we will see that all of these features are present in it.

3. JUSTICE, THE WILL, AND VIRTUE IN THE TREATISES

Let us start then where readers of Anselm looking to understand his moral theory will generally begin, that is, with his finished and published treatises. To do this already requires not only that one engage in study of a body of texts quite different in genre and approach from his predecessors and contemporaries, but even more importantly that one reads across that corpus, integrating what he says in one text with what he develops in another, into a more or less systematic account. Again, I am not going to attempt to do all of that in this particular paper, but instead just focus on some key points and developments within his treatises. We will pass in review of these rather rapidly, the goal being to piece together a picture displaying key structures and elements of Anselm's moral theory, which then will be filled in further as we turn to his other works.

The *Monologion* distinguishes modalities of goodness, references things being good through other things, and argues to a divine essence, which is, among other attributes, supreme justice, just through itself, all other things merely participating in that justice.¹⁷ By the end of the work, Anselm has also argued to and elucidated love, hope, and faith.¹⁸ He has also clarified what human reason's proper function is. *Proslogion* adds discussion of mercy and justice's compati-

17. He also does tell us in *Monologion* ch. 45, that the Son is the "virtue and wisdom, or truth of the Father, and justice, and whatever is befitting to the essence of that highest spirit" (p. 62). See also ch. 58.

18. Anselm, *Monologion*, ch. 68–78.

bility,¹⁹ and speculation on the good(s) the blessed enjoy, but otherwise does not particularly expand Anselm's moral theory. *De Veritate* introduces a key Anselmian notion in ch. 12, his definition of justice as "rectitude of will maintained for its own sake." The further explanations in that chapter contribute to the moral theory, as do the modes of truth in the will, expression, thought, action, and being, discussed in the earlier chapters, understood in terms of "doing what one ought to" (*quod debet/debuit*) and "what they were made for" (*ad quod facta est*).

De Libertate in its turn further develops Anselm's teaching on justice, the will, freedom, and the role grace plays in restoring justice in the will once it has been lost. That work also introduces an important distinction within the will, between the will-as-instrument, and the will-as-use,²⁰ and highlights the importance of perseverance in willing what one ought.²¹ *De Casu Diaboli* further clarifies justice and injustice in the will, adding the important distinction between two main orientations of the will, the will-for-happiness and the will-for-justice, the latter of which is more valuable and ought to structure the former.²² *De Casu* also begins two lines of inquiry more fully developed in later works. One of these is clarification of injustice in the will as both strictly speaking nothing and as some positive damage or corruption.²³ The other is his earlier reference to "turning" (*conversio*) and "concupiscence or desire" (*concupiscentia sive desiderio*) of the will.²⁴ That work also introduces some lines of thinking about (the providential) order, and how the rational creature uses its will, thereby either maintaining justice or falling into injustice through self-will (*propria voluntas*).

19. Anselm, *Proslogion*, ch. 8–11.

20. Anselm, *De Libertate*, ch. 7.

21. Anselm, *De Libertate*, ch. 6–8.

22. In a well-ordered person, the will-to-justice "temper[s] the will-to-happiness . . . restraining the will's excess [*excessum*]." Anselm, *De Casu Diaboli* ch. 14, p. 258. In an ideal state, where one had both an undamaged will to happiness and the will to justice, or even in the state of restored justice in this life, "by the fact that [one] wills to be happy, one would be able to will excessively [*excedere*], but because one wills justly, one would not will to do so, and so, possessing a just will for happiness, [one] could and should be happy." Anselm, *De Casu* ch. 14, p. 258. *De Concordia* further clarifies how these wills function as inclinations of the will-as-instrument: "God ordained these two wills or inclinations, so that the will-as-instrument would use the will that is justice for commanding and ruling. . . . And, without anything detrimental [*incommoditatem*] it would use the other will for obedience." Anselm, *De Concordia*, bk. 3, ch.13, p. 286.

23. Anselm, *De Casu Diaboli*, ch. 9–11, 16, 19, and 26.

24. Anselm, *De Casu Diaboli*, ch. 7–8.

De Incarnatione, particularly in ch. 10, adds a bit to this picture about self-will. In the later treatises, i.e. *Cur Deus Homo*, *De Conceptu*, and *De Concordia*, we glimpse the most fully developed outlines of Anselm's moral theory. What are the key points of that theory most relevant here? Anselm reiterates that justice and injustice are to be found primarily in the will of rational beings and only derivatively in other things.²⁵ He also reemphasizes the role that properly directed reason is to play in moral life, points out that carnal appetites of the fallen creature are not in themselves bad, and stresses that it is the will assenting to these appetites that becomes bad, i.e. unjust. The distinction between three modalities of will—instrument, use, and affection or inclination—is at last explicitly made, and the two wills of *De Casu* are reinterpreted as two inclinations of the will, the one necessarily inclining human beings towards happiness and beneficial goods, or what appears as such for them, and the other towards justice. This second and higher inclination of the will structures, orients, and limits the will-for-happiness, enabling it to be as it ought to be. Justice as an inclination of the will also involves a valuation of that very justice as a good that ought to be preserved, by the free choice of the will, whenever it comes into conflict with other goods.

Anselm reaffirms that once justice in the will has been lost, or better put abandoned, a person cannot on his or her own regain it, without the aid of divine grace, and he elaborates in these later works on the forms of damage this condition of injustice progressively does to the person's will, appetites, and even reason. Once justice has been restored, it is up to the person what to do with it, whether and how to maintain it, or even to voluntarily build upon and increase that very justice within the will. A person is free in a fundamental sense through his or her possession of, perseverance in, and indeed love towards justice. Conversely, a person becomes unfree through abandoning that justice in favor of other desired and voluntarily chosen goods.

I have argued elsewhere that the rectitude of will maintained for its own sake that Anselm identifies with justice should be understood in terms of the possession, cultivation, or at least striving for the virtues, which can be understood as determinate modes of justice in the will, imposing right order upon the will to happiness, ultimately consolidated into habitual dispositions.²⁶ It must be granted that there

25. Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo*, bk. 1, ch. 11, *De Conceptu* ch. 3, *De Concordia* sec. 1, ch. 7.

26. Gregory Sadler, "Freedom, Inclinations of the Will, and Virtue in Anselm's Moral Theory," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*, vol. 81 (2007).

are few uses of the terms *virtus* and *vitium* in the treatises, and in a number of those occurrences those are rightly translated as something other than “virtue” or “vice” in the moral sense. There are also several places, however, where virtue and vice are proper translations for the terms. Still, those references might be viewed as providing relatively little textual support for the claim that Anselm is a virtue ethicist.

4. VIRTUE AND VICE IN OTHER ANSELMIAN TEXTS

When we shift our attention from the treatises to other Anselmian writings, we discover an interesting contrast. The prayers, letters, *De humanibus moribus*, and *Dicta anselmi* contain many more references to and mentions both of virtue and vice in general, as well as of specific virtues and vices. We may set aside, however, the three meditations, in which the term “virtue” occurs only as the *virtus salvationis*, rightly translated as “strength.”²⁷

What about the prayers? Anselm uses the terms “virtue” and “vice” dozens of times in these compositions. He portrays himself within the complex narrative structures of these prayers as a person “deformed by countless vices,”²⁸ “miserably cast down into the depths of vice,”²⁹ “a false monk, lost to all virtue, dominated by a crowd of vices.”³⁰ He laments that “the habit of vice has wiped away from the knowledge of the good.”³¹ He presents his soul, “the strength of its virtue dissolved, weighed down by a burden of vices.”³² He even disabuses himself of the notion that he exhibits “courage” (*fortitudo*)³³ in being able to tolerate his own condition.

God and the saints, by contrast, do possess the virtues. Those Anselm invokes most often in the *Prayers* are justice, love or charity, and faith. Virtues the saints possess both reside within them and derive ultimately from God. They are no mere passive qualities or habitual traits of character, but active dispositions to do good, to enact, align with, and communicate the divine justice in determinate manners. Anselm works these into the very structure of his petitions, for instance: “By all of those virtues in which you abound, O most chari-

27. He only uses this language in *Meditation 3*.

28. Anselm, *Prayer by a Bishop or Abbot*, p. 68.

29. Anselm, *Prayer to Saint Mary Magdalene*, p. 64.

30. Anselm, *Prayer to Saint Benedict*, p. 63.

31. Anselm, *Prayer to Saint Nicholas*, p. 58.

32. Anselm, *Prayer to Saint Peter*, p. 32.

33. Anselm, *Prayer to Saint John the Baptist*, p. 27

table Stephen, pray that “my thirsty soul may be filled by” charity “rich and full.”³⁴

Unsurprisingly, Anselm’s prayers do not elaborate, but instead presuppose, a moral theory oriented by virtue and vice. Clearly both of these are understood as habits, developed through and then dispositionally inclining one towards, characteristic actions. Just as clearly, it is not enough for a person just to *do* what is right or good. To become fully what God made that person for requires the cultivation of virtues and rooting out of vices. The good monk, for instance, “is fervent and lives only for virtue” and “mortifies the vices and the desires of the flesh.”³⁵

Much more explicit and promising treatments of virtue and vice are to be found in the *De humanibus moribus* and in the *Dicta Anselmi*. It does need to be pointed out that these do still remain for the most part fragmentary. From the very beginning of *De humanibus moribus*, the virtues are connected with willing rightly, that is, aligned to God’s will. The vices are a product of *propria voluntas* or *superbia*, which aligns the will with the Devil. Disobedience to God’s will opens one up to the “inclination of the vices and towards willing those things.”³⁶ Indeed, pride or self-will is so central in Anselm’s account that he later likens all the other vices to tributaries that flow originally from it, to children of self-will and the Devil and as soldiers who render service to self-will.³⁷ What inference might we draw from these comparisons? One of them is that the virtues and vices do indeed play an integral role in Anselm’s moral theory. They are situated within the inclinations of a person’s will, and stem from the use and commitments of a person’s will.

What else do we learn about virtue and vice from *De humanibus moribus*? There are several key insights articulated in that text, though admittedly not fully worked through. First, Anselm clearly indicates what he takes virtue and vice to be. He portrays both of these in their proper senses as “qualities of the soul.”³⁸ At first, these are not yet established (*instabiles*), but can be developed into dispositions (*mores*) when they become consolidated into habits (*in habitum redactae*).³⁹ “Good dispositions are called ‘virtues,’ and bad dispositions ‘vices,’”⁴⁰ he tells us, and goes on to clarify:

34. Anselm, *Prayer to Saint Stephen*, p. 53

35. Anselm, *Prayer to Saint Benedict*, p. 63.

36. Anselm, *De humanibus moribus*, ch.5, p. 40.

37. Anselm, *De humanibus moribus*, ch. 39, p. 52.

38. Anselm, *De humanibus moribus*, ch. 133, p. 89.

39. Anselm, *De humanibus moribus*, ch. 133, p. 89.

40. Anselm, *De humanibus moribus*, ch. 134, p. 89.

[T]he virtues prepare the way for outward good works, and the vices for evil ones. But it is not whenever one does a deed [associated with] virtue or vice, that a person is properly said to possess that very virtue itself or vice. For it is insofar as a person has [virtue or vice], when these are possessed from habituation [*ex consuetudine*], that human beings are said to be just or vicious.⁴¹

Anselm's metonymical slip into "just" as the opposed term to for vicious is entirely understandable given the close relationship between justice and virtue, injustice and vice, in his moral theory. Specific virtues are indeed determinate forms of justice within a person's will. As a virtue, justice is one among the other virtues, but it also exercises what might be called an architectonic role in relation to the other virtues as well.

Interestingly, justice is not the only virtue accorded such central and foundational importance in Anselmian moral theory. Charity or love arguably also plays such a role. Humility clearly possesses central importance, evidenced not only by the fact that as a virtue it opposes itself to the vice of self-will or pride, but also by the very similitudes Anselm employs in the *De humanibus moribus*. In one of these analogies, humility is said to prepare the ground for the cultivation or edification of the other virtues, and Anselm insists that if humility is absent, those virtues will lack foundation and even be eventually transformed into vices.⁴² In another, yet more striking metaphor, humility is depicted as a seven-story mountain, at the peak of which reside all of the other virtue, in personified forms.⁴³ By ascending this arduous ascent, the person escapes the shadowy and dangerous valley of pride, where the vices roam like wild beasts, attacking the unfortunate human being.

Anselm also makes several interesting distinctions in this work, fleshing out the conception of virtue and vice in Anselmian moral theory. As one example, he distinguishes between the interiority of a person, i.e. the soul and its acts and states, and the exteriority of the person, the body and its conditions or actions. "Virtue" and "vice," he tells us can apply to both of these. "Interior virtues" include "charity, humility, patience, kindness," while "exterior virtues" are things like "fasting, giving alms, keeping vigil in prayers, weeping, and other things of this sort." The interior sustains the exterior, so that if a person lacks the interior state of developed virtue, it will not be possi-

41. Anselm, *De humanibus moribus*, ch. 135, pp. 89–90.

42. Anselm, *De humanibus moribus*, ch. 97–98, p. 80.

43. Anselm, *De humanibus moribus*, ch. 100–109, pp. 80–82. This is also referenced in *Dicta Anselmi* ch. 1, and also in *Letter 418*.

ble to maintain the outward appearance and perform associated actions for long. Another distinction that he makes bears upon weaknesses of the soul, i.e. the vices. He calls certain of these “natural” to human beings, for example, gluttony and lust, which “from that very flesh, develop within a human being from infancy onward.”⁴⁴ Others are occasioned (*causalis*), involving some external cause at least at the beginning, but then becoming established within a person’s will.

5. VIRTUE AND VICE IN ANSELM’S *LETTERS*

Turning to the *Letters*, it must be admitted that we nowhere find one single, systematic, comprehensive presentation of an Anselmian moral theory, let alone of an explicitly articulated virtue ethics. What we do find instead, however, are three main things. First, there are a vast number of references to virtue and vice in general, and to specific virtues or vices, throughout the letters. Second, there are a number of short discussions of virtue and vice in general, setting out or emphasizing some doctrine Anselm feels is needed to be clear about. Third, there are also several discussions bearing upon specific virtues or vices, revealing to his addressee(s) and to us readers at least a portion of Anselm’s thoughts on these matters.

Space precludes spending much time on what we might call the more casual, or less explicitly developed, references to virtue and vice. Suffice it to say there are many of them. When setting aside references to specific virtues and vices, and just noting short mentions of virtue or vice in general, these occur in more than twenty letters from Anselm.⁴⁵ Charity or love is perhaps the most frequently referenced virtue, but there are many mentions as well of justice, obedience, prudence or wisdom, humility, concord, and even fortitude, as well as some of their opposed vices. It is a reasonable assumption that at least with many of his interlocutors, Anselm can rely upon a shared understanding of virtues and vices developed to some level in those addressees. After all, when he thinks something pertaining to these moral matters needs to be further explained, he typically does so (or suggests where the person might profitably turn for guidance).⁴⁶

44. Anselm, *De humanibus moribus*, ch. 121, p. 84.

45. Examples include Letters 2, 7, 51, 63, 65, 118, 131, 160, 169, 179, 183, 185, 199, 231, 238, 285, 312, 332, 343, 372, 403, 413, 420, 427, 446, 454. There are also references to moral dispositions or habits, e.g. in Letter 80.

46. An example of this is Letter 420: “the whole of holy scripture, if you have it explained to you, teaches you how you ought to live,” p. 365. Cf. also Letter 435.

What does Anselm teach in more depth and detail about virtue and vice through his letters? Five themes in particular stand out. One of these is that the development, practice, and preservation of the virtues requires that choices, and often difficult ones, be made by a person. A prime example of this is referred to in Letter 343, where Anselm advises Rainald who has resigned an unduly bestowed bishopric: “Do not let your heart yearn that God may grant you as a reward for virtue what you scorned for the sake of virtue. The virtue which you preserved is far more precious than what you rejected for its sake.”⁴⁷ This is precisely the type of choice where one either chooses justice or chooses some other thing viewed as a beneficial good. Choosing to maintain virtue for its own sake (whatever level one has of it) is how one concretely wills to maintain justice for its own sake.⁴⁸

Second, in other letters, Anselm points out several other things required to discern and walk “the ever-narrow paths of virtue.”⁴⁹ One of these is properly employing and developing our rational faculties. This involves not only cultivating prudence or wisdom, but also recognizing and rejecting erroneous lines of thought, desires, or reasoning, and furthermore realizing when we need to rely upon the counsel or prudence of other people rather than just our own assessments of matters.⁵⁰ Equally important is prudently managing one’s thoughts, desires, and emotions. Anselm teaches in Letter 414 for example, that instead of struggling directly against bad thoughts or intentions, it is better to “occupy your mind with some useful thought and intention until they disappear. For no thought or intention is ever driven out of your heart except by some other thought or intention which does not agree with it.”⁵¹ Following these courses leads to the “habitual practice of virtue and habitual love” (*virtutum consuetudo et consuetus amor*).⁵²

A third theme arises early on in the *Letters*. Anselm tells Odo and Lanzo that “in the matter of virtue, as it is harder to attain a quality which one did not earlier possess than it is to do without it by idleness, so it is harder to regain what one has lost through negligence than to

47. Letter 343, p. 280.

48. A similar line of moral reasoning is displayed in Anselm’s discussion with Lanfranc of the issue whether Saint Elphege, a previous archbishop of Canterbury, deserves to be regarded as a martyr or not. Eadmer, *Vita Anselmi*, p. 50.

49. Letter 37, p. 147.

50. This theme of relying upon the prudence or counsel of others arises in various manners in Letters 63, 67, 85, 121, 176, 221, 249, among other places.

51. Letter 414, pp. 360–61.

52. Letter 7, p. 109.

obtain what one knows he has not yet possessed.”⁵³ Anselm outlines in a number of letters a consistent view on virtue and vice that stresses that virtue, although one does advance in it, also requires a continual effort and progress to be made. He tells several other monks in letter 51: “always consider what is past as nothing, so you do not fail to hold onto those virtues you have attained; even if you are unable, through infirmity, to add anything to them, always strive to do so through persistent effort.”⁵⁴ He tells Countess Ida: “Nobody can maintain the degree of goodness in life which he has already achieved if he does not continually seek to progress towards even higher virtues. Someone who wants to avoid falling back, therefore, must continually strive for perfection.”⁵⁵

Fourth, progress towards virtue and the battle against vices does not take place in a spiritual vacuum. In Anselm’s view, whether we realize it or not, divine grace remains involved in some ways in our possession, exercise, growth, and maintenance of virtue. Through the use of free will (though occasionally against our wishes!), human beings also cooperate and collaborate with that divine grace. “If it is up to God always to guide us by his grace, so it is up to us to protect zealously what we receive by his help.”⁵⁶ Fifth, in our fallen world, virtue unfortunately places us into situations of difficulty and conflict. Anselm points out in *Letter 63*: “vice always envies virtue,” and he sets out a dilemma: “If you want to be free of the persecution of jealousy, therefore, either find a place where you can hide concealed from wicked people, or renounce virtues. But you will do neither of these, because one is impossible, and the other detestable.”⁵⁷

6. SPECIFIC VIRTUES AND VICES IN THE LETTERS

Anselm references, and at times discusses, specific virtues and vices with his correspondents. Not surprisingly, justice comes up at a number of points,⁵⁸ including several references to a specious or “arbitrary justice”⁵⁹ displayed in the goings-on in England. The letters do not significantly go beyond the understanding of justice developed in

53. Letter 2, p. 100.

54. Letter 51, p. 165.

55. Letter 131, p. 274. Similar discussions occur explicitly in Letters 183, 184, 231, 403, 420.

56. Letter 231, p. 201.

57. Letter 63, p. 178.

58. Letters 32, 80, 160, 165, 180, 252, 276, 267, 344.

59. Letters 178 and 206.

the treatises, but one common theme in them is that of a person suffering as a result of voluntarily maintaining justice in the face of inducements to abandon it. Courage is another virtue that Anselm simply references but does not discuss in any detail.⁶⁰ Anselm has more to say about several other virtues, each of which is particularly germane to (and more easily or reliably realized in) monastic life, but which in his view are incumbent upon other people as well. These are concord,⁶¹ patience, obedience, prudence, charity, and humility. Here in the interests of space, I will focus my discussion solely on the last two.

Anselm uses the terms “charity” (*caritas*) “love” (*amor, dilectio*), and “friendship” (*amicitia*) to denote a virtuous disposition towards others, towards God, and indeed towards oneself. In the letters, this turns out to be the most-often referenced virtue.⁶² It gets more substantive discussion in several of the letters. In 112, addressed to Hugh the hermit, at his interlocutor’s request, he provides a discourse that first explicitly connects love and concord of wills, frames love as the price for heavenly beatitude, then teaches what virtuous love requires:

[Y]ou will not be able to possess this perfect love unless you have emptied your heart of all other love. . . . Just as opposites cannot exist together at the same time, therefore, so this love cannot reside within a single heart with any other kind of love. So it is that those who fill their hearts with love of God and their neighbor will nothing but what God wills or another person wills—as long as this is not contrary to God.⁶³

Letter 189 contains a discussion of charity’s tendency to make people think better of others than they rightly deserve. “When charity alone is the cause of this,” Anselm counsels, “the error should not be accepted because of the good will of the love, nor is that love to be despised because of the fault of the error.” Instead, charity or love ought to spur us to become better than we are, to measure up to that image and affection. “Rather the love should be nourished so that the error may be corrected, and the error should be so expelled that the love may be retained.”⁶⁴ Charity also has an important epistemological function, as

60. Letters 2, 78, 134, 259, 332, 343, 344.

61. Anselm singles this out as a virtue, rather than as simply a condition, in Letter 450. He also discusses it by name in Letters 182, 205, 286, and 289.

62. Explicit references to charity, love, or friendship occur in over 40 of the Letters.

63. Letter 112, pp. 245–46.

64. Letter 189, pp. 74–75. Anselm is referring to his own situation in these passages.

Letter 85 indicates. “Charity should be loved more than knowledge. . . . Moreover, since all useful knowledge depends on charity. . . . I trust in the promise of Truth that, if we come together in its name with the affection of charity, the knowledge of Truth will be with us.”⁶⁵

What about the virtue of humility, which along with charity and justice, enjoys an architectonic function among the other virtues in Anselm’s moral theory? Within the earlier mentioned similitude from the *De humanibus moribus*, likening humility to a mountain opposed to the dark and shadowy valley of pride, he tells us:

[T]he levels by which one climbs to the mountain’s peak are the seven levels of humility, by which one attains to its perfection. . . . [O]ne who, leaving pride behind, begins to climb by the levels of humility, the more of them he or she climbs, the more, the ignorance being dissipated, he is opened to knowledge of himself. And indeed, the vices do not attack him, but instead the very good people, that is, the virtues, approach him. But when he should climb to highest level of humility, he rests with these very virtues in clear knowledge of self.⁶⁶

In one letter in particular, 285, prompted by Dom Conus, Anselm sets down some of his oral teachings about pride and humility. There he makes a set of further distinctions between pride in judgement, in the will, and in deed. The latter is a fault requiring correction, but is less bad than the other two. Anselm suggests that pride in judgement, thinking of oneself higher than one ought to, is particularly difficult to cure, but pride in the will is the most problematic. These modes of pride can also occur conjoined with each other. He then points out:

Against these kinds of pride, types of humility also exist: that is to say, a man may think humbly of himself, he may exercise his will humbly concerning himself in his treatment of and behavior towards others, and he may treat himself humbly. On account of each kind of pride a man is called proud; but on account of each type of humility, or of two of them, a man is not called humble, but only if all the types are there at the same time.

After these important clarifications, Anselm closes the discussion in the hope that “as God has granted me to understand pride and humility he may also grant me to avoid the one and acquire the other.”⁶⁷

65. Letter 85, p. 210.

66. Anselm, *De humanibus moribus*, ch. 100, pp. 80–81.

67. Letter 285, p. 204.

And in turn, as by way of bringing this paper to a close, I would like to highlight another remark Anselm makes about humility, namely that “the more a man advances in this virtue the more he is raised on high, and also in the other virtues.”⁶⁸ When we piece together these many references to and discussions of virtue and vice, it should be clear that the moral theory undergirding Anselm’s work is indeed a type of virtue ethics. His treatments of virtue and vice can be legitimately read back into the treatises, and these understood along with the letters, prayers, *De humanibus moribus* (and perhaps even the *Dicta Anselmi*) as providing at least the outlines of the “clearer than light” teaching Eadmer claimed Anselm provided on “the origins and, so to speak, the very seeds and roots and process of growth of all virtues and vices” and their attainment or avoidance.

68. Letter 189, p. 75.

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