

**The Primal Choice:
An Analysis of Anselm's Account of Free Will**



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In his treatise entitled *De Libertate Arbitrii* (On Free Will),¹ St. Anselm of Canterbury defines free will as “the capacity for preserving rectitude of the will for its own sake.”² This definition may strike the modern reader as somewhat odd for freedom of the will is usually regarded as the ability to choose between acting morally or immorally or, more generally, to choose between at least two courses of action. Anselm's account of freedom, however, does not always require the presence of alternative possibilities – that is, an action may be considered free even if the agent could not act in any way other than he does. The key for Anselm is not that the agent should have a range of possible actions from which to choose, but that his action be self-initiated, free from external pressure, and, to be considered completely free, aimed at sustaining moral correctness. Since Anselm formulates his clearest and most convincing arguments on the issue concerning the primal choice of the angels, this

¹ All textual references to *De Libertate Arbitrii*, *De Casu Diaboli*, and *Proslogion* can be found in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

² *De Libertate Arbitrii*, 3.

discussion will focus on the liberty of the angels before and after the fall of the devil.

Anselm asserts in *De Libertate Arbitrii* that the power to sin has no connection to liberty. At the beginning of the dialogue, the student asks whether the commonly held notion of free will as the ability to sin or not to sin is correct. His teacher replies by giving two arguments to explain why this conception is flawed. The first argument states that God and the good angels have freedom (for they have all that is good to have) yet they cannot sin; therefore, sin must not be liberty or a part of liberty. The second argument is slightly more involved. Relying on the premise that "one who is as he ought to be... such that he is unable to lose this state, is freer than one who is such that he can lose it and be led into what is indecent and inexpedient for him,"³ Anselm demonstrates that, since sin is "indecent and harmful,"⁴ a will that cannot abandon its correct state through sin is freer than one that can. Thus, because the capacity for sin diminishes liberty while its absence increases it, he again concludes, "it is neither liberty nor a part of liberty."

The latter argument lies open to attack because its truth hinges on the debatable presupposition that the will is freer when it cannot sin. The answer to this objection involves the connection between liberty and right reason. It befits rational creatures to use their faculty of reason, which allows them to discern what is fitting and expedient – that is, what is in accord with rectitude; as Anselm says, "[F]reedom of will was given to the rational nature in order that it might retain the rectitude of will it has received" from God.⁵ Since freedom involves the preservation of rectitude, the will that determines itself according to right reason (and, therefore, according to rectitude) is freer than one which abandons right reason and yields to temptation.⁶

³ *De Libertate Arbitrii*, 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁶ Anselm makes it very clear that no temptation, no matter how strong, can rob one of his free will. However, one can will to succumb to temptation. The free will has the ability to either safeguard rectitude or abandon it and does so through its own power alone. Thus, contrary to popular opinion, one can never be forced to act

Furthermore, the decision to yield to temptation entails the loss of freedom, for the will essentially makes an unconstrained yet non-autonomous (what Kant would call a heteronomous) choice to submit to an external force.⁷ The will's subjugation to an outside force runs counter to the definition of freedom, which centers on self-initiated action. Thus, the will determines itself to something that makes it lose its power of self-determination, becoming a "slave of sin." Nevertheless, Anselm explicitly states that those who have made themselves slaves of sin, although they have lost rectitude, are "unable to lose natural free will" – that is, the faculty of free will. However, "now they cannot use that freedom without a grace other than that which they previously had,"⁸ a grace which comes solely from God.

Anselm's definition of freedom as rectitude is not just an arbitrary stipulation of the meaning of the word, but a definition grounded in sound metaphysics. The argument supporting Anselm's conclusion is as follows: *A priori*, freedom is something good, for it is better to be free than to be not free. God, because he is pure perfection and goodness, must have perfect freedom. However, as Anselm points out in his *Proslogion*, there are many things God cannot do, such as lie, turn the true into the false, or be corrupted.⁹ In essence, he cannot do evil. Therefore, the ability to do evil must not be a power enhancing freedom (for

unwillingly, for "one cannot will to will against his will" (*De Libertate Arbitrii*, 5). To illustrate this point, Anselm offers the example of the man who lies to avoid being killed. Although the man is said to lie unwillingly, he actually has a choice: he can either lie, thus abandoning rectitude, or he can preserve rectitude and be killed. While the decision is unpleasant, the will remains free to choose either option. Therefore, being "forced" to turn away from rectitude does not involve the loss of freedom to some outside power but rather willing to will that which is less difficult.

⁷ The choice is unconstrained because nothing outside of the will actually compels it to will in the way it does. At the same time, however, the choice cannot rightly be called autonomous, for autonomy of the will requires that the will act only according to that which is proper to it, namely, reason. Therefore, the will that allows itself to be influenced by some motivation extrinsic to the rational faculty, such as temptation, is not autonomous. Note that this is a Kantian interpretation not made explicit in Anselm; however, it is helpful in considering what Anselm means when he writes, "It is in these – reason and will – that freedom of will consists" (*De Libertate Arbitrii*, 4).

⁸ *De Libertate Arbitrii*, 3.

⁹ *Proslogion*, 7.

God, who is omnipotent and absolutely free, cannot do them), but a privation of power decreasing freedom. As Anselm states:

He who can do these things can do what is not good for himself and what he ought not to do. And the more he can do these things, the more power adversity and perversity have over him and the less he has against them. He, therefore who can do these things can do them not by power but by impotence.¹⁰

Hence, the inability to go against rectitude is the ultimate freedom, while the ability to turn away from it is a defect. By this logic, the so-called "power to sin" is not even a real power, for it hinders rather than enhances individual freedom.

While the student is unable to refute his teacher's claims about the relationship between sin and free will, he does raise an interesting point:

I can contest none of your arguments, but I am not a little swayed by the fact that in the beginning both the angelic nature and ours had the capacity to sin, since without it, they would not have sinned. Wherefore, if by this capacity, which is alien to free will, both natures sinned, how can we say they sinned by free will? But if they did not sin by free will, it seems they sinned necessarily. That is they sinned either willingly or necessarily. But if they sinned willingly, how so if not by free will? And if not by free will, then indeed it seems that they sinned necessarily.¹¹

In other words, how can the apostate angel and the first man be said to have sinned through free will if sin cannot be identified as either liberty itself or as a part of liberty?

Anselm rejects outright the notion that they sinned out of necessity, for that would imply that they did not possess free choice. Rather, he says: "It was through the capacity to sin

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *De Libertate Arbitrii*, 2.

willingly and freely and not of necessity that ours and the angelic nature first sinned."¹² However, he specifies that man and the angels "sinned through their own free will, though not insofar as it was free... but rather by the power it had of sinning, unaided by its freedom not to sin or to be coerced into the servitude of sin."¹³ Here, Anselm distinguishes between the property which makes the will truly free – the ability to preserve rectitude – and the capacity for sin, which is a necessary byproduct of the will's freedom from external coercion or bribery. Therefore, although Anselm essentially states that the rebel angel and the first man did and did not sin through free will, he does not contradict himself, for he is saying that they sinned through their power for self-initiated action, but not through the power for self-initiated action taken for the purpose of upholding rectitude, which is the only way to realize true liberty.

Here, in effect, Anselm distinguishes between the mere faculty of free will, which has the potential for self-determination, and the will which has already determined itself toward or away from rectitude. The undetermined will, in its state of potentiality, is able to choose between two alternatives – preserving rectitude or abandoning it. Therefore, the power to sin inheres in the mere faculty of free will. On the other hand, the will, which has already determined itself one way or the other, no longer has any alternatives available to it. While the undetermined will's ability to choose from at least two possible courses of action typifies most people's notion of freedom, the determined will is also free, for the absence of alternatives open to it is the result of a free choice to either uphold or forsake rectitude.

According to Anselm's account of angelic freedom in *De Casu Diaboli*, it was the act of self-determination – of making the primal choice between rectitude and sin – that sealed the fates of the good and bad angels. Nothing prior to the choice separated the two groups. As creatures of God, they were all naturally good.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

They were all equipped with the same faculties and capabilities, including a will for justice and a will for happiness. The simultaneous presence of these two wills within their nature was the source of the angels' freedom. Anselm proves that an angel (or any other rational creature) that has been given the capacity for willing but does not yet will anything cannot have its first will from itself.¹⁴ Thus, its first will must come from God.¹⁵ However, if God had given the angel only the dispositional will for happiness, the angel's first act of willing would be necessitated by an external force rather than self-initiated; as Anselm says, it would be "the work and gift of God, as are life and being endowed with the senses, which do not involve morality and in which there is neither good nor evil."¹⁶ The same argument would hold if the angel had been given the will for justice alone. By endowing the angels with the two wills, God gave them the opportunity to choose autonomously between pursuing happiness alone, which leads to injustice, or happiness tempered by justice, which is what they all should have willed.

This was the primal choice. The good angels willed as they should have, while the apostate angel, willing only his own happiness, willed as if he was not subject to the superior will of God. Since "it is for God alone thus to will something by his own will such that he follows no higher will," the angel "inordinately willed to be like God."¹⁷ Moreover, he not only willed to be like God, "but he even willed to be greater by willing what God did

¹⁴ Anselm's proof hinges on the distinction between having the potential to perform some action and being able to actually perform that action. To illustrate his point, he offers the example of the ability to walk: "[W]hat has feet, and the other conditions for walking, can walk of itself. But what has feet, but unsound ones, cannot walk of itself" (*De Casu Diaboli* 12). God endowed the angels with the capacity for willing, but since they did not yet will anything, they could not will of themselves.

¹⁵ Anselm uses the word *voluntas* (will) to describe several types of willing. In their analysis of Anselm's theories entitled "Anselm's Account of Freedom," Sandra Visser and Thomas Williams identify three uses of the term: the faculty or capacity for willing, the disposition of that faculty to will in certain ways, and the actual act of willing (*Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 31 (2001): 221-244). In this case, "first will" refers to the initial disposition that the angels receive from God in order that they may engage in their first act of volition.

¹⁶ *De Casu Diaboli*, 13.

¹⁷ *De Casu Diaboli*, 4.

not want him to will, because he put his own will above God's."¹⁸ In doing so, he abandoned justice, for he willed something which was not fitting for him to have. Thus, he lost his freedom insofar as he lost the property, which makes the will free, namely, rectitude. Furthermore, says Anselm, he can never regain rectitude through his own power, for God alone gives the will for justice - "there is no way in which he could acquire justice when he does not have it, either before receiving it or after having abandoned it."¹⁹ Anselm echoes this statement in *De Libertate Arbitrii*, saying: "Just as no will, before it has rectitude, can have it unless God gives it, so when it abandons what it has received, it cannot regain it unless God restores it."²⁰ The devil, then, will never be truly free unless God gives him the will for rectitude again.

The restoration of rectitude through divine grace is an important concept for Anselm. In fact, he considers it a greater miracle than the restoration of life itself, for physical life is by nature impermanent, while rectitude of the will, once given, is meant to be preserved forever. Even if the individual whose life is given back lost it via suicide, he willingly abandoned something he was only supposed to have temporarily; "he who abandons the rectitude of the will casts aside what he has an obligation to preserve always"²¹ and, therefore, says Anselm, deserves to lose it permanently. As the student remarks, many humans (including a number of saints) have been delivered from a life of sin by the grace of God. This raises the question, however, of why God does not restore rectitude to the devil. Although Anselm does not address this issue directly, it is possible to formulate two not mutually exclusive responses based on his theories. The first response is that the devil, due to his slavery to the sin of hubris, continues to reject rectitude, falling ever further away from God. Thus, even if God were to offer him

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *De Casu Diaboli*, 17.

²⁰ *De Libertate Arbitrii*, 10.

²¹ *Ibid.*

grace, he would refuse to accept it (as he did when God offered him perseverance),²² having determined himself to wickedness. The other response states that God has simply decided not to offer grace to the fallen angel, and that this decision must be just even if we cannot understand it, for, as has been shown above, God cannot be unjust.

While the devil falls from grace, the good angels rise in status. According to Anselm, God makes them unable to sin after the primal choice. Their situation is similar to the plight of the devil after the fall in that neither party has alternative possibilities available to it; he is forever a slave to sin, while they cannot but uphold rectitude. The fate of the good angels raises an interesting question: Is God limiting their freedom by making them incapable of sin? Of course, one could reply that he is not, based on Anselm's prior arguments that sin is neither a part of freedom nor freedom itself. However, one could also offer a more positive interpretation of the good angels' situation. The following is Anselm's description of the good angels' condition after the primal choice:

Therefore, the angels that loved the justice that they had, rather than the more that they did not have, received as reward in justice that good their will renounced out of love of justice, and they remained in secure possession of what they had. And they were so elevated that they could have whatever they willed and not see what more they could have willed, and thus they cannot sin.²³

"The more" to which Anselm refers in this passage is the otherwise unspecified apparent good whose pursuit the good angels gave up in the interest of justice via the primal choice and which the bad angels willed to have, even though their willing ran counter to justice. After the choice was made, God endowed the good angels with this good, for they had proven themselves

²² *De Casu Diaboli*, 2-3.

²³ *Ibid.*, 6.

worthy of it, while not only denying the good to the bad angels but also depriving them "of whatever good they desire."²⁴ In Anselm's view, then, the angels' inability to sin is not a limit placed upon them by God. Rather, it is a consequence of their act of self-determination and an enhancement of their freedom. In making the free choice to pursue happiness tempered with justice, the angels wholly gave themselves over to the preservation of rectitude, with no room for alternatives. In other words, they determined their wills toward justice. God rewarded their adherence to justice by making them so perfect in rectitude that there was nothing that they would want to will that they did not already possess. This is why the angels are said to "merit the capacity never to will that which [they] ought not and, always following justice, of never being deprived of any moderate desire."²⁵ Since they chose to uphold rectitude and did so without being coerced or bribed, the results of their free choice are an extension of the liberty involved in making it.

Anselm's theory of freedom would certainly be considered unusual by modern standards. Most people would balk at the notion that one can be considered free without having a set of alternatives from which to choose. However, Anselm demonstrates that alternative possibilities, while often present, are not a necessary component of liberty. In fact, they can be an obstacle to freedom if the will has the option of forsaking rectitude by giving itself over to sin. It is for this reason that the freest will is that which cannot sin, as in the case of God and the good angels. Thus, Anselm proves that true freedom involves making an autonomous choice to preserve rectitude for its own sake.

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²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.