

Introduction to *Three Philosophical Dialogues*

If you asked me, or just about any other scholar familiar with Anselm's work, what the three dialogues translated here are *about*, you would probably be told that they are all three about *metaphysics*, with some ethics thrown in as well. *On Truth* concerns the nature of truth, a metaphysical topic, although it also discusses the nature of justice, an ethical topic. *On Freedom of Choice* and *On the Fall of the Devil* both focus on the nature, extent, and exercise of free will, again metaphysical topics, with a considerable emphasis on the purpose of free will, an ethical topic. But when *Anselm* described these dialogues in his Preface, he called them "three treatises pertaining to the study of Holy Scripture." Now either Anselm and his modern readers have entirely different ideas about what's important in these dialogues, or else they have entirely different ideas about what it means for something to pertain to the study of Scripture—or perhaps both. The matter deserves a close look, since if Anselm is doing something other than what we naturally take him to be doing, we will risk grave misunderstanding if we don't try to understand what exactly that is. (Of course, we may decide in the end that what's interesting about Anselm's discussion in these dialogues is not what *he* thinks is interesting. But we should want to know whether we are reading Anselm on his own terms or using Anselm to pursue our own independent interests.)

So we have two questions before us. First, does Anselm mean something different from what we would mean in saying that these dialogues pertain to the study of Holy Scripture? And second, are the discussions that modern readers find central to these dialogues entirely different from the ones that Anselm thought were central? I will begin by answering the first question, explaining what Anselm has in mind when he says that these dialogues pertain to the study of Holy Scripture. Now even if you're not reading these dialogues because you're interested in Scripture (and given our present-day curricular divisions, the odds are that you're reading them because you're interested in *philosophy*), you should keep reading, because the philosophical payoff will come surprisingly soon. It will turn out that Anselm has in mind

something quite different from what we think of as Biblical exegesis, something that will look far more like philosophy. Then I will proceed to the second question. In that connection I will suggest that Anselm is interested in precisely the same discussions that interest modern philosophical readers: that is, in the discussion of metaphysical and ethical issues. But he may not be interested in them for quite the same reasons that some modern readers are, and his reasons for engaging in those discussions are as important to the character of his thinking as the positions he defends.

We can begin by taking a look at the opening line of *On the Fall of the Devil*: When the Apostle [Paul] says “What do you have that you did not receive?”: is he saying this only to human beings, or to angels as well?

Now contemporary Biblical scholars would look at this question and roll their eyes. “Paul certainly isn’t speaking to angels in this passage,” they would protest; “he’s not even speaking to all human beings. He’s writing to first-century Christians in the new church at Corinth, and he’s admonishing them not to boast about their spiritual gifts. That’s why, after asking ‘What do you have that you did not receive?’ he continues by asking ‘Why then do you boast as if you have not received?’ The answer Paul expects to his first question is, obviously, *Nothing*. Since the Corinthians have nothing they have not received from God, they ought not to preen themselves on their spiritual gifts as if they were somehow responsible for them.” And so, the contemporary biblical scholar might conclude, asking whether these words are addressed to angels is just plain silly.

If Anselm could be brought into this debate, he would surely retort that the critic’s reasoning, if it works at all, proves far too much. For none of Scripture—not one word of it—was written for an audience of people like you and me: educated English speakers of the early 21st century. If the critic’s reasoning is right, then, the question “What do you have that you have not received?” is not asked of *us* either. And yet that is in fact an entirely apt question, and one whose answer is of great theological and philosophical importance. Suppose literally everything we have—every desire, every choice, every virtue, every emotion, every talent—is received entirely from God. Then it becomes very hard to see why we should get

any credit at all for whatever good things we do (“Why then do you boast as if you had not received?”) and any blame for whatever evil we do. Wouldn’t God bear all the responsibility for both good and evil?

Of course, this is a problem only if we have some reason to think that everything we have is received from God. But Anselm believes we have ample reason to think so. Not only does Scripture affirm it, but reason shows it. In both the *Monologion* and the *Proslogion* Anselm argues that God is the ultimate source of everything that is. And in chapter 5 of *On Truth* he argues (in effect) that no matter how things are, they are that way because God directs them to be that way. Nothing can be otherwise than as God, the Supreme Truth, directs. In other words, purely philosophical reflection shows that God is, in a very strong sense, the final and complete answer to every question of the form “Why is X the way it is?”

So Paul’s question to the Corinthians seems to imply that they have nothing but what they have received from God, and rational reflection backs up that implication. And yet both Scripture and rational reflection also tell us that God punishes people, and it seems unjust for God to punish people for failing to make good choices if those good choices can come only from God. God seems to withhold goodness from people and then punish them for lacking it. So there is an urgent theological and philosophical need to figure out how widely Paul’s question is meant to apply.

Still, why *angels*? How does it help our philosophical problem to investigate the application of Paul’s question to angels instead of asking the (presumably easier) question about its application to human beings? The answer, I think, is that the case of angels excludes a number of complications that are extraneous to Anselm’s main interest. Anselm tells us elsewhere (in *De concordia* 1.6) that in these dialogues he is concerned with freedom only to the extent that freedom bears on salvation. Human beings at least seem to have freedom that has no salvific significance at all: my eternal destiny does not hang on what I choose to have for dinner tonight, though that choice does seem to be free. Rather than being distracted by questions about whether I really do have such freedom, and whether, if I do, that freedom is the same sort of freedom I employ in making the choices that *do* matter for eternity, Anselm

asks about the angels. For all we know about angelic freedom is that some angels fell and others didn't. The ones who fell are no longer capable of doing good; the ones who stayed firm are no longer capable of doing evil. So with the angels we get exactly one choice, and that choice clearly does matter for the angels' eternal destiny.

There is another reason for focusing on angels. Human beings are, according to the Christian doctrine of the Fall, damaged goods in need of divine repair. Those who have been repaired are clearly not entitled to boast of their restored condition, since it was God who repaired them; for we are, according to the doctrine of the Fall, too damaged to repair ourselves. God's repair work is known in theology as "grace," and the problem of the relationship between grace and human freedom is a notoriously messy one. The question of grace does not arise for the angels, however, because the angels were all in their original pristine condition when they made their primal choice. So if Paul's question does apply to the angels, it can't be about grace. It must instead be about whether that one primal choice—the choice by which the good angels remained obedient to God and the evil angels fell—was something received from God or not. If it was, we must explain how it could be just for God to hold the evil angels responsible for a choice they received from him; if it was not, we must explain how God can be the source of all things when he's not the source of the angels' choice.

The upshot of all this is that philosophical reflection is necessary if we are to understand what Paul was getting at when he asked the Corinthians "What do you have that you did not receive?" Such philosophical reflection therefore "pertains to the study of Holy Scripture." It now becomes much easier to see why Anselm described all three of these dialogues as pertaining to the study of Holy Scripture. *On Truth* begins by noticing that we speak of God as Truth. Now that's Scriptural language: Jesus identifies himself as the Truth in John 14:6, and 1 John 5:6 identifies the Spirit as Truth.¹ If we are to understand this Scriptural language, we have to figure out what it could mean to speak of God as Truth. Is this our

¹In Anselm's translation of the Bible, however, this verse says that the Spirit testifies that Christ is the Truth.

ordinary use of 'truth', as when we speak of the truth of a statement or an opinion? And if it is, how can the Truth that is God be connected with the truth that statements and opinions have? Furthermore, Jesus speaks of "doing the truth" in John 3:21, so there must also be truth in actions. But what could that be? And how is it connected to the truth of statements, on the one hand, and the Truth that is God, on the other? These are some of the key questions that Anselm raises in *On Truth*. They are philosophical questions, but they pertain to the study of Holy Scripture because their aim is to clarify the meaning of the language used in Scripture. In the same vein, one important line of argument in *On Freedom of Choice* is intended to elucidate the Scriptural claim that "he who commits sin is a slave to sin" (John 8:34). For it would seem that if someone can be enslaved by sin, he is weaker than sin or somehow subject to its power. And then what becomes of freedom and moral responsibility? Here again, in order to understand what Scripture is saying, we are driven to ask philosophical questions.

So one thing Anselm meant by describing these dialogues as "treatises pertaining to the study of Holy Scripture" is that they are devoted to elucidating Scriptural language through rational argument. But I think he had something else in mind as well. It is not only the content of these dialogues but their *method* that pertains to the study of Holy Scripture. Anselm's most characteristic method in these dialogues is the analysis of language. A good illustration of the sort of procedure he uses can be found in chapter 5 of *On Truth*, where Anselm tries to understand what Jesus means in John 3:21 when he says that "He who does the truth comes to the light." What could the truth of actions be? Anselm first notes the contrasting claim in John 3:20: "He who does evil hates the light." He then reasons as follows:

If doing evil and doing the truth are opposites, as the Lord indicates by saying that "He who does evil hates the light" and "He who does the truth comes to the light," then doing the truth is the same as doing good, since doing good and doing evil are contraries. Therefore, if doing the truth and doing good are both opposed to the same thing, they have the same signification.

So Anselm's first conclusion is about the signification (that is, roughly, the *meaning*) of "doing the truth": it means the same as "doing good."

Then he gives a separate analysis for both 'doing' and 'truth' individually. First, he

explains what 'truth' means—or, in other words, what the truth of action is:

Now everyone agrees that those who do what they ought, do good and act correctly.² From this it follows that to act correctly is to do the truth, since it is agreed that to do the truth is to do good, and to do good is to act correctly. So nothing is more obvious than that the truth of action is its rectitude.

The truth of an action is its rectitude: that is, an action is true when it is 'right', when it is as it ought to be. The only thing left now for a full understanding of what is meant by "doing the truth," i.e., acting rightly, is to know what should count as 'doing', i.e., what constitutes 'acting'. Anselm explains:

Now when the Lord said that "He who does the truth comes to the light," he meant us to take 'do' not just to mean what is properly* called doing, but as substituting for any verb. After all, he is not excluding from this truth or light someone who undergoes persecution "for righteousness' sake" [Matthew 5:10], or who is when and where he ought to be, or who stands or sits when he ought to, and so forth. No one says that such people are not doing good. And when the Apostle [Paul] says that everyone will receive a recompense "according to his deeds" [2 Corinthians 5:10] we should understand him to mean whatever we customarily identify as doing good or doing evil.

So Anselm concludes that the 'do' in 'do the truth' applies very broadly. I can "do" the truth even when I'm not *doing* anything, but instead undergoing what someone else is doing to me.

One common move in Anselm's analysis of Scriptural language is his appeal to ordinary usage. In the present context the student immediately goes on to note that

Ordinary language, too, uses 'to do' both of undergoing and of many other things that are not doings. Hence, if I am not mistaken, we can also include among right actions an upright will, whose truth we investigated earlier, before the truth of action.

And the teacher replies:

You are not mistaken. For someone who wills what he ought to is said to act correctly and to do good; nor is he excluded from those who do the truth.

The appeal to ordinary language does two things here. For one, it allows Anselm to tie this discussion of the truth of action to his previous discussion of the truth of willing. Willing is just

²"act correctly" is literally "do rectitude."

a kind of action, so the truth of willing must be exactly the same thing as the truth of action. Since Anselm's purpose in *On Truth* is to argue that there is one truth in all true things, this is an important result.

The second purpose of the appeal to ordinary language is to assure us that in interpreting the language of Scripture, Anselm has not distorted its meaning. This is not so urgent in the present case, since there's nothing terribly controversial about supposing that Jesus meant 'do' quite broadly when he spoke of "doing the truth." But sometimes the assurance that Anselm's interpretation of Scriptural language has an analogue in ordinary language is sorely needed. For sometimes Anselm rejects what might seem the obvious meaning of a passage on the grounds that such a superficial interpretation would give the passage a meaning that we can show is just plain false. When this is the case, Anselm wants to assure the reader that he is not just playing with words, stretching the meaning of a passage beyond recognition. Rather, the meaning he finds there is one that we can find in our ordinary language. This is not to say that ordinary language is the ultimate court of appeal. Anselm acknowledges in chapter 12 of *On the Fall of the Devil* that

Many things are said improperly in ordinary speech; but when it is incumbent upon us to search out the heart of the truth, we must remove the misleading impropriety to the greatest extent possible and as much as the subject-matter demands.

But removing the imprecisions of ordinary language is as much a part of Scriptural exegesis as it is of philosophical analysis, since—as Anselm often shows—Scripture uses the same imprecise, but philosophically clarifiable, ordinary language that we use in other contexts.

So these dialogues are aptly described as "pertaining to the study of Holy Scripture" not only because their metaphysical and ethical *content* serves the aim of clarifying the meaning of certain key passages of Scripture, but also because their *method* is the style of linguistic analysis Anselm uses in studying Scripture. The answer to our first question—why Anselm describes these dialogues as he does—is therefore clear. And along the way the answer to our second question—whether what Anselm finds to be of interest in these dialogues matches what modern readers find to be of interest—has already begun to emerge. The metaphysical and

ethical discussions that modern philosophical readers find most engaging are precisely the same discussions that Anselm took to be the central focus of these works. But what motivates Anselm's interest in those philosophical issues need not be the same thing that motivates the interest of contemporary readers. A contemporary reader might be interested in freedom, for example, because of its apparent connection with moral responsibility. Anselm is interested in it because it poses difficulties in understanding how the choices of God's creatures are related to the sovereign will of the Creator.

This does not mean that one must share Anselm's theological convictions in order to find these dialogues philosophically useful. *On the Fall of the Devil*, for example, contains a great deal of first-rate philosophy that is worth thinking about even if one doesn't believe in a devil or a Fall. But it's important to keep in mind that Anselm is not always addressing precisely the same questions that we would be asking in his place. So while it's often perfectly legitimate to detach his arguments from their intended purpose and put them to use in answering our own philosophical questions, we have to realize that that's what we're doing, and make the necessary adjustments. That is, we can use the techniques and arguments we find in the dialogues to develop Anselmian answers even to non-Anselmian questions.

On the other hand, understanding Anselm on his own terms (as opposed to using him as a resource for our independent philosophical purposes) has a great value as well, and part of the purpose of this introduction has been to enable you to understand Anselm in this way by explaining the purposes behind the arguments he puts forward in these dialogues and the analytical techniques he employs there. Entering sympathetically into Anselm's thought—looking at the philosophical problems through his eyes, with his aims in mind—can reveal new options, new ways of posing questions, and new ways of answering them. It might even show us that there is much more to be said for Anselm's views than we would have thought possible otherwise.