

# Is God's Justice Unmerciful in Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo*?<sup>1</sup>

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“Even though you are leading me into a tight spot: it is very much my desire that you should proceed just as you began.” – Anselm’s student, Boso<sup>2</sup>

*Can God be entirely and supremely just and also entirely merciful, without these two characteristics ending up in contradiction with each other? Anselm of Canterbury considers this question in several places in his works and provides rational resolutions demonstrating the compatibility of divine justice and mercy. This paper considers Anselm's treatment of the problem in the Cur Deus Homo, noting distinctive features of his account, highlighting the seeming incompatibilities between mercy and justice, and setting out his resolution of the problem.*

One aspect of divinity centrally important to Christian thought and practice is God’s mercy or mercifulness (*miser cordia*). The Christian God, as Anselm depicts Him in unsurprisingly orthodox ways, is one who pardons or forgives (*parcere*),<sup>3</sup> who does not merely mete out to sinners and wrongdoers what they deserve, but who provides them with second chances, hears and is moved by appeals, restores integrity to damaged souls, offers an untold number of occasions for collaboration with divine grace, and even alters the entire human race’s general metaphysical and moral condition from an otherwise hopeless state of original sin. And yet, Anselm insists that He is also a God of justice, superlatively and originarily so.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, one

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<sup>2</sup> *Cur Deus Homo* 1.20, p. 88. All translations from Anselm’s treatises are the author’s (I have consulted and greatly benefited from translations by Hopkins and Richardson, Davies and Evans, Williams, Deane, and Charlesworth) and are from *S. Anselmi Cantuariensis Archiepiscopi opera omnia*, ed. Dom F. S. Schmitt, O.S.B. (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons. 1940–1961), vols. 1 and 2. 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*. Each text will be cited with these abbreviations.

M	<i>Monologion</i>	P	<i>Proslogion</i>	DV	<i>De Veritate</i>
DL	<i>De Libertate Arbitrii</i>	DCD	<i>De Casu Diaboli</i>	CDH	<i>Cur Deus Homo</i>
DCV	<i>De Conceptu Virginali et de Originali Peccato</i>	DI	<i>De Incarnatione Verbi</i>		
DC	<i>De Concordia Praescientiae et Praedestinationis et Gratiae Dei cum Libero Arbitrio</i>				

<sup>3</sup> P 9, p. 106-8. CDH 1.3, and 1.7, p. 57-8, for examples. There is also a brief discussion of forgiveness in terms of divine mercy in the *De Similitudinibus* and a wealth of specific examples from the *Letters*, in which Anselm devotes a considerable amount of space to exhorting the wayward to recognition of their errors and sins, counseling repentance and hope in God’s mercy rather than despair, and urging amendment of their lives.

<sup>4</sup> From the very beginning of his work, Anselm unceasingly emphasizes that God is justice itself. “[T]hat nature [God] is that very justice.” God “does not possess justice, but exists [as] justice,” so that speaking in a proper sense, we should understand God as “*existens justitia*.” M 16, p. 30. Cf. also P 5 and 9-11, DV 7, 10, and 13. In fact, among all of the divine attributes Anselm discusses, justice is arguably the one most often mentioned and discussed in his works. This should not be surprising when we consider that when Anselm muses “if we ask ‘what is this supreme nature’ with which we are concerned [here], what can more truly [*verius*] be said in response than

might go so far as to argue that Anselm exceeds many other Christian thinkers in the centrality justice assumes in his understanding of God and in his moral theory. There would seem to be then, at the very least, a tension characteristic of paradox<sup>5</sup> between divine mercy and divine justice, if not outright contradiction between that aspect and that attribute.

When the implications and nature of justice and mercy are seriously thought through, this begins to raise serious and significant problems. Anselm devoted considerable reflection and attention to such issues, and worked them out most thematically, though not exclusively, in three main bodies of writing: the *Proslogion*, the various *Prayers* and *Meditations*,<sup>6</sup> and the *Cur Deus Homo*.<sup>7</sup> Each unfolds for his readers in a distinctive way, and with a particular focus, the dialectic between justice and mercy, human being and God.<sup>8</sup> Even when it might appear that the focus is primarily argumentative and theoretical, as in the *Cur Deus Homo*, it is equally practical and existential, calling for us to participate and locate ourselves practically as human beings within a range of choices and commitments opened up through developing a fuller understanding of these matters.

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‘justice’?” M 16, p. 30. This suggests justice possesses a kind of primacy of centrality or intelligibility, though not an ontological priority, among the divine attributes for Anselm.

<sup>5</sup> On this matter, cf. Gillian Evans, “the ‘Secure Technician’: Varieties of Paradox in the Writings of St. Anselm,” *Vivarium*, v. 13 n. 1 (1975). Her analysis not only discusses Anselm’s classical and patristic predecessors in the exploratory use (and coining) of paradoxes, as well as the stylistic or rhetorical “elegance with which he handles these ‘contradictions,’” p. 4. More importantly for our purposes, she discusses how Anselm raises and resolves paradoxes “chiefly in the area of theology and doctrine, where logic seems to deny the possibility of accepting two apparently contradictory statements or concepts, both of which faith insists must stand,” p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> Interesting tensions between justice and mercy run throughout these, complicated still further by the fact that Anselm is no longer focusing solely on divine mercy and divine justice but also engaging in invocation of mercy of human beings whose wills are totally aligned with the divine will, the saints.

<sup>7</sup> We might also associate with the problematic of justice and mercy as it is articulated and resolved in *Cur Deus Homo* (which bears primarily upon original justice and original sin, and the restoration of human nature, and secondarily upon personal sin or injustice and its forgiveness) certain passages from the *Meditatio Redemptionis Humanae* and the *De Conceptu Virginali*.

<sup>8</sup> This paper, structured within constraints of time and space appropriate to a presentation in a conference panel only touches on or even passes over a number of issues that do call for clarification in light of Anselm’s thought and works. One of these is the very nature of justice itself, which Anselm writes about in several ways without explicitly marking the difference in sense (with one exception). If we closely examine his uses of *justitia* in *Cur Deus Homo*, five distinct (though interrelated) senses of the term can be disentangled from each other:

a) God is justice itself, *justitia existens*, the justice in which everything just in some way is just by participation.

b) There is a “rightness perceptible to the mind alone” providing a set of norms by which, through reasoning, we judge matters to be just or unjust (sometimes getting it right, sometimes only partly so, sometimes not). This is, in some sense, an expression of the divine will, reason, wisdom, etc. When we discuss whether God’s actions would be just or unjust, we appeal to this. Cf. M 80, DV 7.

c) The order of divine providence not only is just, but also is justice, again an expression of the will of God. As Anselm points out, even the unjust (or even the Devil himself) cannot escape this order, though they do not thereby become just, even though what they suffer as punishment is just.

d) Justice exists within the wills of rational creatures. Anselm will say at various points in his work (e.g. CDH, DC) that this is a primary or proper sense of *justitia* (and correspondingly, of the privation of *injustitia*).

e) There is a derivative sense of *justitia* or *justum*, pertaining to what is caused by or signifies the will of a rational creature. In this sense, we can speak of actions, persons, or states of affairs as being just or unjust derivatively.

In this paper, I intend to explore Anselm's framing and resolution of the problematic relationship between divine justice and mercy in the *Cur Deus Homo*, where the focus falls specifically upon explaining how the state of human injustice stemming from original sin, the absolute divine justice of God, and the mercy effected by the God-man's mediation can be not only compatible, but in harmony with each other. This paper is a portion of a larger project, a more systematic study in which I am currently engaged, bearing on the interplay between divine justice and mercy in Anselm's thought, initiated with my earlier article on his *Proslogion* treatment of these topics,<sup>9</sup> and moving next to a study of the dramatic interplay between justice and mercy in selected *Prayers*.

## Preliminary Discussions

Several important features of the dialogue, arising very early on in the text, are worth emphasizing and exploring as we approach it. Anselm's interlocutor, the monk Boso, is requesting of him a rational account explaining "by what necessity and reasoning God, who is all-powerful, had to take on the humility and weakness of human nature, to bring about human nature's restoration."<sup>10</sup> In response, Anselm immediately points out three difficulties involved in providing or even producing such an account. First, this involves treating "higher things," for whose comprehension his intellect is ultimately inadequate.<sup>11</sup> Second, adequate exposition of these sorts of matters involves developing some level of understanding of a host of other interrelated matters.<sup>12</sup> Third, and most intriguing, he says that study of these matters bears upon *beauty* in the person of Christ, and entangles us in a "beautiful rationality higher than human understanding."<sup>13</sup>

This last objection on the author's (and character's) part appears at first to make an appeal on purely aesthetic grounds, and is striking precisely for that reason. By contrast, the first objection sounds more formulaic, and for that reason less remarkable. The human intellect's inadequacies for fully comprehending the divine, or even in some cases to know anything substantive about the divine, provide commonplaces for philosophical and theological literature both before and after Anselm's times. Whether the issue is the existence or the nature of the

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<sup>9</sup> "Mercy and Justice in St. Anselm's *Proslogion*," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, v. 80, n. 1 (2006)

<sup>10</sup> CDH 1.1, p. 48

<sup>11</sup> Anselm points out the inadequacy of his own (and more generally human) intellect to the reality and the rationality of the divine at a number of points in his work. In particular, cf. M 38 and 64-65 and 74, P 14-16, and DI 1.

<sup>12</sup> CDH 1.1, p. 49. He mentions three of these matters specifically, "power," "necessity," and "the will." These will in fact come in for some examination and analysis in *Cur Deus Homo*, but Anselm's full position on any of these must be reconstructed from his body of work as a whole. He also mentions "certain other matters" as well without specifically naming them.

<sup>13</sup> CDH 1.1, p. 49. Aesthetic motives and considerations are clearly evident within significant portions of Anselm's inquiries and teaching. In P proem, he writes of the *unum argumentum* as giving him joy in its discovery, and he intends by sharing it to provide pleasure to readers. P 18 expresses Anselm's sorrow and desire, motivated by the prospect of enjoying understanding of the simplicity and unity of God's attributes. He laments not being able to take all of them in at once to as to delight in their contemplation. The three chapters of "speculations," P 24-26, likewise focus on enjoyment and delight. In DCD, 6 and 24 aesthetic responses play a confirming part in the ongoing inquiry.

divine in general terms, the specific arrangements of divine providence, or even the much more specific topic of the Incarnation, one can always find thinkers ready to stress any epistemological difficulties lurking within such matters.

The second objection articulates a realization on Anselm's part stemming from a prudence we can imagine hard won through considerable reflection and teaching experience, counseling the philosopher or theologian not to overlook how interconnected, murky, and complicated many basic notions turn out to be. Again, one might read this as a somewhat commonplace caution about method, if precisely the prospect Anselm mentions did not actually come to pass within the course of *Cur Deus Homo's* two books. As it turns out, he is correct in pointing out that when grappling with these subjects, i.e. the human creature in its capacities and moral states, the very fabric and framework of the created order, the drama of fall, original sin, incarnation, and redemption, developing an adequate account requires that we delve into deep topics, and understand them in their interrelations.

To return to the third objection, however, when a writer already known in his time and culture for boldly engaging in rational investigation, and for powerful elegance coupled with rigorous precision in his compositions, expresses concerns about his own capacity to do justice to *beauty*, that should alert us to something unusual going on. Notice as well that the beauty involved, which Anselm downplays his abilities to depict, is not that of an object, a landscape, the figure of a person, or even the splendor of a work of art. It is instead that of a rational account, a rational structure of reality (*ratio*). For Anselm and for (at least some of) his readership, an aesthetic dimension is intimately involved within the activity and the product of reasoning itself.

Anselm expresses fears that his own inquiry and reconstruction of this elegant rationality will prove crude and contemptible by comparison, and this failure will result in giving some seeming support and confirmation to Christianity's critics. They are already placed on guard against Christian claims and explanations about core doctrines like the Incarnation and the Atonement for two different reasons, which Anselm the author brings up, placing them in Boso's mouth. On the one hand, perhaps the Christian accounts of these matters are really fictions. Simply because something can be depicted in an attractive way does not mean that it corresponds to how things actually are.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, Christian depictions of the divine are actually not that attractive. They express an ugliness, a baseness, a grossness of disproportion inappropriate to their subject. One might note a somewhat inconsistent dilemma that could be reconstructed out of these: If the Christian accounts exert an aesthetic attraction, they doubtless do so as illusions based on nothing solid. But if those accounts were taken to be based on something solid, they would unacceptably portray God in an aesthetically deficient manner.

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<sup>14</sup> Boso points out that "one who wants to paint a picture picks out something solid upon which he paints, so that what he paints remains. Nobody paints in water or in the air, since in that case no trace of the picture would remain." The considerations of fittingness (*has convenientias*) Christians propose to non-Christians by way of explanation strike the latter as precisely these sorts of compositions, "painting on a cloud." CDH 1.4, p. 51-2

Responding to this second criticism of unbelievers, who argue that Christians sully God by claiming that God became human with all the ugliness that entails, Anselm's initial response is to assert that the opposite is the case. The restoration of humanity by the incarnation and atonement is befitting [*convenienter*], and attentive study of the rationality or logic involved reveals an inexplicable (or discursively inexhaustible, *inenarrabilem*) beauty to God's act and its conditions.<sup>15</sup> Christians are actually "proclaiming the ineffable depth of his mercy," displayed through God saving humans from the evils they deserve, restoring to them goods they do not merit.<sup>16</sup>

Notice three interesting issues involved here. First, this initial Anselmian response, by its language of desert [*debitum*], might be taken as suggesting an interpretation of divine mercy as performing a transcendence or abrogation of a previously established norm of justice.<sup>17</sup> For some people that sort of view on justice and mercy may be an attractive resolution to what otherwise appears an intractable dilemma. But for a thinker like Anselm, while not unthinkable, such a purported solution would certainly be unworkable since it would radically estrange the divine action and will involved in mercy, not only from the order of justice within God's relation to created being, but also from God's very justice itself. Such an interpretation will in fact be one mistaken position considered, critiqued, and rejected within the course of the dialogue.

Second, Boso's objection, on behalf of unbelievers, also calls into question the legitimacy of aesthetic considerations of fittingness and of beauty employed in the course of rational argument and inquiry. Put bluntly, to the non-Christian, the sorts of reasonings Christian engage in on the basis of what is fitting for God may sound appealing, but they risk being rejected as merely attractive considerations, provided precisely because of the lack of stronger, more rigorous logical arguments. The suggestion Anselm has us entertain is that perhaps the entire architecture of beautiful and befitting reasoning is needless and distracting ornamentation, rather than a necessary skeleton of rationality to be fleshed out through further reflection and argument.

Third, Boso also worries: if God is indeed to show mercy to human beings (or rather, extending to the whole human race), why would not a simpler account of this divine action than that involved in the Incarnation be more plausible, even more congruent with God's nature and attributes? Why should an omnipotent God not simply free human beings from sin more directly,

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<sup>15</sup> CDH 1.3, p. 51

<sup>16</sup> CDH 1.3, p. 50-51.

<sup>17</sup> The notion (and the very language) of *debere/debitum* is absolutely central to Anselm's conception of justice, particularly in the sense in which justice applies to the human will (and derivatively to actions, thoughts, linguistic expression, relationships, and being). For expressions of this, cf. DV 4 and 12, DL 8, DCD 9, CDH 1.11, DCV 3-4, DC 1.6

For particularly specific, reliable, and succinct discussion about this Anselmian conception of justice, cf. in particular Eugene Fairweather, "Truth, Justice, and Moral Responsibility in The Thought of St. Anselm," in *L'Homme et Son Destin* (Neuwelaerts. 1960); Phillippe Delhay, "Quelque aspects de la morale de saint Anselme," *Spicilegium Beccense*, v. 1 (Paris: Vrin. 1959); and Daniel Rakus, "The Dynamics of Love in Anselmian Ethics," *The Downside Review*, n. 421 (2002). For fuller studies, cf. also G. Stanley Kane, *Anselm's Doctrine of Freedom and the Will* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen. 1981); Dom Robert Pouchet, *La Rectitudo chez saint Anselme: Un itinéraire augustinien de l'ame à Dieu*. (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes. 1964).

more immediately? Does this complex Christian story involving original sin, divine justice and mercy, an incarnational bringing-together divine and human nature, and suffering onto death not seem to impugn God's wisdom as well, by suggesting that God deliberately and unnecessarily demands some strangely complicated rationale governing reconciliation, when a simpler one would have sufficed just as well?

Before we turn to what are plausibly incompatibilities or contradictions between divine justice and divine mercy in the next section, there are several additional implications stemming from the various points made so far. These may not be evident at first, but they are important to bear in mind as we work through the problems and Anselm's resolution, so permit me the liberty to draw them out explicitly.

The first of these is this. Although God is perfectly simple, this attribute of the divine does not mean that human argumentation aimed at developing and then demonstrating the rationality of Christian faith ought therefore to be similarly simple, or that simplicity ought to be uncritically adopted as a criterion for our accounts.<sup>18</sup> We ought to be on our guard against over-*simplistic* lines of seemingly rational exposition or explanation, as well as concepts over-*simplified* into inadequacy to the realities they are supposed to help us grasp.<sup>19</sup> Certain common conceptions of mercy and of justice will be shown to suffer from precisely this kind of inadequacy, and in the course of *Cur Deus Homo's* progress, they are progressively replaced by, or better yet developed into, more adequate and also more complexly articulated conceptions. Rightly understood in this way, mercy and justice are not only compatible but interconnected, not only with each other, but also with divine omnipotence and wisdom, as well as the other murky matters mentioned earlier. It requires a suitably complex account to make these matters as intelligible as we human beings need and desire them to be.

Second, although he carries out his inquiry *sola ratione* and *remoto Christo*, Anselm does not attempt to reduce the possible lines of reasoning and argumentation solely to what can be demonstrated on bases of strict logical necessity. He maintains a legitimate scope for incorporation of considerations of fittingness and even beauty within the argumentation, even reconnecting these with necessary reasoning, most explicitly when he suggests:

When it comes to God, let nothing unfitting—even the least bit—be accepted, and let no rational consideration [*ratio*]*—not even the smallest—be rejected if a greater one does not disagree with it. Just as where God is concerned, what follows from the very least unfittingness is an impossibility, likewise, from the*

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<sup>18</sup> On the relation between divine simplicity and our necessarily complex ways of understanding and relating to God, cf. my "A Perfectly Simple God and Our Complicated Lives: The 2008 Saint Anselm Lecture," *The Saint Anselm Journal*, v. 5, n. 1 (2009)

<sup>19</sup> For Anselm the truthfulness of thoughts, judgments, or linguistic expressions is a matter of their adequacy (rather than merely adequation, one might say) in grasping or expressing realities. What appears to be a correspondence theory of truth in DV 2 and 3 is properly contextualized by Anselm's distinction of three kinds of expression in M 10. Cf. also M 31, DV 7 and 10.

smallest rational consideration, so long as a greater one does not defeat it, a necessity arises.<sup>20</sup>

A danger of granting too much argumentative ground to Christianity's critics, raised by Boso's early suggestion that considerations of fittingness should give way to stricter bases of necessity, is thereby headed off by arguing for the legitimacy of arguments involving fittingness.

Third, we will only understand how the Christian account, as Anselm articulates it, turns out to be entirely coherent by penetrating as far as we are able into the logic governing and explaining the Incarnation. This is not to simply develop a chain of linguistic signs or a latticework of mental notions that would then represent to us how these things are in reality. Nor does our working out this account somehow make it so, as if our thought dictates and shapes the reality. Instead, the development of the Anselmian account leads to participation through dialogical discourse and rational inquiry within that very reality, however imperfectly, to be sure. Looked at in this light, argument in terms of the "befitting" or "unbefitting" is no longer a poor or preliminary substitute for a better argument by more rigorous reasons, but reflects a progressively fuller, more adequate grasp on our parts of the very matters being examined.<sup>21</sup>

### Seeming Incompatibilities Between Divine Mercy and Justice

Early on in book 1, Boso examines and resolves one preliminary possible incompatibility between justice and mercy, considering a by-then classic narrative of the situation in which "God would have had to act against the devil by justice rather than by power" [*per fortitudinem*].<sup>22</sup> Such a position would assume that the Devil has some rightful claim on sinful humanity, one based in justice, so that God then would have to satisfy a Devil's bargain, so to speak, in order to mercifully redeem humanity.<sup>23</sup> Boso argues, in good Anselmian fashion, both that there is no

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<sup>20</sup> CDH 1.10, p. 67.

<sup>21</sup> Marilyn McCord Adams points out that: "in *Cur Deus Homo*, we should expect to see considerations of fit forwarded as necessary reasons, because it is precisely the former that are relevant to assessing what Omnipotent Wisdom and Justice would do. Equally suspect is the notion that Anselm would regard aesthetic considerations as intellectually 'second class.'" She goes further, adding a provocative interpretation, maintaining: "virtually the entire argument of *Cur Deus Homo* is made by weighing up and balancing off proprieties." Marilyn McCord Adams, "Elegant Necessity, Prayerful Disputation: Method in *Cur Deus Homo*," *Cur Deus Homo: Atti del Congresso Anselmiano Internazionale* (Pontificio Ateneo S. Anselmo: 1999), p. 376.

Gillian Evans provides some helpful reflections on Anselm's use of argument by *convenientia*, *decentia*, *quod expedit*, and other such locutions expressing "fittingness," noting that it functions within the scope of and through reference to a divinely ordained ordering of truth and rectitude that interpenetrates all being, an order both moral and metaphysical at the same time. "'Fittingness' is powerful in his frame of reference, not mere 'suitability,' but an interlocking, rather like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle." Gillian Evans, "Anselm and Keeping Order in the Real World," in *Saint Anselm: His Origins and Influence*, ed. John Fortin (Edwin Mellen: 2001), p. 11.

<sup>22</sup> CDH 1.7, p. 55.

<sup>23</sup> As Nicolas Jacob Cohen rightly points out, "Anselm rejects both this theory and the understanding of justice that it assumes," since the assumption built into the notion that God would need to ransom human beings back from the Devil would be "that God could not do anything in violation of strict justice." Nicolas Jacob Cohen, *Patristic Analogues in Anselm of Canterbury's Cur Deus Homo* (Ph.D. dissertation, Boston College: 2011), p. 69. In effect, this would be to establish justice in at least one of its forms as greater than God, rather than as one of the divine attributes.

justice in the Devil and that it would be perfectly just for God to take back humanity from the Devil. So, divine mercy that “pardons the sinner, and frees him, and restores him,”<sup>24</sup> thus becomes an available option that seems in no way conflicting with, let alone contradicting, the demands of justice.

Soon afterwards, however, Boso senses another problem. The Incarnation, and Christ’s subsequent suffering and death can certainly be interpreted as superlative expressions of divine mercy. In these events, God the Father willingly gives his own Son to humanity, God the Son willingly consents to his Father’s will, and humanity is thereby redeemed. But, how is this arrangement just, one which “give[s] over the most just man of all to death in place of the sinner?”<sup>25</sup> Anselm points out in response that Christ undergoes His suffering and death willingly [*sponte*], to which Boso retorts that He accepts this precisely through obedience to the Father’s will. Anselm then makes several well-needed distinctions, reconstructing the situation along the following lines.

Christ’s free choice results in his suffering and death, because that is what the structure of fallen human beings’ relationship to God ends up requiring. “He underwent death of his own volition, not through an obedience requiring him to abandon his life, but rather to maintain justice on account of that obedience, persevering in it so strongly that he thereby incurred death.”<sup>26</sup> The purpose of this was that humanity might be saved, which the Father *mercifully* wills and the Son *mercifully* wills and brings about. But because of the nature of the transgression on humanity’s part, that purpose can’t be fulfilled without a human being making right what has gone so deeply wrong. Divine mercy thus calls for and culminates in a restoration of justice. As Anselm notes: “The Father was unwilling [*nolebat*] that the human race be restored, except some human being do something as great as was that death.”<sup>27</sup>

But, one might well query, why this seemingly unnecessary, even vindictive, intransigence on the part of the Father?<sup>28</sup> At numerous points in the work, Anselm elaborates an underlying logic of fittingness that addresses this question, providing intelligibility to this divine insistence on the necessity of justice being done or restored. One particularly important and recurring consideration of this argumentation runs along the following lines. If God does not become man, with all that entails, humanity will not be restored, and then “God will not be able

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<sup>24</sup> CDH 1.7, p. 58-59.

<sup>25</sup> CDH 1.8, p. 60. Cf. DCV 8 and 21, also the discussion of the action of nailing Christ’s hands in DV 8.

<sup>26</sup> CDH 1.9, p. 62. For other relevant passages discussing perseverance in a choice or commitment of the will (or lack thereof), ch. DL 5 and 7, as well as DCD 2-3

<sup>27</sup> CDH 1.9, p. 63.

<sup>28</sup> Here we arrive at the crux of the issue for the many critics (though typically similar in their criticism) of Anselm’s “theory of the atonement.” For reviews of these critics, and responses well-grounded in Anselm’s moral theory, cf. in particular John McIntyre, *St. Anselm and His Critics: A Reinterpretation of the Cur Deus Homo* (Oliver and Boyd: 1954); David Bentley Hart, “A Gift Exceeding Every Debt: An Eastern Orthodox Appreciation of Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo*,” *Pro Ecclesia*, v. 7, n. 3. (1998); Kevin McMahon, “The Cross and the Pearl: Anselm’s Doctrine of the Atonement,” in *Saint Anselm: His Origins and Influence*, John Fortin, ed. (Edwin Mellen: 2001); and Rachel Reesor-Taylor, *Anselm’s Cur Deus Homo for a Peace Theology: On the Compatibility of Non-Violence and Sacrificial Atonement* (Ph.D. dissertation, McGill University, 2007).

to see through [*perficere*] the good which He started, or He will regret having started such a good,”<sup>29</sup> both of which would be absurd.

The good here is God’s creation of human beings to enjoy beatitude or happiness,<sup>30</sup> and accordingly God’s plan would require human creatures to be in some way restored to a state of integrity, enabling them to not only to enjoy the beatitude they were originally intended for, but also to merit it by possessing and perseveringly maintaining justice. But if a realization of this intended good is of such absolute importance to God, why does He simply not mercifully call a cosmic do-over? Why not just declare a Jubilee of sorts, or blank out all the moral slates upon which are tallied justices and injustices? Couldn’t God, simply by willing it so, restore any given human creature to complete integrity, to the original state of justice?<sup>31</sup> Could he not equally effortlessly do this for everyone, whether considered as individual persons or as the entire human race? What holds God back then? What restrains, compels, or otherwise necessitates the incarnation and sacrifice of a God-man? We seem to arrive back at one of the original challenges, even scandals, raised by non-Christians.

Anselm’s response will bring together three main lines of reasoning. The first of these clarifies what it means for God not to be able to do something, by analysis of necessity in relation to divine omnipotence.<sup>32</sup> The second bears directly on the divine attribute of justice and the requirements it imposes upon the totality of creation.<sup>33</sup> In the third, we reach the crux of the issue, a painful one as my fellow-presenter, Gene Fendt admirably depicts it: the fallen, damaged condition of the human race and the individual human creature, seemingly inextricably transfixed in privation of justice.<sup>34</sup> Examining the metaphysical and moral structure revealed by uniting these three lines of reasoning into a single composition leads to a stark conclusion on the part of Boso at the end of 1.23: “Nothing is more just and nothing is more impossible. But from these [reasonings] it seems that God’s mercy and the human being’s hope are dead, at least in respect of the happiness for which the human being was created.”<sup>35</sup>

Is there any way out of this *aporia*, this impasse of seeming impossibility? In 1.25 Anselm argues that since reasoning has ruled out every other way by which a resourceless humanity can be redeemed, Christ, God becoming man, provides the only possible solution, and reinforces this by reminding Boso: “[I]t is necessary that some humans do arrive at happiness,”<sup>36</sup> and elaborates an argument:

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<sup>29</sup> CDH 1.19, p. 84.

<sup>30</sup> On this divine intention, cf. M 68-70, DL 3, and DC 3.13. In DCD 3 and 14, Anselm seems to maintain that God created even the Devil (and presumably all other angels) in order to enjoy beatitude as well.

<sup>31</sup> There are numerous places in Anselm’s texts where God does precisely this for a particular person, e.g. DL 10. Indeed were this not to be the case, it would be difficult to see any point to prayers for divine mercy.

<sup>32</sup> CDH 1.12. Other relevant discussions are to be found in P 7, DL 8, and DCD 18.

<sup>33</sup> CDH 1.13 and 1.15

<sup>34</sup> This is a point on which additional and more specific discussion is called for. In Anselm’s own works, cf. in particular DL 10-12 DCV 2, and DC 3.8.

<sup>35</sup> CDH 1.23, p. 91.

<sup>36</sup> CDH 1.25, p. 95.

If it is unbecoming for God to lead a human being [possessing] any stain to that [happiness] for which He created him without any stain, lest [God] either regret the good thing He began, or [God] seem unable to see through that intention; by that very same unbecomingness it is even more impossible that no human being be brought to that [happiness] for which the human being was made.<sup>37</sup>

He provides this argument to lead a “foolish person” (*insipiens*) out of their inadequate standpoint by providing needed (though not total) intelligibility to these matters. Anselm’s invocation of the Fool here<sup>38</sup> ought to remind us of *Proslogion*’s line of argumentation, and indeed attentive reading also reveals employment of similar “that than which nothing greater which can be conceived” reasoning at multiple points of the text.<sup>39</sup> Boso states in 1.12 that “nothing can be thought more benevolent than God,”<sup>40</sup> and in 1.23 “nothing can thought to be stricter or more just” than God’s requirements that humanity restore what it lost, and what it stole from God.<sup>41</sup>

Anselm will bring matters to a close in 2.20 by invoking the formula of “that than which no greater cannot be thought” with respect to mercy:

That mercy of God that seemed to you to be lost, when we considered God’s justice and the sin of human being(s), we have now discovered to be so great and so concordant with justice, that it could not be thought to be greater or juster.<sup>42</sup>

Notice that in this passage, mercy and justice are no longer juxtaposed, let alone set in contradiction, but rather become interfused with each other. A proper human perspective on divine justice and mercy approximates in some way the divine perspective, that is, the reality of these in God. Looked at from the right perspective, nothing could be thought to be more just than the divine mercy embodied in the Incarnation. But, what does it require for us to arrive at such a perspective, not only to affirm it, but also to understand what we are affirming? Two key elements Anselm’s account brings forward are a critical analysis of mistaken conceptions of mercy in book 1, and a proper assessment of the value of Christ’s self-giving sacrifice in book 2.

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<sup>37</sup> CDH 1.25, p. 95.

<sup>38</sup> Anselm’s discussions of foolishness, particularly in P 4 and DI 1, reveals that one key aspect of human foolishness is treating inadequate argument, understanding, and inquiry as if it were adequate or even provided a definitive resolution. This stance represents, on the one hand, a failure to think matters through sufficiently, that is, as far as the matters themselves and their internal rationality require. On the other hand, precisely where the foolish person stops short is with his or her own conceptions, taking these as providing the definitive word on the matter. As Anselm points out, what ends up being overlooked in this is that in matters involving God, this in effect would elevate the human thinker above God, which is impossible.

<sup>39</sup> Anselm is clear that this “that than which nothing . . . can be conceived” logic applies to all of the divine attributes in the *Proslogion*, and this in turn ties back to the discussions of whatever it is greater to be than not to be in M 15-17.

<sup>40</sup> CDH 1.12, p. 70.

<sup>41</sup> CDH 1.23, p. 91.

<sup>42</sup> CDH 2.20, p. 131

The key question for Anselm's examination is framed as "whether it is fitting [*deceat*] for God to forgive a sin out of mercy alone,"<sup>43</sup> without some restitution being made voluntarily by the sinful creature. If God were to do this, it seems that justice would be violated in three different ways, each of which is unbecoming to God, going against the very justice that God does not merely possess, but supremely is. For one, such unmerited forgiveness effaces the difference between sinners, who deserve punishment, and non-sinners, who do not.<sup>44</sup> For another, forgiving sins without some satisfaction or restitution being made also represents a kind of disorder, one incompatible with God's wisdom as well as justice.<sup>45</sup> Third, and perhaps still worse, it "makes" sinfulness or "injustice similar to God," by making "injustice more free, if it is forgiven solely from mercy, than by [imposition of] justice."<sup>46</sup> Later in 1.24, after elaborating why a human being cannot make the restitution he or she owes to God, Anselm points out that "it is mockery to attribute this sort of mercy to God" precisely because "this kind of mercy is entirely contrary to His justice," and he concludes that "since God cannot be contrary to Himself, it is impossible for Him to be merciful in this way."<sup>47</sup>

### **Anselm's Resolution of the Problem in *Cur Deus Homo***

God cannot be merciful in conformity to an all-too-human way of understanding mercy, seemingly because he is too just for that. But He can be and, as we discover, *is* merciful in a truer way, one consonant with the requirements of divine justice. How should we then conceive of this alternate, higher, type of mercy? If we follow through the logic of Anselm's argumentation, it will not be a mere verbal or conceptual formula but rather a *Logos* that must be understood as embodied in and intelligible as a person, as the God-man, Christ. And, grasping this, or rather Him, to the degree we are capable, involves understanding God's freely chosen act of fully adopting human nature, permitting a human being to give a restitution to God that is entirely and rightly owed, but otherwise could not be given by any human person.<sup>48</sup>

As the investigation proceeds through book 2, we are invited into the deeper intelligibility of this atoning act, learning, for example how its effects resonate throughout time, so that there was never "any time in which . . . there was no person to whom this reconciliation without which

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<sup>43</sup> CDH 1.12, p. 69.

<sup>44</sup> CDH 1.12, p. 69. On this cf. also M 69-74 and P 10-11.

<sup>45</sup> CDH 1.12, p. 69.

<sup>46</sup> CDH 1.12, p. 69.

<sup>47</sup> CDH 1.24, p. 93

<sup>48</sup> Anselm's stress upon the impossibility for a human being (except for the God-man, Christ) to be able to render such satisfaction involves a distinction on his part between what was originally owed by rational creatures and what subsequently (and additionally) is owed by them. "The conception of justice as rectitude, and of this in turn as a criterion for the morality of human actions, no less than the conception of freedom as a power to maintain this rectitude for its own sake have practically led to reducing to naught any possibility for a human being to perform any supererogatory acts towards God, any that cannot [already] be demanded, as spontaneous and gratuitous manifestations of love." Phillippe Delhay, "Quelques Aspects de la Morale de S. Anselme," *Spicilegium Beccense*, v. 1 (1959), p. 414 (translation mine).

every human would have been made in vain, did not apply [*pertineret*].”<sup>49</sup> Anselm and Boso also revisit, deepen, and resolve earlier discussed puzzles about necessity, impossibility, freedom, and volition, particularly centered on Christ’s willing interconnected choices, which seemingly enchain Him within the bonds of a necessity to die, but actually reflect his commitment to redeem human nature from the very bonds of original sin.

Another central point Anselm dwells upon, which offers further insight into divine mercy, is the value of Christ’s sacrifice. What does that sacrifice consist in, precisely? In 2.11, Anselm revisits Christ’s obedience, in which “through perseveringly maintaining justice he placed himself under [God’s] will,”<sup>50</sup> but notes that this is already something God, and justice itself, requires from every rational being. It is indeed part of *how* Christ makes restitution, we might say, but it is not *what* is given as restitution. In addition to obedience (and as well as setting us an example), He gives something entirely beyond what is required, “giving his life, or setting aside his soul, or giving over his very self to death.”<sup>51</sup> In this, He “gives himself as restitution to God, in such way that one could not give oneself more.”<sup>52</sup> Given how great the depth and damage of sin is, when even “a sin we consider the least serious is so infinitely [grave],”<sup>53</sup> a human being making restitution by giving the death of God in Christ should just about balance matters out, it seems.

Christ’s self-donation does more, however, Anselm maintains, and we can appreciate this though considering the value of this entirely just person’s life. All other sins pale in comparison to any injury against him, so killing Christ then becomes incomparably worse than any other sin, or indeed than the totality of all other sins. Boso draws out one implication via analogical reasoning that moves from a point of comparison of values to a value exceeding comparison: “If every good is as good as its destruction is bad, the good [of Christ] is incomparably greater than would be those [other] sins, which this killing exceeds beyond estimation.”<sup>54</sup> Anselm adds: “sins are hateful to the degree that they are evil, and this [i.e. Christ’s] life is loveable to the degree that it is good. So it follows that this life is more loveable than the sins are hateful.”<sup>55</sup> There is thus an unmeasurable surplus involved in the sacrifice the Son willingly chooses in becoming incarnate, in taking a human nature that affords the possibility of restitution between humanity and God. And so, Anselm can conclude:

What can be understood to be more merciful, than when to a sinner condemned to eternal death and therefore not having any means by which to redeem himself, God the Father says: “take my only-begotten [Son] and give [Him] in place of yourself,” and the Son: “take me and redeem yourself”?<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> CDH 2.16, p. 119.

<sup>50</sup> CDH 2.11, p. 110.

<sup>51</sup> CDH 2.11, p. 110.

<sup>52</sup> CDH 2.11, p. 110.

<sup>53</sup> CDH 2.14, p. 113.

<sup>54</sup> CDH 2.14, p. 114.

<sup>55</sup> CDH 2.14, p. 114.

<sup>56</sup> CDH 2.20, p. 131

In this passage, the superlative divine mercy coincides at last with divine justice, for he adds: “What indeed could be more just than that He who is given a reward greater than any debt, should forgive every debt, if it is given with the feeling that one ought to have [*debito. . . affectu*]?”<sup>57</sup>

I would like to conclude by noting two short points, both of which could be (and, in a fuller study of divine mercy and justice, are planned to be) developed in additional depth and detail. Notice that in the course of this later passage, so reminiscent of formulations in his *Proslogion* and *Monologion*, Anselm writes now in terms of “understanding” (*intelligere*) rather than the “thinking” or “conceiving” (*cogitari*) spoken of earlier.<sup>58</sup> What *Cur Deus Homo* offers is Anselm’s systematically developed, though admittedly not comprehensive, articulation of a rational account of what Christian faith and doctrine offers to us, with the interplay between divine justice and mercy framing one portion of that structure. We are afforded an opportunity to penetrate (a little, though as much as is possible for us in our present condition) into the intelligibility of these matters, and thereby to conform our intellects to their reality.

The second point follows from this, again reemphasizing themes articulated in Anselm’s earlier works. It is not enough for us human creatures simply to understand or even comprehend the compatibility between divine justice and mercy. We are also called willingly to locate ourselves as human agents, practically and participationally, within a now better understood economy, providential ordering, and narrative of divine justice and mercy. Much more could and needs to be said about that, but for the present I defer that task to a further and more extensive study.

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<sup>57</sup> CDH 2.20, p. 131

<sup>58</sup> For example, in P 3, and also in Anselm’s *Response to Gaunilo*, 4