

# ANSELM ON ETHICS

---

JEFFREY E. BROWER

There is a real question about whether Anselm developed anything like a systematic ethical theory.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, scholars have sometimes suggested that his treatment of ethical matters consists in little more than recapitulation of ethical principles implicit in Scripture or transmitted to him by Christian thinkers such as Augustine and Boethius.<sup>2</sup> The truth of the matter, however, is quite the opposite. Although it is easy to overlook the systematic nature of Anselm's ethical theorizing, as well as its genuine originality, his contribution to medieval ethical theory is considerable. Admittedly, none of his philosophical or theological works is devoted to the systematic presentation of ethical issues; nor is there much novelty to be found in them at the level of specific ethical principles. Nonetheless, it is possible to extract from his works

---

<sup>1</sup> References to Anselm are given (parenthetically in the text) according to the following abbreviations: M = *Monologion*; DV = *De veritate*; DLA = *De libertate arbitrii*; DCD = *De casu diaboli*; CDH = *Cur Deus Homo*; DC = *De Concordia*. All references are to the critical edition of Schmitt 1968, which I cite by page (and where appropriate, also by line) number. Although all translations are my own, for M, DV, DLA, and DCD I have consulted and sometimes relied extensively on the translations in Williams 1995a and 2002. For CDH and DC, I have consulted the translations in Hopkins and Richardson 2000 and Davies and Evans 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Sheets 1948 is engaged, at least partly, in the attempt to dispel this impression. For discussion of the relation between Augustine and Anselm, see Crouse 1958 and Yamazaki 1988.

something that moral philosophers today would recognize as a worked-out ethical theory—one that includes a sophisticated moral metaphysics, moral semantics, and moral psychology.<sup>3</sup>

For purposes of classification, we can divide ethical theories into two main categories, *teleological* and *deontological*, each of which admits of further subdivision.<sup>4</sup> Teleological (or good-based) theories attempt to explain the moral value of actions in terms of their conduciveness to some ultimate end or good state of affairs (*telos* in Greek): actions that promote this end are morally good, right, or obligatory, whereas actions that obstruct it, or promote its opposite, are morally bad, wrong, or prohibited. Nowadays the most familiar forms of teleological theory are ones that—like the utilitarianism of John Stuart Mill or G.E. Moore—identify the end of morality in terms of the goodness for all sentient creatures or the universe as a whole. During Anselm’s time, however, the only prominent forms were those that—like the eudaimonism of Plato and Aristotle—require agents to aim at their own individual happiness or well being (*eudaimonia* in Greek), where this is taken to include the good of others and to involve the possession of the moral and intellectual virtues.

By contrast with teleological theories, deontological (or duty-based) theories attempt to explain the moral value of actions in terms of their rightness or obligatoriness, a property they distinguish (at least conceptually) from conduciveness to the well being of any sentient creatures or the universe they inhabit. Because deontological theories place great emphasis on duty or obligation (*deon* in Greek), they typically also stress the need for proper motives or intentions, requiring agents not only to perform the right action, but also to perform it for the sake of its

---

<sup>3</sup> Anselm’s ethical views have received very little attention from contemporary scholars, and as a result there is no satisfactory systematic treatment of them available in the contemporary literature. Important aspects of Anselm’s ethical views, however, are discussed in Fairweather 1958, Gracia and Sanford 2003, Langston 1996, Visser and Williams 2001, and the works cited in note 1. For more complete bibliographical information, see Kienzler et al. 1999, especially §10.5.

<sup>4</sup> For the sake of simplicity, I treat *consequentialist* and *eudaimonistic* (or *virtue-ethical*) theories as species of teleological theory, though they are often treated separately.

rightness. Some familiar twentieth-century forms of deontology—such as the intuitionism of H.A. Prichard and W.D. Ross—claim that rightness or obligatoriness is a primitive or unanalyzeable property of actions to which we have direct, intuitive access. Others—such as the formalism of Immanuel Kant—attempt to analyze the rightness or obligatoriness of actions in terms of their formal features (e.g., their universalizability). During Anselm’s time, there don’t appear to have been any worked-out forms of deontology. Indeed, given the prominence of eudaimonism throughout the Middle Ages, deontological theory is often regarded as a late development, associated with the attempts of some late medieval philosophers to analyze the rightness of certain actions in terms of their conformity to the absolute will of God.

One of the most distinctive features of Anselm’s ethical theory is the extent to which it succeeds in combining elements of theories falling in both categories. At bottom, I shall argue, Anselm’s theory is deontological in nature: unlike the eudaimonism characteristic of this period, it separates morality from happiness (at least conceptually) and emphasizes the need for agents to be motivated by justice rather than happiness. This, in itself, is historically significant, since it is typically the late-medieval philosopher, John Duns Scotus (d. 1308), who is credited as being the first medieval thinker to develop a distinctively non-Aristotelian or duty-based conception of morality.<sup>5</sup> Despite the deontological orientation of Anselm’s ethical views, his account also incorporates central elements of medieval eudaimonistic ethical theory. Like other medieval eudaimonists, Anselm devotes considerable attention to the nature of happiness or the human good, ultimately identifying it with a form of union with God. Moreover, he argues at length that

---

<sup>5</sup> For Scotus’s ethical theory, see Hare 2001 and 2000, and Williams 1995b. Hare suggests not only that Scotus’s ethical theory can be seen as a natural development of views already present in Anselm, but also that Anselm’s ethical theory can be seen as a natural development of certain views of Augustine. Although Hare seems to me right about the relationship between Scotus and Anselm, his suggestion about the relationship of both to Augustine seems mistaken. Augustine certainly emphasizes the role of justice in morality, and in this respect must be regarded as a source for Anselm’s views. But I see no evidence to suggest that the emphasis on justice led Augustine either to separate morality from happiness or to develop (as both Anselm and Scotus do) a doctrine of two affections or wills.

right action necessarily leads to happiness (at least in the long run) and that something like Aristotelian virtue has an essential role to play in morality.<sup>6</sup>

The main features of Anselm's ethical theory can all be seen as deriving from his distinctive conception of morality in terms of justice rather than happiness. My discussion, therefore, is organized accordingly. I begin (in Section I) with a brief examination of Anselm's views about the nature of justice, and its place in his theory of value generally. This examination will provide us with Anselm's answers to some familiar metaethical questions—that is, questions about the nature of moral language and the properties in virtue of which such language applies to the world. With answers to these questions in hand, I then turn (in Sections II and III) to the details of Anselm's normative views and moral psychology—that is, to his views about the conditions under which moral properties are exemplified and the psychology required to explain our motivation with respect to them.<sup>7</sup>

Because the elements of Anselm's ethical theory are scattered throughout a large number of sources, ranging over a host of topics, and because they seem to me to show no significant change over time, I will draw freely on his entire corpus in my discussion. Moreover, because his views are interesting, in part, for the extent to which they succeed at integrating aspects of eudaimonistic ethical theory, I will also compare them, wherever appropriate, with a standard medieval form of eudaimonism—helping myself to the succinct formulations it receives at the

---

<sup>6</sup> Anselm's success at integrating key elements of eudaimonism is all the more striking given the paucity of resources that he had to work with. Because he belongs to the period of medieval philosophy prior to the recovery of Aristotle in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, he was writing well before any part of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, one of the chief sources for later medieval eudaimonism, was available in translation to philosophers in the Latin West. For an account of eudaimonistic ethical theory, therefore, Anselm had to rely on what could be gathered from the often diffuse writings of such philosophers and theologians as Augustine, Boethius, Cicero, and Seneca.

<sup>7</sup> I have little to say, in what follows, about Anselm's theory of action. But see Normore 1998 for an argument that Anselm's moral psychology leads him to embrace a distinctive theory of action, one that differs in important respects from that of medieval Aristotelians.

hands of philosophers such as Aquinas and Scotus, rather than trying to reconstruct it in every case from Anselm's own sources.<sup>8</sup>

## I. ANSELM'S METAETHICS

Throughout his works Anselm assumes that moral statements, of the form "X is good" or "X is right", are either true or false (and hence have *cognitive* value), and also that their truth or falsity is independent of the (objects of) beliefs, desires, and other psychological states of individual human beings (and hence that the cognitive value of moral statements is an *objective* matter). In contemporary terms, therefore, he accepts both cognitivism and objectivism in ethics. In this respect, Anselm doesn't differ from most other medieval philosophers, who also assume that moral statements are objectively true or false. There is another respect, however, in which he does differ from most other medieval philosophers—namely, in his views about the nature and types of properties that must be appealed to in order to explain the objective truth or falsity of moral statements.

*I.1 Types of Value.* According to a standard medieval form of eudaimonism, all value is to be explained in terms of goodness, and all goodness is to be explained in terms of being. According to this theory, therefore, the only properties that must be invoked to explain the objective truth or falsity of moral statements are the natural properties in virtue of which things exist or have

---

<sup>8</sup> For useful summaries of medieval eudaimonistic ethical theory, to which my own discussion is indebted, see Gallagher 1990; MacDonald 1990, 1991a, and 1991b; and Williams 1995b.

being.<sup>9</sup> Since the distinctive nature of Anselm's views can be brought into relief by contrasting them with this sort of medieval theory, it will be useful to spell out a few of its details.

Eudaimonism, of the standard medieval variety, is grounded in a form of universal teleology. Things belong to the specific natural or metaphysical kinds they do in virtue of possessing certain natural capacities or dispositions (namely, those that are definitive of their kind). Thus, things belong to the kind *plant* if they possess all and only the capacities definitive of plants (such as the capacity to take in nutrition, reproduce, and grow); whereas they belong to the kind *human being* if they possess all and only the capacities definitive of human beings (such as the capacity for rational cognition and volition). Now to the extent that things have the capacities associated with a specific kind, they are said to *exist* and hence *to have being* as members of that kind. Thus, things are said to have being *as plants* just in case they possess the capacities definitive of plants; whereas they are said to have being *as humans* just in case they possess the capacities definitive of human beings; and likewise for other kinds of things (e.g., cats, dogs, horses). We might call this sort of being 'essential being', since it is associated with the nature or essence of a thing, placing it within its specific metaphysical kind.

In virtue of possessing their distinctive capacities, things not only have essential being (i.e., existence as a member of some kind); they also have an inclination to a set of further states or activities. Moreover, it is the actualization of these further states or activities that constitutes a thing's being fully developed as a member of its kind. Thus, a fully developed plant or animal will possess not only the capacities definitive of its kind, but also the corresponding states or conditions (in the case of human beings, they are called 'virtues') that constitute the actualization

---

<sup>9</sup> This is at least one of the motivations behind the standard medieval view that things are good to the extent they are in being, and that evil is a privation of being. For discussion of the various considerations motivating this view, see the introduction, as well as the essays, in MacDonald 1991a.

of these capacities. Because it is typically an “accidental” or contingent matter whether a thing possesses such further states or conditions, medieval eudaimonists conceive of them as Aristotelian accidents—that is, as properties falling within one of Aristotle’s nine accidental categories. Moreover, because of their special relationship to the kind-defining capacities of their possessor, medieval eudaimonists also think of such states or conditions as giving their possessor additional being or actuality. Hence, a fully developed plant or animal, they say, not only has existence as a plant or an animal, but also has “more being” as a plant or animal than other, less developed members of their kind. We might call this second sort of being ‘kind-relative accidental being’—*accidental* because it contrasts with *essential* being, and *kind-relative* because it contrasts with accidental being (such as hair color or blood type in human beings) that does not directly contribute to something’s being an ideal member of its kind.<sup>10</sup>

As this brief sketch makes clear, medieval eudaimonists conceive of being as involving more than just existence. On the one hand, they think of something as *having being* in virtue of existing. Like most contemporary philosophers, moreover, they think of this type of being as an all-or-nothing affair: something exists (full stop) just in case it has primary being—that is, just in case it has the capacities definitive of some natural or metaphysical kind. On the other hand, however, medieval eudaimonists also think of something as *having being* to the extent that it actualizes the capacities associated with its kind—that is to say, to the extent it has *kind-relative accidental being*. In this respect, they differ from most contemporary philosophers. For in conceiving of kind-relative accidental being as a type of *being*—despite the fact that, unlike existence, it is not an all-or-nothing affair, but rather comes in degrees—medieval eudaimonists are led to say that being itself comes in degrees. Even so, it should be clear that the sense in

---

<sup>10</sup> The distinction between essential and (kind-relative) accidental being is customary in late medieval philosophy. See, for example, Scotus’s discussion in *Quodlibet*, q. 18.

which they think being comes in degrees is quantitative rather than qualitative. Things have being, in the first place, in virtue of existing, and they have “more (or less) being” to the extent that they have quantitatively more (or less) kind-relative accidental being—that is, quantitatively more (or less) of the accidents required to complete them as members of their kind.<sup>11</sup>

According to medieval eudaimonists, the complete development of a thing is not only *an* end toward which its nature inclines it, but also *the good* for things of that kind. Like being, therefore, they regard goodness as kind-relative and degreed: to the extent that a plant (or human being) is fully developed, to that same extent it has both *being* and *goodness* as a plant (or human being). In the ideal case, plants (or human beings) will have not only the essential being associated with their specific kind, but also *all* the kind-relative accidental being it is possible for them to have. That is to say, they will be good as plants (or human beings) *in every respect*. In the limiting case, by contrast a plant (or human being) will have *only* the essential being associated with its kind, and hence be good as a plant (or human being) *only in one respect*. Finally, in most if not all actual cases, plants (or human beings) will have the essential being associated with their kind and *some but not all* of the kind-relative accidental being it is possible for them to have, and hence be good as plants (or human beings) *in some respects but not others*.

Anselm’s ethical theory shares much in common with that of the medieval eudaimonists. Like them, he admits a type of value that supervenes on being: things are good, he says, to the

---

<sup>11</sup> This last point must be qualified in light of the fact that medieval eudaimonists also distinguish degrees of being in connection with different metaphysical kinds, so that the being of God is said to be greater than that of human beings, which in turn is said to be greater than that of plants. Even here, however, degrees of being are best thought of quantitatively rather than qualitatively. Thus, a human has “more being” *qua* human than a plant *qua* plant because members of the kind *human being* possess quantitatively more capacities than members of the kind *plant*: they possess all the capacities associated with plants (such as the capacity for nutrition, growth, and reproduction) as well as several others (such as the capacity for rational thought and volition). The same is also said to be true of God relative to the members of all other kinds (including *plant* and *human being*)—though this leads to familiar puzzles about how God can be said to possess the capacities associated with material beings, puzzles which the medievals attempt to solve by appealing to the notion of *eminent* possession. Cf., e.g., Aquinas ST 1.4.2.



extent that they have being (M 1). Like the medieval eudaimonists, moreover, Anselm recognizes two different ways in which things can have being, and hence two corresponding types of goodness. On the one hand, he says, things can have goodness just in virtue of possessing a nature or essence (where a nature or essence is that which accounts for a thing's natural powers or capacities). This sort of goodness appears to be what we called 'essential goodness' above. On the other hand, he says, things can also have goodness in virtue of actualizing the capacities or powers associated with their nature (DCD 12). This appears to be what we called 'kind-relative accidental goodness'.

In ethical contexts, Anselm has little to say about essential goodness, presumably because insofar as it derives from our nature, it isn't something over which we have control. The notion of kind-relative accidental goodness receives more attention from him. Unlike the medieval eudaimonists, however, he is prepared to distinguish two different types of goodness here too, one of which he refers to as 'advantage', the other as 'justice':

Setting aside the fact that every nature is called 'good', there are two goods, and two evils contrary to them, that we commonly speak of. One good is that which is called 'justice', and whose contrary evil is injustice. The other good is that which can be called 'the advantageous', or so it seems to me, and the evil opposed to it is the disadvantageous. (DCD 12, 255:4-8)

As passages such as this one help to make clear, Anselm recognizes three types of value or goodness: namely, essential goodness and two types of kind-relative accidental goodness, advantage and justice. As we shall see, 'advantage' is Anselm's name for the type of kind-relative accidental goodness recognized by medieval eudaimonists—that is, the value associated with a thing's complete actualization—whereas 'justice' is his name for a type of accidental goodness peculiar to human beings (or rational agents). Both types of value qualify as "accidental" because whether, and to what extent, a rational agent possesses them is a contingent

or accidental matter. From the ethical perspective, moreover, they are the only really interesting types of value—not only because their possession is under the agent’s control, but also because they can, at least from the agent’s perspective, come into conflict. According to Anselm, an agent possesses justice if and only if that agent does what it ought to do (or fulfills its duty); but duty, he thinks, can sometimes require agents to sacrifice advantage.

We shall see more clearly below (in Sections II) how Anselm understands the relation between justice and advantage, when we turn to his normative views concerning the conditions under which each of these properties is possessed. Before turning to these conditions, however, it will be useful to clarify how Anselm conceives of nature of the properties themselves. Does he think of them as primitive, unanalyzable properties (as moral intuitionists such as Prichard and Ross do)? Or does he rather think of them (in the spirit of a Kant or Scotus) as somehow analyzable in terms of other properties, say universalizability or conformity with divine commands? In order to address these questions clearly, it will be useful to impose some terminological uniformity. Hereafter, therefore, I shall use the term ‘value’ (rather than ‘goodness’) to refer the genus of which essential goodness, advantage, and justice are species; and I shall use the term ‘goodness’ to refer to essential goodness and advantage, referring to the third species of value simply as ‘justice’. Eventually we shall see that when Anselm himself wants to speak about value in general, and hence about the genus to which goodness and justice belong, he introduces another evaluative term—namely, ‘rightness’.

*I.2 The Nature of Value.* As we have seen, medieval eudaimonists admit one fundamental type of value, goodness, which is kind-relative and admits of degrees. Because they regard this type of value as “supervening on”, or explicable in terms of, the natural properties in virtue of which

things have being, they typically deny that goodness is anything ontologically over and above such properties. In other words, they conceive of goodness as “multiply realizable”—that is, as a functional property realized by the different natural properties in virtue of which different things are completed as members of their kind. In conceiving of goodness in this way, many medieval eudaimonists take themselves to be following Aristotle, who famously rejects the Platonic view that we must admit a Form of goodness in which all good things participate.<sup>12</sup>

As we have also seen, Anselm too admits a type of goodness that supervenes on being, a type that is both kind-relative and comes in degrees. Unlike medieval eudaimonists, however, he thinks we must recognize a distinct Form or property for such goodness. Indeed, in *Monologion*, he claims that we must recognize a distinct Form wherever we have a property admitting of degrees, introducing the following anti-Aristotelian (or Platonic) principle:

- (P1) Whenever two (or more) things can be said to be *F* to the same or different degree, we must understand these things as being *F* by virtue of participating in something like the Platonic Form or standard of *F-ness*.<sup>13</sup>

His paradigm example of things satisfying this principle is that of just things:

Whenever things are said to be equally just, or more or less just, in comparison with one another, they can be understood as just only through justice, which is not different in the diverse things. (M1 14:13-15)

But as he immediately goes on to say, the same principle applies to good things as well:

But, then, since it is certain that all good things, if they are compared with one other, are either equally or unequally good, it is necessary that all good things are good through something understood to be the same in the diverse things. (M1 14: 15-17)

---

<sup>12</sup> Cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.

<sup>13</sup> Anselm doesn't explicitly speak of *participation* in the *Monologion*; nor does he explicitly refer to goodness and justice there as Platonic *Forms* or *standards*. Nonetheless, it's natural to assume that he's following Augustine in this regard, who does explicitly talk in this way (e.g., in *De libero arbitrio* II), especially since Anselm does invoke such notions in other works (see, e.g., DV 2 for an explicit appeal to participation and DV 13 for his argument that God is the Form in which all true things participate). For discussion of the historical context in which Anselm develops his views about universals, see Iwakuma 1996. For discussion of his understanding of universals themselves, see Adams 1972, Henry 1963, and Hopkins 1976.

In addition to (P1), Anselm also thinks we must endorse another broadly Platonic principle:

- (P2) The Form of *F-ness* must itself be *F*—indeed, *F* through itself—since it is the source of the *F-ness* of all other things.

Anselm makes (P2) explicit in the case of goodness: “Now who would doubt that this thing, through which all goods exist, is itself a great good?” And since he takes this Form, as well as every other, to reside somehow in God, he concludes that what we say about goodness must be said of God: “Therefore, He is good through himself, since every good exists through him” (M 1 15:4-7). And the same, he says, applies to the Form of justice.

As the foregoing helps to make clear, we must distinguish on Anselm’s view the goodness or justice of *Forms* from the goodness or justice of *things participating in them*. Unlike some Platonists, Anselm never shrinks from saying that things other than the Form of goodness or justice can truly be good or just. Nonetheless, he’s committed to saying that the goodness or justice of such things is nothing but their standing in a certain relation to these Forms (namely, the relation of participation). But what about the rightness or goodness of the Forms or standards themselves? Anselm doesn’t tell us very much about them, but what he does say—that they are good and just “through” themselves—certainly suggests that they are good and just, respectively, solely in virtue of being what they are. Moreover, since Anselm says that each of these Forms or standards somehow resides in God, we can infer that God, too, must be regarded as good or just solely in virtue of what he is.

At this point a question, inspired by Plato’s *Euthyphro*, arises about how Anselm understands the relationship between the standards of goodness or justice and God. In locating these standards in God, does Anselm mean to be articulating some type of divine command theory, as his late medieval admirer, John Duns Scotus, did? That is to say, does he think that

things are good or just merely because they conform to God's will, or that they conform to God's will because they are good or just?

Anselm is aware of the need to answer this question. As it turns out, he does think that whatever God wills is just or right and whatever he does not will—or wills against—is unjust or wrong. But as he points out, it doesn't follow from this that something is just or right simply because God wills it:

When it is said “what God wills is just, and that what he does not will is not just”, this must not be understood to mean that if God were to will anything inappropriate, it would be just *because* he willed it. (CDH 1.12, 70:14-17)

This passage certainly suggests that Anselm rejects any straightforward identification of justice or rightness with what God wills. Indeed, on the basis of what he says here, it's natural to suppose that he would reject *any* type of divine command theory of value, and hence to conclude that insofar as standards of value reside in God, they must reside not in his will or other psychological states, but in his nature, where this is conceived of as utterly distinct from any psychological states.

The picture that emerges from this passage is complicated, however, by the fact that, like other medieval philosophers and theologians, Anselm accepts the doctrine of divine simplicity. According to this doctrine, God is an absolutely simple being, devoid of any distinct metaphysical parts, properties, or constituents. The doctrine leads Anselm not only to deny any real distinction between God and his nature or will, but also to deny any real distinction between God and any of the Forms or standards residing in him. Thus, comparing God's justice to the justice of a human being, he says:

A human being cannot *be* justice, but it can *have* justice. Consequently, a just human being is not understood as existent justice, but rather as having justice. By contrast, the supreme nature cannot properly be said to *have* justice, but rather to *exist as* justice.

Therefore, when it is said to be just, it is properly understood as existent justice. (M 16, 30:20-23)

Insofar as Anselm's rejection of divine command theory appears to require a real distinction between the divine nature and will, passages like this one might seem problematic. After all, if God is identical both with his nature and with the standard of justice, and each is in turn identical with his will, then it might appear that he is committed to some form of divine command theory after all.<sup>14</sup> I strongly suspect, however, that Anselm would deny the validity of this last inference. Even if God is identical both with the standard of justice and with his will, there is still a *conceptual* distinction to be drawn between the two, so that it is not *qua* participating in God's will that something is right or just, but *qua* participating in the Form of justice. And this, Anselm may assume, is all that's needed to avoid commitment to any type of divine command theory.

The assumption that we can distinguish (at least conceptually) which Form a given thing participates in, even if all Forms are identical with God, seems to be required for the success of Anselm's project as a whole. For as we shall see, in the special case of the will (and the agents who possess it), he wants to maintain that a thing can participate in justice without participating in goodness, despite the fact that God is identical with each. This is not the place to pursue the doctrine of divine simplicity in detail. Nonetheless, it must be recognized as important element of Anselm's ethical theory, not only for the reason just given, but also because one of its consequences—namely, that God is identical with the standard of justice—will become important later on, when we examine Anselm's views about moral motivation.

---

<sup>14</sup> Anselm's argument in CDH 2.17, that all necessity and possibility are subject to God's will, might be taken to support this conclusion, assuming that some moral truths are necessary (or possible). It is important to recognize, however, that Anselm's concern in this chapter is primarily with the question of whether anything external to God necessitates (in the sense of *compels*) him to do the things he does.

In the end, therefore, I think it's fair to say that Anselm's metaethical views commit him to a type of theistic Platonism, which we may summarize as follows:

Anselm's Theistic Platonism:

- (i) There are Forms of goodness and justice;
- (ii) These Forms (like all others) exist in God—or rather, given divine simplicity, are identical with God, though they can be conceptually (but not really) distinguished from his will and other psychological states;
- (iii) These Forms are good or just solely virtue of being what they are, whereas all other things are good or just in virtue of, and to the extent that, they participate in them.

Anselm's commitment to (i) and (iii) distinguishes him from those Aristotelians who deny that there are Forms for any fundamental types of value. By contrast, his commitment to (ii) distinguishes him from those medievals (such as Scotus) who attempt to explain at least certain types of value in terms of divine commands. Indeed, the conjunction of all three commitments seem to align Anselm with recent moral theorists, such as Prichard and Ross, who think of the fundamental types of value as irreducible or unanalyzeable—though even here there are differences, since Anselm thinks of creaturely value in terms of irreducible *relations* rather than *properties*.

Anselm's theistic Platonism leaves unresolved certain questions that we might expect a metaethical account of his sort to answer. For example, how exactly are we supposed to conceive of the genus of value? What do all species of this genus have in common, and what are the differentiae by which they are distinguished? Anselm does have answers to these questions. But since they emerge only in the context of his normative ethics and moral psychology, I shall hold off presenting them until we have had a chance to see the basic contours of his views in each of these areas.

## II. THE ROOTS OF ANSELM'S NORMATIVE ETHICS AND MORAL PSYCHOLOGY

In the course of examining Anselm's views about justice and goodness, an account of the conditions under which these properties are exemplified has begun to emerge. A thing can be said to exemplify justice if and only if it is doing what it ought to be doing or fulfilling its duty. By contrast, a thing exemplifies goodness if and only if it is a fully developed member of its kind. Now since being complete as a member of one's kind is just a matter of actualizing the natural powers or capacities distinctive of that kind—say, the capacity for nutrition in the case of plants, or to be strong and swift in the case of horses (cf. M 2)—the conditions for possessing goodness are fairly clear (or at least as clear as the theory of natural kinds underlying it). But what is involved in a thing's *doing what it ought to be doing*, and hence in the conditions for possessing justice? As medieval eudaimonists see it, when a human being has done all that's required for it to be complete as a member of its kind, there is a clear sense in which it has done what it "ought" to do. Indeed, this appears to be all there is to the notion of obligation or rightness for medieval eudaimonists.<sup>15</sup> Assuming, however, that Anselm really takes justice to be a type of value distinct from goodness, this can't be what he has in mind when he speaks of obligation. But then what does he have in mind? How are we to distinguish the conditions for possessing justice from the conditions for possessing goodness? The rest of this chapter is largely given over to answering these questions. In this section, I identify the general form these answers take; in the following section, I fill them out in further detail.

*II.1 Rightness, Goodness, and Justice.* In order to determine Anselm's views about justice and its relation to goodness, we must turn to his account of rightness in general. As I indicated in the



discussion of Anselm's metaethics, rightness is the genus of which both goodness and justice are species. Hence, his discussions of the nature of rightness are the natural place to look for an account of the difference between these two species—in particular, the different conditions required for their possession.

Anselm's only extended treatment of rightness, and the conditions under which its various species are possessed, occurs in his *De veritate*. This text is one of three dialogues “pertaining to the Study of Holy Scripture” (DV preface). As its title indicates, the topic of *De veritate* is truth, but the dialogue covers much more than philosophers now associate with this topic.

The dialogue opens with a student, perhaps one of Anselm's own students, asking him about the relationship between God and truth:

Student: Since we believe that God is truth, and we say that truth is in many other things, I would like to know whether we ought to acknowledge that, wherever truth is said to be, God is that truth. (DV 1, 176:4-6)

No doubt the student's question is prompted by passages of Scripture such as *John* 14:6, where Christ asserts “I am the way, *the truth*, and the life”, and the extended reflections on such passages one can find in authorities such as Augustine.<sup>15</sup> As Anselm sees it, the student's question must be ultimately answered affirmatively. In the last chapter of the dialogue, he argues that since all true things are true by participating in the Form of Truth, and since this Form resides in God—or given divine simplicity, is identical with God—true things are true by participating in God. Hence, in every case God is their truth or the Form by which they are true (DV 13). Rather than begin the dialogue with an affirmative answer to the student's question, however, Anselm approaches the issue indirectly, attempting to show first that truth is identical

---

<sup>15</sup> At least bracketing certain considerations having to do with natural law. Cf., e.g., Aquinas ST 1-2.94.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. e.g., *De libero arbitrio* 2.

with rightness.<sup>17</sup> This enables him to introduce an elaborate theory of truth and value, without which he thinks a straight affirmative answer to the student's question would be unacceptable.<sup>18</sup> Since the general theory of truth and value will be important for understanding Anselm's views about justice and its relation to goodness, we must begin by examining it.

In order to see the connection between truth and rightness in general, Anselm asks us to consider the case of truth in statements, the most familiar bearers of truth. The key to understanding the truth of statements, he suggests, lies in understanding their purpose. By 'purpose' here Anselm appears to mean *that end or good toward which a thing's nature directs it*. Since to be a statement, on his view, is to just to be certain kind of sentence or proposition—one that has the capacity to be true or false—he says that the purpose of statements is to correspond to reality.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the purpose of an affirmative statement, he says, is to signify as being the case what is the case, whereas that of a negative statement is to signify as not being the case what is not the case (DV 2).

Having thus identified the purpose of statements, Anselm proceeds to argue that when they are fulfilling it—that is, when they are actually corresponding to reality—they are doing what they "ought" to do, or what it is "right" for things of their kind to do, and hence possess rightness. But since statements are also true, and hence possess truth, under precisely the same conditions, he claims that their rightness *is* their truth:

Teacher: For what purpose is an affirmation made?

Student: For the purpose of signifying as being the case what is the case.

---

<sup>17</sup> Anselm actually distinguishes at one point (DV 11) between the rightness perceptible by the senses and the rightness perceptible only by the mind, and argues that, strictly speaking, truth should be identified only with rightness of the latter sort. For my purposes, however, we can ignore this complication and think of rightness perceptible only by the mind as rightness in general.

<sup>18</sup> In this regard, Anselm may be consciously following Augustine's example in *De libero arbitrio*. In book 2 of this work, Augustine is concerned to show that God is identical with truth, but he attempts to do so only after first attempting to establish the identity of truth with another evaluative notion (though in his case, the evaluative notion is wisdom rather rightness).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. DV 2 and chapter 9 of this volume for Anselm's view of statements.

T: So it ought to do that. --S: Certainly.  
 T: So when it signifies as being the case what is the case, it signifies what it ought to.  
 S: Clearly.  
 T: And when it signifies what it ought to, it signifies rightly. --S: Yes.  
 T: Now when it signifies rightly, its signification is right. --S: No doubt about it.  
 T: So when it signifies as being the case what is the case, its signification is right.  
 S: That follows.  
 T: Furthermore, when it signifies as being the case what is the case, its signification is true.  
 S: Indeed it is both right and true when it signifies as being the case what is the case.  
 T: Then its being right is the same thing as its being true: that is, its signifying as being the case what is the case. --S: Indeed, they are the same.  
 T: So its truth is nothing other than its rightness.  
 S: Now I see clearly that this kind of truth [i.e., the truth of statements] is rightness. (DV 2, 178: 8-26)

There are obvious problems with the argument that emerges from this passage. For one thing it appears to be of the following form:

- (1) A statement has rightness just in case it corresponds to reality (since in that case it is fulfilling its purpose and hence doing what it ought to do).
  - (2) But a statement is also true (or has truth) just in case it corresponds to reality.
- ∴ (3) The truth of a statement is its rightness.

But this form of argument is invalid. Even if the conditions under which statements possess the properties of truth and rightness are the same, it doesn't follow—at least without further assumptions that Anselm doesn't provide here—that their truth and rightness are identical. (Consider the analogous properties of being a creature with a heart and being a creature with a kidney, which are traditionally spoken of as being exemplified under the same conditions.)

But even setting aside the form of the argument, one might be skeptical of the account of truth that emerges from it. According to it, truth (or rightness) is not to be *identified* with the correspondence that true statements have to reality; rather it is a property or feature that true statements have *in virtue of* such correspondence. As indicated above, however, Anselm thinks of truth as a Platonic Form (or aspect of God) in which true things participate. Hence, the truth

(or rightness) of statements, on his view, is nothing but their standing in an appropriate relation to the Form or standard of Truth, which is God himself!

If the foregoing argument were all Anselm had to offer on behalf of the identity of truth and rightness, the thesis itself might seem to have very little going for it. I suspect, however, that the argument stated above is not what explains Anselm's sympathy for the general thesis; rather it is his sympathy for the general thesis that explains his acceptance of the argument, along with the consequences that follow from it. But what, then, explains his sympathy? Anselm himself seems to provide the answer when he points out what the greatest virtue of this thesis: namely, its ability to make sense of the fact that Scripture applies the notion of truth to non-linguistic items such as the will and to action:

The Truth Itself [i.e., Christ] claims that there is truth in the will when he says that the devil "did not remain steadfast in the truth" [John 8:44]. For it was only in his will that he was in the truth and then abandoned the truth. (DV 4, 180:21-23)

We must equally believe that there is truth in action as well, just as the Lord says: "He who does evil hates the light" [John 3:20], and "He who does the truth comes to the light" [John 3:21]. (DV 5, 181:12-14)

Taken on their own, passages such as these might seem puzzling. But as Anselm points out, on the assumption that truth is identical with rightness, their sense becomes perfectly clear. Thus, in the case of the will, he says:

If [the devil] was in rightness and in the truth so long as he willed what he ought to will—namely, that for the sake of which he had received a will—and if he abandoned rightness and truth when he willed what he ought not to will, then we can understand truth in this case as nothing other than rightness, since both truth and rightness in his will were nothing other than his willing what he ought to will. (DV 4, 181:4-8)

Likewise in the case of truth in action:

If doing evil and doing the truth are opposites, as the Lord indicates when he says "He who does evil hates the light" and "He who does the truth comes to the light", then doing the truth is the same as doing good, since doing good and doing evil are contraries. Therefore, if doing the truth and doing good are opposed to the same thing, they are not

diverse in their signification. Now everyone agrees that he who does what he ought to do, does good and what is right (*rectitudinem facit*). From this it follows that doing what is right is doing the truth, since it is clear that to do the truth is to do good, and to do good is to do what is right. So nothing is clearer than that the truth of an action is its rightness. (DV 5, 181:19-28)

In the end, therefore, the identification of truth with rightness seems to be justified, for Anselm, not only—or even primarily—because of the argument given above, but rather because it provides us with a single, unified account of truth that can be applied to such disparate cases as truth in statements, will, actions, as well as various other cases (cf. DV 3, 6-7).

Be this as it may, the important question for our purposes is what this general account of truth or rightness has to do with Anselm's ethical theory. So far, it doesn't seem to have helped us make much progress toward answering our original question about the relationship between the two species of rightness, namely, goodness and justice. Indeed, from what we've just seen of Anselm's general account of rightness, it might appear that no such answer could be forthcoming. For what the foregoing account suggests, if anything, is that Anselm's notion of rightness captures nothing more than the eudaimonist notion of goodness. After all, Anselm tells us that something possesses rightness just in case it is doing what it ought to do. But according to the general account this is nothing but its fulfilling the purpose dictated by its nature—which just appears to be the conditions under which the eudaimonist says that a thing possesses goodness.<sup>20</sup> What we still want to know, therefore, is whether there is anything in Anselm's

---

<sup>20</sup> This is most clear, as we have seen, in the case of statements. Interestingly, in the context of statements, Anselm distinguishes two kinds of rightness (or truth), which correspond exactly to the two kinds of goodness he distinguishes in the *Monologion*—namely, essential goodness and the kind-relative accidental goodness by which a thing is completed as a member of its kind (i.e., advantage). Thus, statements have one kind of rightness (or truth), he says, just in virtue of having the capacity to correspond to reality, and they have another kind of rightness (or truth) in virtue of actualizing this capacity (DV 2). But, of course, this just appears to be another way of saying that, in virtue of possessing the first kind of rightness, a statement has essential goodness (and hence qualifies as a good statement in some respect), whereas in virtue of possessing the second kind of rightness, it also has the accidental goodness of advantage (and hence qualifies as a good statement in every respect).

discussion of rightness to ground the distinction he draws in his metaethical discussions between goodness and justice?

Anselm provides the beginnings of an answer in chapter 12 of *De veritate*, where he specifically turns to the question of justice. In its ordinary sense, he tells us there, justice is that species of rightness that “deserves praise, just as its opposite, injustice, deserves reproach”. He then proceeds to argue that rightness of this sort must be identified with rightness of will:

Teacher: Since all justice is rightness, the justice that makes praiseworthy the one who preserves it does not exist anywhere at all except in rational natures.

Student: That must be right.

T: Where, then, do you think this justice exists in human beings, who are rational?

S: Either in the will, or in knowledge, or in action.

T: If someone understands correctly or acts correctly, but does not will correctly, will anyone praise him for his justice?

S: No.

T: Therefore, this justice is not rightness of knowledge or rightness of action, but *rightness of will*. (DV 12, 193:4-13)

Of course, the mere fact that Anselm identifies justice with rightness of will does not by itself show it to be a type of value distinct from goodness. Even the medieval eudaimonists typically allow that the accidental goodness by which rational creatures are completed as members of their kind is under their voluntary control, and hence intimately connected with their will. Indeed, this explains why they think the kind-relative accidental goodness of rational creatures qualifies as *moral goodness*.<sup>21</sup>

In order to see why Anselm conceives of justice as a distinct type of value, therefore, we must look beyond its mere connection to will. Indeed, as I now want to argue, the basis for Anselm’s distinction between rightness possessed by the will—that is, justice—and the rightness possessed by everything else, lies in the fact that, in the special case of the will, it is possible for *fulfillment of purpose* (i.e., the conditions for possessing rightness) to come apart from *complete*

---

<sup>21</sup> Cf., e.g., Aquinas, ST 1-2.6 *divisio textus*.

*actualization* (i.e., the conditions for possessing goodness). In order to see this, however, we must turn from his discussion in *De veritate*, to those texts in which he explains the distinctive “purpose” of will in rational creatures.

*II.2 Will and the Purpose of Rational Creatures.* In both the *Monologion* and *Cur Deus Homo*, Anselm tells us that God created rational beings—which include not only human beings but also the angels—with the intention of making them happy through enjoying him, the supreme good (CDH 2.1; M 68). Initially, this might suggest that, like the medieval eudaimonists, Anselm conceives of the purpose of rational creatures in terms of happiness, so that in their case the possession of rightness (or fulfillment of purpose) is to be identified with the possession of their goodness or happiness after all (namely, union with God). But in fact this is not the case. Rational creatures cannot possess, much less enjoy, God unless they first love him in the right way. “Thus, it is certain” says Anselm “that rational nature was made for the purpose of loving and choosing the supreme good above all other things” (CDH 2.1, 97:14-15). Fulfillment of this purpose, however, is not to be understood as that in which happiness consists, but rather as a precondition for happiness. Indeed, to judge by passages such as the following, Anselm regards happiness as an external reward, something that a good God is simply constrained by his nature to bestow on creatures who love him.

For if he gives no reward to the one who loves him, he who is most just does not distinguish between the one who loves what ought to be supremely loved and the one who disdains it; nor does he love the one who loves him—or else it does no good to be loved by him. But all those things are incompatible with his nature. Therefore, he rewards everyone who loves him perseveringly. (M 70, 80:11-14)

We must not be misled by Anselm’s way of speaking here. Although it rightly emphasizes that creatures who receive happiness are worthy to receive it, and that their actually receiving it

requires some action on God's part, it also obscures the close connection that exists between the fulfillment of rational nature on the one hand and happiness on the other. According to Anselm, happiness partly *consists* in loving God, since enjoyment is just the possession of an object one loves. Moreover, once the rational creature loves God, and so is in a position to enjoy him, Anselm thinks that God is finally able to give what he intended to give it all along.

Properly understood, therefore, the purpose of rational creatures is to do their part to enter into that loving relationship for which God originally created them. As Anselm sees it, moreover, this is the purpose for which rational creatures received their distinctive powers or capacities—namely, reason (or intellect) and will (or rational appetite). Reason, he says, was given by God to enable rational creatures to “distinguish what is just from what is unjust, what is good from what is evil, and what is a greater good from what is a lesser good” (CDH 2.1, 97:5-7), whereas the will was given to these same creatures to enable them to respond appropriately to reason's judgments or discriminations—that is, to “hate and avoid what is evil, love and choose what is good, and more greatly love and choose the greater good [over the lesser good]” (CDH 2.1, 97:9-11). Moreover, since Anselm thinks the will is the main source of agency and control, and is capable of directing intellect or reason, the fulfillment of the rational creature's purpose depends primarily on it.

Now according to Anselm, justice requires us to love the supreme good above all else (CDH 2). Presumably, this is because justice requires us to give each its due, and hence to love each thing in proportion to its value. As he also tells us, however, loving the supreme good above all else requires us to make it the ultimate object of our pursuit—that is, “loving and choosing it for its own sake, not for the sake of anything else” (CDH 2.1, 97:15). As he says:

If rational nature loves the supreme good for the sake of something else [such as happiness], it loves not the supreme good, but this other thing. (CDH 2.1, 97:16)



And again elsewhere:

Someone who wills something for the sake of happiness is not willing anything other than happiness. (DCD 13, 256:22-23)

Evidently, it is this line of reasoning that leads Anselm to break with eudaimonism—that is, to separate morality from happiness and to introduce another end at which agents (and their wills) should be directed, namely, justice. For unless one recognizes on the basis of reason that it is right to love God above all else, and also loves him in this way because it is right to do so, Anselm thinks it is impossible to love God appropriately (or perhaps even to love God at all). But this is precisely what is required to fulfill the purpose of rational nature.

It might be objected, at this point, that Anselm's introduction of rightness faces the same difficulty that he finds with loving God for the sake of happiness. After all, even if we love the supreme good for the sake of rightness rather than happiness, aren't we loving it for the sake of something else? In order to respond to this objection, we need to recall one of the consequences of Anselm's commitment to divine simplicity—namely, that God is identical with the standard of rightness or justice. Thus, when Anselm tells us that we must love what is supremely good or valuable above all else, he is telling us that we must love justice above all else, and hence all other things in relation to it. Since Anselm takes God to be identical to justice, however, there is no danger on his view that in loving rightness above all else we will be loving something other than God—or that in loving God for the sake justice we will be loving him for the sake of something else.

But can't the same be said for happiness or the human good? After all, God is identical not only to the standard of justice but also to the standard of goodness. So isn't the same sort of reply open to the medieval eudaimonist? No. To love God for the sake of happiness, as Anselm

sees it, is not to love him for the sake of the goodness with which he is identical (i.e., standard of goodness), but rather to love him for the sake of one's *own* goodness with which he is not identical. For although one's own goodness (or happiness) participates in the standard of goodness, is not to be identified with it.

All of this helps to reinforce the conclusion that, for Anselm, justice is fundamentally a different type of rightness than goodness. As we have seen, Anselm thinks that the will has justice under precisely the same conditions as a thing has rightness—namely, when it is *fulfilling its purpose or achieving the end toward which its nature directs it*. This just goes to show that justice is a species of rightness. In the case of all things other than the will, however, the end towards which their nature directs them is their complete development or actualization. This is what gives rise to the temptation to identify all species of rightness with goodness. But as Anselm's discussion of the will shows us, we must resist this temptation. For there is one case in which a thing's nature does not direct it, at least not first and foremost, towards its complete actualization, but rather toward the supreme good, which is justice.

In the end, therefore, Anselm's theory of rightness does, in fact, yield the two distinct kinds of value (namely, goodness and justice) that our discussion of his metaethics led us to expect. In the case of all things other than the will, the end toward which their nature directs them is their own goodness or advantage—that is, their complete actualization. Hence, in the case of all things other than the will, their rightness will be their goodness.<sup>22</sup> In the case of the will, however, things are more complicated. Here we must distinguish one species of rightness (namely, justice) from goodness. And the reason is that, unlike all other things, the will's distinctive nature directs it toward an end beyond itself, namely, supreme good or justice.

In the next section, we shall see what it is about the distinctive nature of the will that leads Anselm to explain its “purpose” in terms of justice rather than goodness. Before doing so, however, it is worth noting that we now have an answer to our earlier question about how Anselm conceives of the genus of value and the differentiae that divide it. As we have seen, Anselm conceives of all value in terms of “rightness”. But since rightness is a matter of a thing’s achieving the end towards which its nature directs it, and there are two fundamentally different kinds of end, it follows that there are two main species of rightness, and hence two fundamental kinds of value—namely, goodness and justice—differentiated by the different ends with which they are associated.<sup>23</sup>

### III. RIGHTNESS OF WILL

Although we have touched on Anselm’s views about justice or rightness of will, and hence on the conditions under which it obtains, we have yet to provide a precise characterization of these conditions. In this final section, I provide the required characterization, and in the process complete our account of Anselm’s normative ethics and moral psychology. It is important to note that, in turning to the precise conditions under which justice obtains, we are turning to what appears to be the heart of Anselm’s ethical theory. For it is only when the will—which is the seat of agency and control—possesses rightness that Anselm thinks we get a sort of rightness that deserves moral praise or commendation. Or to put the point in more Platonic terms, it is

---

<sup>22</sup> Indeed, if we distinguish, as Anselm does, the first and second rightness (or truth) of things, we can say that their first rightness will be their essential goodness and their second rightness will be their advantage (or kind-relative accidental goodness).

<sup>23</sup> Here again, however, we can distinguish two species of goodness—namely, essential goodness and kind-relative accidental goodness. If we follow Anselm in referring to these two species of goodness as ‘first rightness’ and ‘second rightness’, we might call justice, to which goodness in general is coordinate, ‘third rightness’.

only when *the will* participates in the standard of rightness that we have a subject of moral justice or praiseworthiness.<sup>24</sup>

In order to identify the precise conditions under which Anselm thinks rightness of will obtains, we must begin with his account of the nature of the will itself, which he describes in terms of its two distinctive capacities or dispositions.

*III.1 The Two Dispositions of Will.* As we have seen, Anselm conceives of the will as a responsive faculty, its purpose being to respond appropriately to the value judgments of intellect or reason. Not surprisingly, he says that reason is capable of making two main kinds of value judgment or discrimination, one corresponding to each of the two fundamental types of value he takes to exist in the world—namely, goodness and rightness. The will, in turn, is capable of responding to each of these types of value—or better, to objects presented by reason as possessing these types of value. Thus, at one point in *De casu diaboli*, he has his student say: “we will nothing but what we *think* is either just or advantageous” (DCD 4, 241:15-16). And he makes the same point in *De Concordia*, this time speaking in his own voice:

Undoubtedly, the will (in the sense of a tool [or faculty]) wills only what is either advantageous or right. For whatever it wills, it wills either because of its usefulness or because of its rightness, and even if it is mistaken, it *considers* what it wills as related to these two ends. (DC 3.11, 281:7-10)

Unlike Anselm, medieval eudaimonists admit only one fundamental type of value, goodness, and hence postulate only one source of motivation in the will—the disposition for happiness (i.e., the

---

<sup>24</sup> Anselm does say at certain points that we can speak of the justice or praiseworthiness of agents or actions, but he is careful to add that such moral goodness or value is wholly derivative on the praiseworthiness of the will from which they proceed:

There is no justice that is not rightness, and no rightness other than rightness of will is called justice in its own right. For rightness of action is called justice, but only when the action proceeds from a correct will. Rightness of will, on the other hand, is always entitled to be called justice, even if it is impossible for what we rightly will to come about. (DV 12, 194:30-33)

Analogous points apply, he says, to the relationship between rightness of will and agents (Cf. e.g., DCD 9).

disposition to respond to what reason judges to be conducive to one's own goodness). Because Anselm insists, by contrast, that there are two fundamental types of value, and that the will must be capable of responding to both, he thinks we must postulate two dispositions or sources of motivation in the will—the disposition for happiness (or advantage)<sup>25</sup> *and* the disposition for justice. Even so, Anselm agrees with the eudaimonists that there is a tight connection between the faculty of will and the disposition for happiness. Indeed, he suggests at one point that the will of every rational creature possesses this disposition as a matter of necessity:

Not everyone wills justice, and not everyone avoids injustice. On the other hand, not only every rational nature, but indeed everything that can be aware of it wills the advantageous and avoids the disadvantageous. (DCD 12, 255:8-11)<sup>26</sup>

Given what we've seen of Anselm's views about morality—that it consists in the pursuit of the supreme good, or justice, for its own sake and not for the sake of anything else (including happiness)—it is not surprising that he denies that there could be any genuinely moral agents, actions, or volitions without the further disposition for justice. What is, perhaps, surprising is that Anselm also denies that there could be any genuinely moral agents without the disposition for happiness.<sup>27</sup> After all, why couldn't God create a rational agent whose will possesses only the disposition for justice?

Part of the reason, I suspect, is that Anselm takes there to be a necessary connection between the possession of a will and the disposition for happiness. In virtue of possessing the capacities definitive of some natural kind, creatures are naturally inclined to the actualization of

---

<sup>25</sup> Anselm also refers to this at one point as the 'natural will' for advantage: "No one is compelled by fear or the expectation of something disadvantageous, or incited by love of something advantageous, to will something, unless he first has a natural will to avoid what is disadvantageous or to have what is advantageous" (DCD 12, 254:23-26).

<sup>26</sup> In the next sentence Anselm goes so far as to say: "In fact, no one wills anything unless he thinks that it is in some way advantageous for himself". This is a puzzling claim, since it suggests that it is impossible to will anything for the sake of rightness alone. Perhaps Anselm's point is merely that no one considers any course of action unless it at least appears in some way advantageous (though after considering it, one may will it on the basis of rightness alone).

<sup>27</sup> In this respect, Anselm's views about the two dispositions seems to differ from those of Duns Scotus, who follows Anselm in many other respects. Cf. Boler 2002.

those capacities—that is to say, they possess the disposition for advantage. In the case of rational creatures, however, the disposition for advantage just is the disposition for happiness (since ‘happiness’ is just the name Anselm uses for the state of complete actualization of rational creatures). But this is only part of the reason. According to Anselm, the will is also essentially free. But as he argues in *De casu diaboli* 13-14, it would be impossible for God to create an agent with freedom of will without endowing it both with the capacity for happiness and with the capacity for justice.<sup>28</sup> For freedom requires the ability to initiate one’s own acts of will or volitions. And if God gave a creature only a single disposition, it would be unable to will anything other than the objects toward which it disposed him; indeed he would be unable to refrain from willing them. In such a case, says Anselm, his acts of will would be not his own, but rather “the work and gift of God, just like his life or his power of sensation” (DCD 12).

Anselm summarizes the argument of chapters 13-14 in this way:

One cannot be called just or unjust for willing only happiness or for willing only what it is appropriate, when he wills in that way out of necessity. Again, one neither can nor ought to be happy unless he wills to be happy and wills it justly. For both of these reasons, therefore, God must create both wills in him in such a way that he both wills to be happy and wills it justly. (DCD 14, 258:18-22)

As the discussion in *De casu diaboli* makes clear, Anselm thinks that it is the possibility of conflict, to which the possession of both dispositions (or “wills”, as he speaks of them here) gives rise, that makes freedom possible (at least in the case of creatures).<sup>29</sup> It is the presence of distinct dispositions for action that places the exercise of either disposition in power of the agent

---

<sup>28</sup> Although Anselm focuses specifically on angels here, it’s clear that he thinks his discussion generalizes to all rational creatures.

<sup>29</sup> As Visser and Williams (2001, 238) point out, no such conflict is required in the case of divine freedom: “Divine aseity in fact guarantees that *every* action God performs is self-initiated. Even if, *per impossible*, God never had alternative possibilities available to him, every action of his will would still be free”.

itself. Moreover, it is this sort of freedom that makes rightness of will—and hence justice—possible in the case of creatures.

*III.2 Rightness, Happiness, and Virtue.* We are now, at last, in a position to identify the precise conditions under which rightness of will (or justice) obtains. From Anselm’s general views about rightness, we know that rightness of will, like that of all other things, is a matter of the will’s fulfilling its purpose, where this consists in its doing what it ought to do. Unlike the case of all other things, however, the distinctive capacities of the will—that is, the dispositions for happiness and justice—can be in conflict. And when they are in conflict, the agent who possesses them ought to exercise its disposition *for* justice and *against* happiness. But this, in turn, entails that in the special case of the will, fulfillment of purpose or doing what one ought to do, at least as Anselm uses those expressions, requires one to be willing to sacrifice what is to one’s advantage. Anselm makes this point clearly in *De casu diaboli*, when he suggests that it was precisely this sort of sacrifice that the bad angels, who according to Christian tradition fell from grace, were unwilling to make, and that the good angels, who maintained their justice, were willing to make. Speaking of the original sin of the Devil in particular, he says:

He sinned by willing something advantageous that he did not have and ought not to have willed at that time, but that could have served to increase his happiness. (DCD 4, 241:19-20)

In the case of the good angels, by contrast, Anselm says:

The good angels willed the justice that they had rather than that additional something which they didn’t have. As far as their own will was concerned, they *lost* that good, as it were, for the sake of justice. (DCD 6, 243:17-18)

It might be wondered why Anselm inserts so many qualifications into the last sentence of the second passage—‘as far as their own will was concerned’, ‘as it were’. The reason is that,

immediately after “sacrificing” their happiness, Anselm says that God saw to it that the good angels received, “as a reward for justice”, precisely what they thought they had permanently lost (DV 6, 243:19-20). Indeed, by giving to them this one thing they lacked, Anselm says that God made the angels perfectly happy, and thus removed the possibility of their ever sinning again—since one can sin only by acting against justice, but one could never act against justice except by willing something advantageous that one does not already have. Since their will for justice, however, was initiated by them, Anselm claims that God did not thereby remove their freedom—rather he insured the continued uninterrupted of their self-initiated will for justice.

From everything we’ve seen, it appears that rightness of will is a matter of the will’s willing the right thing—viz. the supreme good—for the right reason. This is in fact how Anselm characterizes rightness of will in *De veritate* 12. There he argues that the will has both a “what” and a “why”—that is, an object and a motive—and that rightness of will requires the correctness of both: “just as everyone must will *what* he ought, so also everyone must will it *because* he ought, in order for his will to be just” (DV 12, 194:9-10). Moreover, he also emphasizes here that in order to will something for the right reason, the rightness itself must be what motivates one’s willing:

When the just man wills what he ought, he does not—insofar as he deserves to be called just—preserve rightness for the sake of anything other than rightness itself. But someone who wills what he ought only because he is compelled, or because he is bribed by some extraneous reward, preserves rightness not for its own sake, but for the sake of something else—if he deserves to be said to preserve rightness at all. (DV 12, 194:18-22)

It is easy to get the impression from passages such as this one that Anselm thinks rightness of will is a property that wills (and derivatively, agents) have when and only when they are *occurrently* willing the right thing for the right reason. In this respect, it might appear that Anselm accepts a form of deontology sometimes associated with Kant and his followers. The



appearance, however, is misleading. And seeing why will bring to light an aspect of Anselm's ethical theory that is not always emphasized by Kantians—namely, the importance of virtue.<sup>30</sup>

When Anselm speaks of the just person as having the *will* for justice, or as *willing* what is right for its own sake, he is not talking about occurrent volitions. As he himself points out, the term 'will' (*voluntas*) and its cognates are often ambiguous between three possible meanings: (1) a faculty or power of the soul (i.e., the will); (2) a particular act of that power (such as a choice or volition); (3) any kind of state or disposition of that power (such as an intention, attitude, want, or desire). In the same context, moreover, he claims that it is only will in the third sense that is relevant for understanding rightness of will:

A just man is said to possess—even while he is asleep and not thinking at all—the will to live justly. And an unjust man is denied to possess—even when sleeping—the will to live justly. (DC 3.11, 283:5-7)

A just person who is asleep, says Anselm, doesn't differ from an unjust sleeping person in having either a faculty of will or an occurrent volition. For both possess the former and lack the latter (provided they're not dreaming). He concludes, therefore, that the just person must differ from the unjust person in having a disposition that the unjust person lacks. Now the disposition in question can't merely be the natural disposition for rightness. For as we've seen, this disposition is possessed just in virtue of possessing the will, and hence the just and unjust cannot be distinguished in terms of it. Moreover, Anselm makes it clear that rightness of will can be lost (more on this in Section IV.3 below). Evidently, therefore, the disposition in which rightness of will consists must be the sort of disposition that the medieval eudaimonists or

---

<sup>30</sup> Until recently, it was customary to downplay the role of virtue in Kant's ethics, and even to contrast Kantian views with those of virtue theorists generally. See, e.g., Foot 1978 and MacIntyre 1981. But more recent commentators have begun to challenge the conventional wisdom. See, e.g., Engstrom 1992, which argues that "the primary focus of attention in Kant's moral theory is not, as is often thought, on isolated instances of choice and action, but rather on a person's disposition or character" (748). For more extended treatments of the same issue, see Munzel 1999 and Sherman 1997.

eudaimonists have in mind by *virtue*—that is, a stable disposition or habit for choosing what is right for the right reason.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, we might characterize it as the disposition that gives to the just person’s will its overarching or dominant bent, that single desire or intention which is unifying or architectonic in the just person’s life.

In the final analysis, therefore, rightness of will appears to consist not in any particular volition, or series of volitions, but rather in an enduring state of the will in which justice is valued over happiness. Speaking of a creature in this state, Anselm says the following:

[J]ustice governs his will for happiness in such a way as to restrain its excess without eliminating its power to exceed. Thus, since he does will to be happy, he can exceed the limits of justice, but since he wills it justly, he does not will to exceed them. And thus, having a just will for happiness, he both can and ought to be happy. By refraining from willing what he ought not to will, even though he could will it, he deserves to be unable ever to will what he ought not; and by always retaining justice through a disciplined will, he deserves not to lack happiness in any way. (DCD 14, 258:22-29)

As this passage makes clear, a just will is one in which the distinctive capacities of will are properly ordered or balanced, with the disposition for justice or rightness regulating the disposition for happiness—though not in such a way as to extinguish freedom of choice.

By this point the main contours of Anselm’s ethics will be clear. According to him, a right action is one that possess rightness, which given his theistic Platonism means that it participates in the Form (or lives up to the standard) of rightness—that is, God under a certain description. Even so, it is not actions, but agents, on Anselm’s view, that are the primary locus of moral evaluation. Thus, a moral agent, as Anselm characterizes it, is one that possesses rightness of will (or justice)—that is, the habit or virtue of will that disposes one to choose the right action for the right reason, even if it means (temporarily) sacrificing one’s own happiness.

---

<sup>31</sup> Though, of course, medieval eudaimonists will explain what is involved in “choosing what is right for the right reason” differently than Anselm.

Although I think this description of Anselm's ethics is correct as far as it goes, I cannot close without calling attention to certain of his theological commitments, which affect the way he thinks of the just person and of the disposition or virtue by which he is just.

*III.3 The Preservation of Rightness and Theological Virtue.* Rightness of will, as Anselm conceives of it, is not something that rational creatures, at least in the first instance, are responsible for acquiring; rather it is something they are responsible for preserving once it has been given. In this respect, rightness of will, on Anselm's view is more like what Aquinas and other medieval eudaimonists would call a theological virtue than it is like one of the traditional moral or intellectual virtues—that is to say, it is something supernaturally infused as opposed to acquired by repeated action.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, according to Anselm, God created rational nature—both angels and the first human beings—with rightness of will precisely because they could not be happy without it. This explains, moreover, why he prefers to characterize rightness of will in terms of *preserving* (rather than merely *willing*) rightness for its own sake:

When a will was initially given to the rational nature, it was, at the same time as that giving, turned by the Giver himself to what it ought to will—or rather, it was not turned but *created* upright. Now as long as that will remained steadfast in the rightness in which it was created, which we call “truth” or “justice”, it was just. But when it turned itself away from what it ought to will and towards what it ought not to, it did not remain steadfast in the original rightness (if I may so call it) in which it was created. (DCD 9, 246:26-247:1)<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> Sheets (1948) emphasizes the supernatural origin of the will's rectitude, though he is skeptical (for reasons I find unconvincing) that Anselm could have possessed the notion of a virtue in the standard Aristotelian sense. Cf. esp. 136-137.

<sup>33</sup> The same point also emerges from the passage quoted above from DCD 12, if we restore its original context: “He cannot be called just or unjust for willing only happiness or for willing only what it is appropriate, when he wills in that way out of necessity. Again, he neither can nor ought to be happy unless he wills to be happy and wills it justly. For both of these reasons, therefore, God must create both wills in him *in such a way* that he both wills to be happy and wills it justly. *This added* justice governs his will for happiness in such a way as to restrain its excess without eliminating its power to exceed.”

According to traditional Christian doctrine, the first human beings and certain of the angels fell from grace by sinning. Anselm explains their sin in terms of their abandoning, or failing to preserve, rightness for its own sake. For as he says, “no one preserves justice except by willing what one ought to will, and no one abandons justice except by willing what one ought not to will” (DCD 4, 241:1-2). Now in the case of the bad angels (i.e., Satan and his cohorts), Anselm thinks their loss is permanent or irretrievable. In case of the first human beings, however, and their descendents (to whom the original loss was transmitted), Anselm thinks that, at least prior to death, their rightness of will can be recovered—though here again the recovery is primarily a matter of grace (co-operating with free will) rather than the result of any effort on the part of individual human beings. Indeed, as he says at one point, emphasizing the difficulty of recovering such rightness, “it is a greater miracle when God restores rightness to someone who abandons it than when he restores life to a dead person” (DLA 10).

All of this serves to emphasize the difficulties that Anselm thinks morality is fraught with in this life and the impossibility of moral success apart from grace. In our post-fallen state, he thinks we must begin by asking God to restore the rightness of will that once belonged to our first parents, and then committing ourselves to holding on to what he graciously gives us in response to our request.<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> I presented earlier versions of this chapter at Purdue University, Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville, the Cornell Summer Colloquium in Medieval Philosophy, and Marquette University’s Midwest Seminar in Ancient and Medieval Philosophy. I am grateful to the audiences on those occasions for stimulating discussion and comments. I am also grateful to Michael Bergmann, John Boler, Jeff Hause, Patrick Kain, Brian Leftow, Scott MacDonald, Dan Maloney, Michael Rea, Paul Studtmann, and especially Susan Brower-Toland for helpful comments and suggestions on earlier drafts.

## REFERENCES

- Adams, Marilyn McCord. 1999. "Romancing the Good: God and the Self According to St. Anselm of Canterbury," in *The Augustinian Tradition*, ed. Gareth B. Matthews (Berkeley: University of California Press), 91-110.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1972. "Was Anselm a Realist: The *Monologion*," *Franciscan Studies* 32: 5-14.
- Boler, John. 2002. "Reflections on John Duns Scotus on the Will," in *Emotions and Choice from Boethius to Descartes*, ed. Henrik Lagerlund and Mikko Yrjönsuuri (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers).
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1993. "Transcending the Natural: Duns Scotus on the Two Affections of the Will," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 69: 109-126.
- Crouse, R.D. 1958. "The Augustinian Background of St. Anselm's Concept *Justitia*," *Canadian Journal of Theology* 4: 111-119.
- Davies, B. and Evans, G. R. (eds.). 1998. *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Engstrom, Stephen. 1992. "The Concept of the Highest Good in Kant's Moral Theory," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 52: 747-780.
- Fairweather, Eugene R. 1958. "Truth, Justice, and Moral Responsibility in the Thought of St. Anselm," in *L'homme et son destin d'après les penseurs du moyen age. Actes du premier congrès internationale de philosophie médiévale* (Louvain: Nauwelaerts), 385-391.
- Foot, Phillipa. 1978. "Virtues and Vices," in *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 1-18.
- Gallagher, David. 1991. "Thomas Aquinas on the Will as Rational Appetite," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 29: 559-584.
- Gracia, Jorge J. E. and Sanford, J.J. 2003. "Ratio quaerens beatitudinem: Anselm on Rationality and Happiness," in *Rationality and Happiness: From the Ancients to the Early Medievals*, J. Yu and Jorge J. E. Gracia, eds. (New York: University of Rochester Press, forthcoming 2003).
- Hare, John E. 2001. *God's Call: Moral Realism, God's Commands, and Human Autonomy* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company).
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2000. "Scotus on Morality and Nature," *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 9: 15-38.
- Henry, D. P. 1963. "Was Saint Anselm Really a Realist?," *Ratio* 5:181-189.

- Hopkins, J. and Richardson, H. (trans). 2000. *Complete Philosophical and Theological Treatises of Anselm of Canterbury* (Minneapolis: Arthur J. Banning Press).
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1976. *Anselm of Canterbury: Volume Four: Hermeneutical and Textual Problems in the Complete Treatises of St. Anselm*. (New York: Mellen Press).
- Iwakuma, Yukio. 1996. "The Realism of Anselm and His Contemporaries" in *Anselm: Aosta, Bec, and Canterbury*, eds. D.E. Luscombe and G.R. Evans (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press), 120-135.
- Kienzler, Klaus et al. 1999. *International Bibliography—Anselm of Canterbury: Anselm Studies Volume IV* (Lewiston/Queenston/Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press).
- Langston, Douglas. 1996. "Did Scotus Embrace Anselm's Notion of Freedom?" *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 5: 145-159.
- MacDonald, Scott (ed.). 1991a. *Being and Goodness: The Concept of the Good in Metaphysics and Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press).
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1991b. "Later Medieval Ethics," in *Encyclopedia of Ethics*, ed. Lawrence C. Becker (New York: Garland Publishing), vol. 1: 485-490.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1990. "Egoistic Rationalism: Aquinas's Basis for Christian Morality," in *Christian Theism and the Problems of Philosophy*, ed. Michael D. Beaty (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press), 327-354.
- MacIntyre, Alastair. 1981. *After Virtue* (Norte Dame: University of Notre Dame Press).
- Munzel, G. Felicitas. 1999. *Kant's Conception of Moral Character* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
- Normore, Calvin. 2002. "Goodness and Rational Choice in the Early Middle Ages," in *Emotions and Choice from Boethius to Descartes*, ed. Henrik Lagerlund and Mikko Yrjönsuuri (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers).
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1998. "Picking and Choosing: Anselm and Ockham on Choice," *Vivarium* 36: 23-39.
- Schmitt, F. S. 1968. *S. Anselmi Cantuariensis Archiepiscopi Opera Omnia* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Friedrich Fromann Verlag).
- Sheets, J. R. 1948. "Justice in the Moral Thought of St. Anselm," *Modern Schoolman* 25: 132-139.
- Sherman, Nancy. 1997. *Making a Necessity of Virtue: Aristotle and Kant on Virtue*. (New York: Cambridge University Press).

Visser, Sandra and Williams, Thomas. 2001. "Anselm's Account of Freedom," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 31: 221-244.

Williams, Thomas (trans.). 2002. *Three Philosophical Dialogues* (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing).

\_\_\_\_\_. (trans.). 1995a. *Monologion and Proslogion with the Replies of Gaunilo and Anselm* (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing).

\_\_\_\_\_. 1995b. "How Scotus Separates Morality from Happiness," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 69: 425-445.

Yamazaki, Hiroko. 1988. "Anselm and the Problem of Evil," *Anselm Studies* 2: 343-350.