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ANSELM OF CANTERBURY ON GRACE AND FREE CHOICE

In his treatise *The Harmony of the Foreknowledge, The Predestination, and the Grace of God with Free Choice* St. Anselm argues that free choice coexists with God's Grace. He wants to dispel a controversy of his day that one or the other but not both is a prerequisite for salvation. The dispute arises from seemingly incompatible passages in the Bible. On the one hand, some passages in the Divine Scripture indicate that salvation is solely dependent upon the Grace of God, viz.. «without me you can do nothing» [John 15:5] and «It is not of him who will nor of him who runs but of God, who shows mercy» [Rom. 9:16]. On the other hand, Scripture instructs that we possess free choice. «Keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking guile. Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it» [Ps. 34:13-14]. How is this apparent incompatibility between grace and free choice to be resolved? Notwithstanding that all creatures owe their existence to God's Grace, human beings possess the ability to pursue good as a function of His Grace. Without this ability to will rightly no one would be capable of choosing to pursue good. We did not acquire this ability by our own efforts. Nor did we acquire it from some other human being. Consequently, the source of it is God. According to Anselm there are three senses in which one speaks of the will: [a] the instrument-for-willing, [b] the inclination of this instrument, and [c] the use of this instrument. The will qua instrument-for-willing is the ability to will; that is, the capacity to exercise free choice. The inclination of the instrument-for-willing is comprised of two tendencies: [a] the inclination to will what is beneficial and [b] the inclination to will what is right. The use of the will pertains to cognitive activity the object of which is that which is willed.

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As for the instrument-for-willing Anselm says, «no one wills uprightness except someone who has uprightness; and no one is able to will uprightness except by means of uprightness. But it is clear that this uprightness belongs to the will considered as instrument»¹. Since this instrument is the ability a person has of free choice ² what Anselm says can only mean that uprightness is an option relative to free choice. If not, the instrument itself must be upright which is to say that the ability is itself upright. But uprightness is not something properly predicated of ability. So on this account it is via God's Grace that one is free to choose to be upright. This is tantamount to claiming that without God's Grace no one could choose to be upright. He says, «...when the 'instrument' for -willing-justice [i.e., when uprightness] has been lost, the will-as-instrument cannot at all will justice, unless justice is restored by Grace»³. This entails that when the instrument; that is, ability to will uprightness has been lost, one is no longer free to choose to be upright without God's Grace restoring uprightness as an option. This being the case, one is put in a *passive* position for he can do nothing on his own to recapture the option to choose to be upright. So whether or not a person who has lost uprightness-of-will recaptures it is strictly a matter of God's Grace. Given the passive position the human agent is in entails that God restoring the agents uprightness is a function of caprice. Only God knows whether He will choose to restore the agents uprightness-of-will. For all we know, God may make this decision about restoring uprightness-of-will based on a roll of [Divine] dice. Anselm would most certainly find this situation unacceptable. The only other alternative is that God automatically restores uprightness-of-will when it has been lost. If this is the case, there is essentially no difference between one being able to choose between right and wrong sans God's Grace or with it. In other words, if God automatically restores uprightness-of-will when it has been lost, then the Grace by which He restores it is superfluous.

¹ St. Anselm, *The Harmony of Foreknowledge, The Predestination, and the Grace of God with Free Choice from Anselm of Canterbury*, Vol. 2. J. HOPKINS and H. RICHARDSON (ed. and trans.), Toronto and New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1976, p. 316.

² Ibid, p. 314.

³ Ibid, p. 315.

Now the instrument called will is also inclined; that is, disposed to will what is of benefit to the individual or will what is right qua just. It is apparent that Anselm believes that all men are inclined to will what is beneficial to them but not all men are inclined to will what is just. He says «...in a just man the instrument-for-willing is so inclined to will justice...»⁴. This entails that a person cannot be inclined to will justice unless he possesses the ability to be just. He possesses the ability to be just by the Grace of God. But as indicated above the ability to will justice can be lost and we have seen the untoward results of such a situation. Furthermore, Anselm does not qualify the inclination-to-will what is beneficial. In some cases what is beneficial to one is also just. Since choosing to act in a way which is beneficial to one apparently does not require the Grace of God, it would appear that there are at least some just acts that do not require it. Otherwise, those acts which one is inclined to perform that are beneficial to him as well as just presuppose the Grace of God. As such, there would be some beneficial acts that require God's Grace which is contrary to Anselm's position.

It is with respect to the use of will as instrument whereby one exercises free choice. Furthermore, «...using the instrument-for-willing; and the use of the will is the willing which occurs when we are thinking of that thing which we will»⁵. Anselm means by this that the use of the instrument-for-willing entails the cognition of that which is willed. For example, one cannot will to sing a particular song unless one is cognizant of the song to be sung. In other words, use of the instrument entails willing something specific of which the willing agent is aware. In this regard there are two important issues. [1] How does one know that that which he wills is just? When Anselm says «...uprightness-of-willing something is given to no one except to one who understands willing and what he ought to will»⁶ he is referring to use of the will indicated by the word 'something' meaning something specific. This can only mean that knowledge that that which one chooses is just is a prerequisite for being given [by God] the option of choosing that which is just. So even if, as Anselm maintains, we are all equally granted via the Grace of God the instrument for willing

⁴ Ibid, p. 315.

⁵ Ibid, p. 315.

⁶ Ibid, p. 310.

uprightness, one cannot use that instrument [i.e., free choice] rightly unless one knows that which is just. So how does one come upon such knowledge? The word of God constitutes the seed of this knowledge. It is via the word of God that one understands [i.e., comes to know] what he ought to will and without such knowledge one cannot will uprightly. Furthermore Anselm understands that knowledge of that which is just does not in and of itself lead one to [attempt to] do that which is just. One can only bridge the gap between knowing what is just and doing what is just by willing that which is just. One is capable of upright willing only by the Grace of God. This analysis has an interesting result. First of all, Anselm equivocates with respect to the notion of understanding. On the one hand, he construes understanding as knowledge viz. a knowledge of that which is willed is a precondition for willing it. On the other hand, he takes understanding to mean belief. It seems clear from the text that his position is that only believers in the word of God via Christ are graced to choose rightly. This entails that nonbelievers cannot choose rightly since uprightness-of-will is a precondition for one possessing the ability of free choice. This, however, contradicts Anselm's claim that «A man always possesses this instrument even though he does not always use it»⁷. He does not qualify this as only a man who believes in the word of God. Furthermore, he claims that «...the instrument itself is not greater in one person and less in another»⁸.

[2] The second issue involved in the exercise of free choice is the abandonment of uprightness-of-will. Anselm says, «Surely, he abandons uprightness-of-will not because the *ability* to keep it fails him [which ability constitutes freedom of choice] but because the *will* to keep it fails him. The will-to-keep uprightness is not deficient in itself but ceases because another willing expels it...»⁹. The position enunciated here is that what one chooses to do involves a competition between wants [i.e., willings]. He is correct about this matter. Rarely does one act on the basis of a singular want. Rather, one's decision to act is the result of a choice between competitive wants. As Anselm observes. «For if each of us carefully examines his own acts of willing, he will discern that he never abandons uprightness-of-will [which he has received by Grace] except by

⁷ Ibid, p. 315.

⁸ Ibid, p. 315.

⁹ Ibid, p. 314.

willing something else which he cannot will compatibly [with willing uprightness]¹⁰. So the abandonment of uprightness-of-will pertains not to the ability to choose freely but to the exercise of that ability. This is inconsistent with the claim that the instrument; that is, the ability for willing uprightness can be lost¹¹. Nevertheless choosing to abandon uprightness-of-will can mean only one of two things. [1] It means choosing to abandon the ability for willing uprightness. This cannot be the case. One does not lose an ability merely as a function of choice. One may choose to do something else, i.e., sever a hand whereby he loses the ability to use that hand. But one cannot simply choose to lose the ability to use one's hand. [2] It means freely choosing to act in a particular instance in a way that is contrary to uprightness-of-will. In this case, there is nothing barring the agent on a different occasion to choose to act in a manner that is consistent with uprightness-of-will in which case he needs no intervention on behalf of God to restore uprightness-of will. The first alternative is the only condition that would require God's intervention to restore the ability for willing uprightness. But as we have just seen, that alternative cannot be the case.

So, in conclusion, it would appear that regardless of the various ways Anselm construes free will it is incompatible with the Grace of God.

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¹⁰ Ibid, p. 314.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 319.

