

(St.) **ANSELM** of Canterbury [1033–1109]

The greatest philosopher of the eleventh century, Anselm of Canterbury was the author of some dozen works whose originality and subtlety earned him the title of “Father of Scholasticism.” Best known in the modern era for his “Ontological Argument,” designed to prove God’s existence, Anselm made significant contributions to metaphysics, ethics, and philosophy of language.

Anselm was born in Aosta, in the Piedmont region of the kingdom of Burgundy, near the border with Lombardy. His family was noble but of declining fortunes. Anselm remained at home until he was twenty-three; after the death of his mother he quarrelled irrevocably with his father and left home, wandering for some years before arriving at the Benedictine Abbey at Bec in Normandy. Impressed by the abbey’s prior Lanfranc, who had a reputation as a scholar and teacher of dialectic, Anselm joined the monastery as a novice in 1060. Such was his ability that in 1063 he was elected prior and in 1078 abbot, a position he held until his elevation as archbishop of Canterbury in 1093. While at Bec Anselm wrote his *Monologion*, *Proslogion*, and the four philosophical dialogues *De grammatico*, *De veritate*, *De libertate arbitrii*, and *De casu Diaboli*. While archbishop Anselm wrote his *De incarnatione Verbi*, *Cur Deus homo*, *De conceptu virginali*, *De processione Spiritus Sancti*, and *De concordia*. Perhaps from this time also date his fragmentary notes on power, ability, and possibility. Anselm’s archepiscopate was marked by controversy with the English kings William Rufus and Henry I over royal privileges and jurisdiction; Anselm spent the years from 1097 to 1100 and from 1103 to 1107 in exile. After a brief illness, Anselm died on April 21, 1109, in Canterbury, where he is interred in the Cathedral.

Method. Most of Anselm’s work systematically reflects on the content of Christian doctrine: Trinity, Incarnation, the procession of the Holy Spirit, original sin, the fall of Lucifer, redemption and atonement, virgin conception, grace and foreknowledge, the divine attributes, and the nature of sin. He called this reflective activity ‘meditation’ and also, in a famous phrase, “faith in search of understanding” (*fides quaerens intellectum*). His search for understanding is of particular interest to philosophers for three reasons. First, he often addresses arguments to those who do not share his dogmatic commitments—that is, he offers proofs based only on natural reason. He begins the *Monologion*, for example, with the claim that a person who does not (initially) believe that there is a God with the tra-

ditional divine attributes “can at least persuade himself of most of these things by reason alone if he has even moderate ability.” Likewise, the “Ontological Argument” of the *Proslogion*, and indeed the treatise as a whole, is addressed to the Biblical Fool, who denies the existence of God. This approach, later known as ‘natural theology’, may be given in support of but does not depend upon particular points of doctrine.

Second, even when Anselm assumes certain dogmatic theses, his analysis is often directed to specifically philosophical issues in the case at hand, and thereby has broader implications. While discussing Lucifer’s sin and subsequent fall in his *De casu Diaboli*, for instance, Anselm formulates a series of general theses about responsibility and motivation that hold not only of Lucifer’s primal sin (or Adam’s original sin), but which apply to ordinary cases of choice. Elsewhere he offers a defense of metaphysical realism (*De incarnatione Verbi*), a reconciliation of foreknowledge with the freedom of the will (*De concordia*), an account of sentential truth-conditions (*De veritate*), and so on.

Third, even when pursuing his doctrinal agenda Anselm is always a philosopher’s philosopher: distinctions are drawn and defended, theories proposed, examples given to support theses, and tightly constructed arguments are the means by which he meditates on Christian themes. He uses the selfsame method when no doctrinal commitment is at stake, as in the semantic analysis of the *De grammatico*, the account of power and ability in his fragmentary notes, or the analysis of freedom of choice in *De libertate arbitrii*. For Anselm, understanding—the very understanding for which faith is searching—is a philosophical enterprise, and his treatment of even the knottiest doctrinal difficulties is clearly philosophical in character. Intellectual integrity, he held, demands it. (He further held that although a philosophical approach to matters of faith is necessary it is not sufficient; hence in addition to systematic treatises Anselm also composed prayers and devotional works.)

Metaphysics. Following Augustine, Anselm is, broadly speaking, a platonist in metaphysics. A thing has a feature in virtue of its relation to something paradigmatically exhibiting that feature. Anselm begins the *Monologion*, for example, by noting the diversity of good things in the world, and argues that we should hold that “there is some one thing through which all goods whatsoever are good” and that that one thing “is itself a great good...and indeed supremely good” (chap.1). He reasons that we can judge that some things are better or worse than others only if there is something, namely goodness, which is the same in each, though in different degrees—a claim sometimes dubbed ‘the Platonic Principle’ for Plato’s use

of it in the case of equal sticks and stones in his *Phaedo*. To establish the uniqueness of this one thing Anselm applies the Platonic Principle again and rules out an infinite regress. Furthermore, since the goodness of good things is derivative, and things might be good in any degree imaginable, it follows that the one thing through which all good things are good must be supremely good; it can be neither equaled nor excelled by the goodness of any good thing that is good through it. Note that the Supreme Good does not strictly speaking ‘have’ goodness but rather *is* goodness itself, a quasi-substantial entity whose nature is goodness.

Much of Anselm’s metaphysics is a sustained study of such relations of dependence and independence: things may be the way they are “through themselves” (*per se*) or “through another” (*per aliud*), Anselm holds, and roughly the same reasoning can be applied to features other than goodness. The later mediæval tradition called such features “pure perfections,” and their defining characteristic is that it is unqualifiedly better to have them than not. Just as the presence of goodness in things leads to the conclusion that there is some one thing that is paradigmatically good, through which all good things have their goodness, Anselm argues that so too the bare fact of their existence leads to the conclusion that there is some one thing through which everything else exists. Moreover, this one thing ‘paradigmatically’ exists, namely, it exists through itself and of necessity: it is existence itself, something whose nature is existence (chaps. 3–4). Anselm drops from the Platonic Principle the requirement that things having a certain feature may exhibit it in varying degrees; rather, the possession of the same feature by itself licenses the inference that there is something each thing has, something exemplifying the feature itself. Likewise, the key move in his argument that there is only one such thing that exists through itself, rather than a plurality of independent things each equally existing through itself, is to apply the Platonic Principle to the feature of *self-existence* itself; this entails that there is a unique self-existent nature. Furthermore, since it is better to exist through oneself than through another (independence is better than dependence), the Supreme Good must exist through itself, and hence is identical with the self-existent nature, the source of the existence and goodness of all else there is. Anselm concludes that “there is accordingly a certain nature (or substance or essence) that through itself is good and great, and through itself is what it is, and through which anything that exists is genuinely either good or great or anything at all” (chap. 4). In short order Anselm shows that this being is appropriately called ‘God’, and the remainder of the *Monologion* is devoted to establishing other divine attributes: simplicity, unchangeableness, eternity, triune nature of persons,

and the like.

The existence of God is therefore the most fundamental metaphysical truth. Anselm tells us that he sought to replace the chain of arguments outlined above with “a single argument that needed nothing but itself alone to prove its conclusion, and would be strong enough to establish that God truly exists and is the Supreme Good, depending on nothing else, but on whom all other things depend for their existence and well-being.” In doing so he devised one of the most-discussed arguments in the history of philosophy, presented in his *Proslogion* 2 as follows:

Therefore, Lord, You Who give understanding to faith, give me understanding to the extent You know to be appropriate: that You are as we believe, and You are that which we believe. And, indeed, we believe You to be something than which nothing greater can be thought. Or is there is not some such nature, then, since “The Fool hath said in his heart: There is no God” [*Psalms* 13:1]? But certainly that same Fool, when he hears this very thing I say, ‘something than which nothing greater can be thought’, understands what he hears; and what he understands is in his understanding, even if he were not to understand that to be. It is one matter that a thing is in the understanding, another to understand a thing to be. For when the painter thinks beforehand what is going to be done, he has it in the understanding but does not yet understand to be what he does not yet make. Yet once he has painted, he both has it in the understanding and also understands to be what he now makes. Therefore, even the Fool is convinced that there is in the understanding even something than which nothing greater can be thought, since when he hears this he understands, and whatever is understood is in the understanding. And certainly that than which a greater cannot be thought cannot be in the understanding alone. If indeed it is even in the understanding only, it can be thought to be in reality, which is greater. Thus if that than which a greater cannot be thought is in the understanding alone, the very thing than which a greater cannot be thought is that than which a greater can be thought. But certainly this cannot be. Therefore, without a doubt something than which a greater is not able to be thought exists (*existit*), both in the understanding and in reality.

The logical analysis, validity, and soundness of this argument have been a matter of debate since Anselm came up with it. Yet its general drift is clear. God, Anselm tells us, is something than which nothing greater can be thought. (Note that he does not present this formula as a definition or part of the meaning of ‘God’ but rather only as a claim that is true of God; the indirect negative formulation is important since we cannot adequately think of or conceive God as such.) So understood, the denial of God’s existence leads to a contradiction, as follows. That than which a greater cannot be thought cannot itself be thought not to exist, since if it were, we could think of something greater than it, namely that than which nothing greater can be thought existing in reality. But it is logically impossible to think of something greater than that than which nothing greater can be thought. Thus the denial of God’s existence must be rejected, and so God’s existence

affirmed. Hence Anselm's argument as a whole is *ad hominem*, directed against someone who accepts the claim that God is something than which nothing greater can be thought; once accepted, Anselm offers a *reductio ad absurdum* of the denial of God's existence.

Anselm's argument (as it was known in the Middle Ages) attracted attention from the very first. When the *Proslogion* was initially circulated, Gaunilon, a monk of Marmoutiers, wrote a brief in defense of the Fool; Anselm wrote a gracious reply and directed that thereafter the treatise should be copied with their exchange.

In the *Monologion* and *Proslogion*, Anselm says that he is trying to establish the existence of a 'nature' (or equally an essence or a substance). The divine nature is identical with the very qualities of which it is the paradigm, and furthermore is also a concrete particular: God is an individual, albeit a three-in-one individual. In addition to such an extraordinary nature there are also common natures, such as human nature, which is present in each human being as his or her individual nature. Anselm holds that such common natures "become singular" when combined with a collection of distinctive properties (*proprietas*) that distinguish an individual from all others (*De incarnatione Verbi* 11). In the same work he inveighs against the extreme nominalism of Roscelin of Compiègne that anyone taking universals to be no more than vocal utterances deserves no hearing on theological matters; Roscelin cannot understand how a plurality of humans are one human in species, and cannot understand how anything is a human being if not an individual (chap. 1). While the extent of Anselm's metaphysical realism is a matter of debate, remarks such as these make it clear that he countenanced some form of realism about universals. Whereas some form of platonic exemplarism works for features that are identical with the divine essence, a more traditional realism applies to non-divine natures in the mundane world of creatures. From Boethius, Anselm adopts the standard metaphysical framework of substances and accidents, sorted into the ten Aristotelian categories. In the case of substances, Anselm holds that common names designate common natures, while proper names designate individuals metaphysically composed of a nature combined with distinctive properties with further accidental qualities. In addition, there are non-substantial qualities such as whiteness, instances of which may be found in individuals. Anselm speaks occasionally of form and of matter, but does not have a developed hylomorphic theory.

Ethics. Anselm's positive ethical theory is grounded on his theory of the will and free choice, one of his most striking and original contributions. The traditional account of free will holds that an agent is free when there

are genuine alternatives open to her, so that she can do one or another of them as she pleases. This traditional account is sometimes called ‘bilateral’ since the agent must have at least two possible courses of action in order to act freely. In his *De libertate arbitrii*, by contrast, Anselm defends a unilateral normative conception of freedom according to which an agent is free when two conditions are jointly satisfied: (a) she has the ability to perform a given action; and (b) that action is the one she ought to perform, that is, it is objectively the right action and hence the one she ought to want to perform—roughly, that an agent is free when she can act as she ought, regardless of alternatives. (Anselm, like all mediæval philosophers, holds that what an agent ought to do is an objective matter.) Note that Anselm is careful to say that an agent is free when she *can* act as she ought, not that she *does* so act; we commit wrongdoing freely when the right course of action is open to us but we fail to pursue it. The crucial issue, of course, is when an agent has the ability to perform a given action. Anselm devotes most of his fragmentary notes on ability and power to investigating this issue. His analysis tracks connections among ascriptions of ability, responsibility, and the cause of an action, much in the spirit of contemporary philosophical reflections on tort law. Very roughly, Anselm thinks there are a variety of freedom-canceling conditions; some of these, such as compulsion, are extremely sensitive to the kind of ability at stake.

One case in particular attracts Anselm’s attention in his *De libertate arbitrii*. Some abilities can be exercised by an agent more or less at will: lifting a book, thinking about Rome, deciding not to eat pork, playing the piano. Other abilities depend on external factors, which may include the actions and abilities of other agents. It takes two to tango, a multitude of musicians to play a symphony, other runners to have a race. These are all necessarily dependent abilities: they require other agents acting appropriately for their exercise. But consider a case in which an ability that could be exercised at will can no longer be so exercised, though the agent retains the ability. A ballerina tied to a chair cannot dance but still has the ability to do so. More exactly, Anselm holds, she does not have the opportunity to exercise the ability, though she retains the ability; were the constraint removed, she could exercise her ability at will. Anselm argues that the ballerina’s ability to dance is what matters to her free choice, according to (a), not whether she currently has the opportunity to exercise her ability. Now suppose that the ballerina, no longer tied to a chair, has through excessive dancing injured her legs so badly that she can dance only if a doctor operates on her legs. Here too, Anselm maintains, she has not lost the ability to dance but only the opportunity to exercise her ability,

and can regain the opportunity only if a doctor helps her to do so. This is the situation in which Anselm finds the human race. Through the (wrongful) exercise of our free choice in original sin, we have lost the opportunity to freely do what is right, and can only recover it through the actions of another (namely through God's grace). We can legitimately be faulted for not doing what is right even now, despite the fact that we cannot do what is right at will, by our unaided efforts; we have the ability, and we lost the opportunity to exercise it through its improper use, but these facts do not stand in the way of our being free to act rightly; hence our culpability for failing to do so. Whether we agree with Anselm or not, his analysis is subtle and provocative, and represents a new level of sophistication in the analysis of free choice.

Following Augustine, Anselm argues that we abandon rectitude of will only by our own choice. Many things can happen against one's will, but it is impossible to will against one's will, since that would require both willing something and willing not to will it—but that can be done by simply not willing it in the first place. Not even God can take away our rectitude of will, Anselm maintains, since rectitude of will is doing what God wants; if God wanted to deprive our wills of rectitude, He would want us to not do what he wants, and whether we try to obey or to disobey we wind up doing as He wants. Thus abandoning rectitude must be through our own choice, since it cannot happen against our will or by external (even divine) compulsion. The responsibility for wrongdoing rests squarely on our shoulders.

Anselm returns to these topics in his *De casu Diaboli*, perhaps returning to the traditional bilateral conception of freedom in the process. In Chapter 12 he puts forward a famous thought-experiment in which God creates an angel with free will, but without any motive for action whatsoever—a free being with no ends at all. Anselm argues that such a being would never act, since any action is motivated by pursuit of an end, and by hypothesis the angel has no ends. (Nor is an angel ever prompted by biological needs, and this is the point of using an angel rather than a human being in the example.) From this case Anselm and later philosophers drew the moral that at least some ultimate end has to be given to agents in order for there to be action at all, and hence the possibility of moral action. An agent must therefore have at least one ultimate end, an end she does not choose.

Yet one end is not enough for moral agency. Anselm argues that there must be two ultimate and incommensurable ends to make sense of moral choices, and specifically of moral dilemmas. He reasons as follows. If an agent had only a single end, she would always act in pursuit of that end,

unless deceived or misled through ignorance. There would be no moral conflict; her motives and reasons for action would be transparently in the service of her single ultimate end. This is quite similar to the life of non-rational animals. A dog pursues only its apparent good, as defined by its nature (which establishes its ultimate end). Dogs naturally aim at their own ‘perfection’, as Anselm puts it. But human beings are more complicated. We face choices in which each alternative serves a distinct end, the ends being ultimate and incommensurable. Anselm holds that this fact explains moral agency and the possibility of moral wrongdoing—for rational agents have two distinct ultimate ends: they seek their own happiness (through advantage or benefit) on the one hand, and they seek justice (rectitude of will) on the other hand.

This is the core of Anselm’s so-called “two-will theory” of motivation. Moral conflicts and dilemmas arise when we are faced with the choice between happiness and justice, between individual self-interest and impersonal fairness. Each end is a genuine good to the individual agent, and the conflict between them is real. Morality demands that we favor justice over happiness in such conflicts; wrongdoing is explained as the choice of happiness over justice. A thief prefers his own advantage to following the laws. While we might not side with the thief, his choice is not inexplicable; indeed, we may even sympathize with him while deploring his actions. The possibility of an irreducible clash between ultimate ends that we cannot forego gives us the ability to explain moral agency. To say that justice and happiness can conflict is of course not to say that they do; if we are lucky, we might avoid moral dilemmas. Nevertheless, our actions are free because of the pull between these ends, even if we consistently take one side or the other.

Human fulfillment for Anselm thus turns out to be surprisingly paradoxical. We do not deserve to be happy unless we are prepared on principle to forego happiness for justice. Indeed, only by pursuing justice for its own sake can we attain the self-interested happiness we have scorned. The price of moral agency is that happiness is the reward for those who do not pursue it.

Philosophy of Language. Anselm adopts Augustine’s view of language as a system of signs. This general category covers linguistic items, such as utterances, inscriptions, gestures, and at least some acts of thought; it also covers nonlinguistic items, such as icons, statues, smoke (a sign of fire), and even human actions, which Anselm says are signs that the agent thinks the action should be done. Roughly, a sign signifies something by bringing it to mind; this single semantic relation, founded on psychology, is the foundation of Anselm’s semantics.

As noted above, common names—at least natural-kind terms—signify common natures, and proper names signify the common nature in combination with distinctive properties. Nondenoting terms are problematic; ‘nothing’ seems to be significant only by signifying nothing, a paradox that exercises Anselm in several treatises. Troublesome as they are, Anselm directs his most sustained inquiry into semantics not at empty names but at ‘denominative’ terms, roughly what we call adjectives.

The difficulty he addresses in his *De grammatico* can be stated simply: ‘white’ cannot signify whiteness (‘whiteness’ does that); nor can it signify what is white (‘snow’ does that); what then does it signify? Anselm’s answer depends on several distinctions, the most important of which is between direct and indirect signification (*per se* and *per aliud* signification). A term signifies directly if it brings the proper and customary signification to mind; it signifies other things indirectly, perhaps things linked somehow to what the term directly signifies. As a first approximation, then, Anselm holds that ‘whiteness’ directly signifies whiteness, whereas ‘white’ directly signifies whiteness and indirectly signifies things that have whiteness (and is used to pick out the latter).

Verbs, for Anselm, signify actions or ‘doings’ of some sort, broadly speaking, including even passive processes; that is their distinguishing feature. Names and subjects, respectively, signify subjects and their doings; when combined in a sentence, the truth of the sentence reflects the underlying metaphysical dependence of doings on doers, of actions on subjects. Now just as Anselm’s theory of meaning applies to more than words, so too his theory of truth applies to more than statements. In the *De veritate* Anselm puts forward an account that recognizes a wide variety of things to be capable of truth—statements, thoughts, volitions, actions, the senses, even the very being of things. Truth, for Anselm, is a normative notion: something is true when it is as it ought to be. Thus truth is in the end a matter of correctness (*rectitudo*), the correctness appropriate in each instance (*De veritate* 11). For statements there are actually two forms of correctness: a given statement ought to signify what it was designed to express, and, if assertoric, it ought to signify the world the way it is. The first is a matter of the propositional content of an utterance, the second whether that propositional content is asserted (or denied). The statement “Snow is white” does what it should do when it succeeds in signifying that snow is white; it also does what it should do when it succeeds in signifying that snow is white in the circumstances that snow really is white. The latter is the closest to our contemporary notion of truth for statements, but Anselm insists that the former is a kind of truth too (he calls it the “truth of signi-

fication”), and indeed can hold even if the world changes such that snow is no longer white.

See also Aristotle; Augustine, St.; Ontological Argument for the Existence of God; Plato; Roscelin.

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