

Anselm on divine justice and mercy

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Abstract: This article examines in detail chapters 8–11 of Anselm’s *Proslogion*, in which he addresses the problem whether perfectly just God can consistently spare sinners who deserve eternal condemnation. The article argues that Anselm’s discussion is framed by two doctrines that permeate the *Proslogion*: that God is the being than which none greater can be conceived and that God is ontologically simple. Anselm presents several principles about justice and mercy for consideration, some of which should be modified or rejected. The article offers a sympathetic construction of the perspectival solution he offers to the problem, but concludes that some important questions remain unanswered.

In chapters 8–11 of the *Proslogion* Anselm discusses how it might be that God is both just and merciful. One may be excused for thinking that Anselm is attempting the impossible. If a negative judgement is just, then the person upon whom the judgement is passed deserves to suffer its consequences. Mercy would be the unjust reduction or remission of that punishment. So the argument goes, applicable to all, including God.

Human law has at its disposal a two-stage procedure designed to make room for a department of mercy in the halls of justice. Aristotle observed, for example, that human legislators must frame their laws using imprecise language, prescribing universally in the knowledge that there will be exceptions, all the while being unable to foresee the unlimited variety of cases to which their laws apply. *Epieikeia*, standardly translated as equity, aims at correcting faults in justice arising from the application of imperfect laws (Aristotle (1984), 2187–2189). It is a concept close to mercy, stripped, perhaps, of mercy’s emotional overtones.

No such two-stage procedure is available to Anselm. His concern is exclusively with *God’s* justice and mercy, and that makes a difference. Anselm’s eternal, unlimited, and wise God is not subject to the confines of imprecision and ignorance that hamper the efforts of human legislators. Nor is God obligated to

conform to human-made laws. These differences obviate the need for a two-stage procedure when it comes to God's deliberations. But they make the initial quandary all the more pressing. How can one and the same divine determination be both just and merciful?

Commentators on chapters 8–11 have tended to hurry over them. M. J. Charlesworth dispatches them in a single sentence. 'In these chapters', Charlesworth assures us, 'St. Anselm is concerned with a general discussion of God's justice and mercy and his analysis raises no points needing special mention' (Charlesworth (1965), 80). Brian Leftow acknowledges the quandary Anselm attempts to resolve, but sees these chapters as inchoate, to be superseded by Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo*, which explicates 'the distinctively Christian reconciliation of justice and mercy'. In the Incarnation and Atonement, '[t]here is justice, in that punishment appropriate to sin is meted out. There is also mercy, in that God takes the punishment on Himself rather than applying it to us.'¹ As noteworthy and influential as Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo* is, it addresses an issue wholly different from the issue that rightly concerns Anselm in the *Proslogion*. The difference can be illustrated this way. A corporation facing bankruptcy might have its debts forgiven or restructured to restore it to solvency. Notwithstanding successful corporate restructuring, various members of the corporation's officers and staff might still be subject to individual civil and criminal penalties. Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo* is an interpretation of how humankind, as a morally fallen species, can be restored by God's gracious and salvific activity. It does not follow that all members of the species are absolved of their individual sins. For this reason it is puzzling that Leftow concludes by remarking that because of the Incarnation and Atonement, 'perhaps neither God's justice nor God's mercy is really at stake in the saving of some and the damning of others'. It is certainly Anselm's opinion, an opinion that emerges time and again in chapters 9–11, that in the final judgement God's mercy spares some sinners that God's justice condemns.

Gregory Sadler has provided a more detailed and sympathetic examination of chapters 8–11. His analysis lays special emphasis on Anselm's notion of God as the being than which none greater can be conceived. Anselm claims for this notion that it is the *unum argumentum* he had been seeking.² Though there is nothing wrong in translating *unum argumentum* as 'one argument', it is a mistake to ask where that argument is located. The most plausible candidate is *Proslogion 2*, the site of what would later be called the ontological 'proof'. But what about the rest of the *Proslogion*, which teems with other arguments? Sadler writes that 'these passages constitute a part of the *unum argumentum* . . . and as such they represent a portion of the work just as integral to the whole as the "proof" itself' (Sadler (2006), 42). It helps our understanding if we note on Anselm's behalf that *argumentum* need not always refer to a string of sentences related as premises to conclusion. Lewis and Short's *Latin Dictionary* offers as its second entry under *argumentum* 'a sign by which any thing [sic] is known'.

'The being than whom none greater can be conceived' is the one sign, meditation upon which dominates the whole of the *Proslogion*.

The approach I take to chapters 8–11 differs from Sadler's in the following ways. I take seriously seven of the rhetorical questions that Anselm poses, examining their credentials, logical consistency, and conformity with religious orthodoxy. Sadler and I both recognize that Anselm's resolution of justice and mercy is perspectival: I offer an account, founded in Anselm's epistemology, of how the perspectivalism works. Finally, I utilize Anselm's commitment to God's ontological simplicity to explicate his remarks concerning God's goodness, justice, and mercy.

Seven propositions in search of an authority

Chapter 9 begins with a flurry of rhetorical questions.

Indeed, how do You [God] spare the wicked if You are completely just and supremely just? For how does a completely and supremely just being do something that is not just? Or what justice is it to give everlasting life to one meriting eternal death? Why then, good God, good to the good and to the wicked, why do You save the wicked if this is not just and You do not do anything that is not just?³

The following propositions embedded in those questions can be extracted for inspection:

- (1) God is completely and supremely just.
- (2) A being that is completely and supremely just never does anything that is not just.
- (3) God saves the wicked.
- (4) It is not just to save the wicked.

It is clear that as they stand, propositions (1)–(4) form an inconsistent quartet: the truth of any three of them entails the falsity of the remaining one. The quartet's obvious inconsistency should alert us to the possibility that Anselm knows that not every proposition embedded in his rhetorical questions need be true. At the same time, however, we should expect that he chooses propositions for their surface plausibility, even if it should turn out on reflection that some of them must be modified or rejected. There is no logical crisis for someone willing to jettison or tinker with some of the four propositions. Let us see what can be said about each of them.

Proposition (1) is a consequence of the doctrine that God is the being than which none greater can be conceived. As the greatest conceivable being God is 'whatever it is better to be than not to be', for if this were not true of God – if for instance God lacked the great-making property of omnipotence – God would be less than the greatest conceivable being. In illustration of how the better-to-be-than-not-to-be principle applies, Anselm immediately supplies 'it is better to be just than not just'.⁴ So far Anselm is entitled to assert that God is just, but not

necessarily in a way that would distinguish God from other righteous agents. Here, however, is a passage from *Proslogion* 11 that raises the stakes: ‘Surely it is just for You to be so just that You cannot be conceived to be more just.’ Anselm’s God is thus judgementally impeccable. So, one might rejoin, is Ronald Dworkin’s ‘Hercules’, ‘a lawyer of superhuman skill, learning, patience, and acumen’.⁵ With respect to justice, what is the difference between Hercules and God?

The doctrine of God’s simplicity provides Anselm’s answer. In *Monologion* 16 he distinguishes between one’s *having* justice and one’s *being* justice. Hercules, if he existed, could not be justice even though he would have justice.⁶ Hercules’ justice would remain accidental to Hercules. God’s justice is not an accidental feature. It is not merely a matter of luck that God never errs. God is (essentially) justice itself; the ideal against which all cases of just behaviour are to be compared. Anselm makes a telegraphic gesture to God’s simplicity in *Proslogion* 12, ‘whatever You are, You are not through another but rather through Yourself’. He expounds the doctrine more fully in *Proslogion* 18:

Surely You are life, You are wisdom, You are truth, You are goodness, You are blessedness, You are eternity, and You are every true good. . . . Therefore life, wisdom, and the like are not parts of You, but all of them are one, and each one of them is entirely what You are and what all the others are.⁷

Anselm thus appeals to God’s perfection and simplicity to justify proposition (1).

Anselm understands proposition (2) in a more rigorous way than it might appear initially. We might be inclined to allow that Hercules can do all sorts of things that are not just without sully his reputation as a just agent. Taking a nap is not just but neither is it (typically) unjust; some actions are neutral with respect to the just–not-just dichotomy. Whatever the merits of this view, it is rejected by Anselm at the end of *Proslogion* 9:

Finally, that which is not done justly ought not to be done, and that which ought not to be done is done unjustly. Therefore, if it were not just for You to pity the wicked, You ought not to pity them, and if You ought not to pity them, it would be unjust for You to pity them. If it is sinful to say that, then it is lawful to believe that You justly pity the wicked.

Anselm invokes a deontic principle about justice that he applies to everyone, God included. A consequence of the principle is that there are no actions or omissions that are neither just nor unjust. Given Anselm’s principle, (2) can be recast as

(2’) A being that is completely and supremely just never does anything that is unjust.

Though the explication of proposition (1) reveals Anselm’s indebtedness to Platonism, the justification of proposition (2’) is supplemented from a different source. In retrospective validation of the contents of *Proslogion* 9–10, Anselm juxtaposes two passages from Psalms: ‘Truly therefore, “all the Lord’s ways are compassion and truth” [Psalm 25:10], and yet “the Lord is just in all his ways” [Psalm

145:17].⁸ Platonism and Scripture converge on the opinion that *all* God's ways are exercises of justice and mercy, that these exercises are not accidental to God but rather flow from God's innermost nature, and that this nature cannot be less than perfect.

Many tough-minded theists would be willing to disavow proposition (3). They might quibble amongst themselves about frequency: is it that God *never* saves the wicked or that God *hardly ever* does? The former position would seem to be easier to defend: all the wicked are *wicked*; hence to spare even one of them would be to fall short of perfect justice. If there are some occasions in which God saves the wicked, thus preserving (3) in a curtailed form, then we lack, up to now, an explanation for how these salvific activities are compatible with God's justice.

Anselm does not ally himself with extreme versions of tough-minded theism. He had just introduced, in *Proslogion* 8, the claim that God is merciful. Not merciful in the sense of experiencing feelings of pity for sufferers for, Anselm claims, God's impassibility precludes his undergoing any such emotions. It is rather that God is properly called merciful because sorrowful but sinful humans feel the beneficent effects of God's healing and salvific action. We need not take issue here with Anselm about God's impassibility. What is salient about chapter 8 for our purposes is Anselm's explicit claim that God's mercy includes sparing those who sin against God. Anselm makes it clear that 'saving' or 'sparing' is no mere reduction or remission of punishment; it is the conferring of a reward of infinite value: to save the wicked is 'to give everlasting life to one meriting eternal death'.⁹

It might seem that further confirmation of Anselm's commitment to (3) can be found in this passage from chapter 9:

For although You are completely and supremely just, still for that reason You are beneficent even to the wicked, since You are completely and supremely good. For indeed You would be less good if You were beneficent to none of the wicked. For one who is good both to the good and to the wicked is better than one who is good only to the good. And one who is good to the wicked both by punishing and by sparing is better than one who is good to the wicked by punishing alone.

Three new theses can be found in this remarkable passage.

- (5) God is completely and supremely good.
- (6) A being that is good both to the good and to the wicked is better than one who is good only to the good.
- (7) A being that is good to the wicked both by punishing and by sparing is better than one who is good to the wicked by punishing alone.

Propositions (5) and (6) together would justify the claim that God benefits the wicked. Proposition (7) conjoined with (5) would rule out the possibility that the *only* way God 'benefits' the wicked is by punishing them. Nonetheless, as I shall

argue below, there are good reasons for Anselm not to endorse (6) and (7): the credentials for ascribing (3) to Anselm are sound without the aid of them.

The only option precluded by (3) is universal condemnation: none of the wicked will be saved. Supplement that with another observation made by some tough-minded theists, namely, that we all have sinned, and one ends up with the ultimately pessimistic theological conclusion: Dante's unwritten *Divine Tragedy* ends at *Inferno*. One way to avoid the conclusion is to embrace some version of (3). Anselm is not ultimately pessimistic, but we need to pay special attention to the way Anselm embraces (3). He maintains with regularity that God is completely and supremely just and completely and supremely good, but he never describes God as completely and supremely merciful. I believe that the omission is intentional, but that nonetheless it only postpones a dilemma without resolving it. If Anselm says that God is completely and supremely merciful, then eschatological universalism – the doctrine that every person will eventually be saved – follows, barring some powerful but unarticulated argument to the contrary. Anselm can hardly have failed to know that universalism had been branded as heretical. But if God is not merciful at all, then either none are saved or if some are saved, their having achieved salvation is independent of – indeed, in spite of – God's activity. The latter possibility smacks of Pelagianism, another doctrine condemned as heretical.¹⁰ Awareness of this dilemma would explain why Anselm should be reluctant to attribute complete and supreme mercy to God. Commenting in *Proslogion* 11 on the two texts he has just cited from Psalms, Anselm says that the texts are not contradictory because 'for those You will to punish, it is not just that they be saved, and to those You will to spare it is not just that they be damned'. This remark would be disingenuous, to put it mildly, if Anselm believed that God wills to punish no-one. If that is so, then some concession must be made to the tough-minded theist:

(3') God saves *some but not all* of the wicked.

But the substitution of (3') for (3) does nothing to ease the tension among propositions (1)–(4), especially if (4) is understood as

(4') It is not just to save *any* of the wicked.

The antithesis of (4') is this proposition, imputable to Anselm:

(Anti-4') It is just to save some of the wicked.

Evidence in support of (Anti-4') can be found in the discussion of proposition (3).

We began with an inconsistent quartet of propositions, (1)–(4). In examining their credentials I have argued that Anselm is best regarded as holding the following, adjusted quartet, in which the inconsistency has disappeared at the expense of (4'):

(1) God is completely and supremely just.

- (2') A being that is completely and supremely just never does anything that is unjust.
 (3') God saves some but not all of the wicked.
 (Anti-4') It is just to save some of the wicked.

If only it were that simple. Non-universalists should worry that in denying (4') Anselm opens the field for universalism. What is to prevent the replacement of (3') and (Anti-4') with

- (3*) God saves all of the wicked

and

- (Anti-4*) It is just to save all of the wicked,

respectively? Worse yet, it appears that Anselm provides the universalist with the wherewithal to effect the replacement. The problem lies in propositions (5)–(7), claims that stake out relations between God and the good.

Proposition (5) is non-negotiable for Anselm. Its credentials were established in the first four chapters of the *Monologion*. Though Anselm intends the *Proslogion* to supersede the former work in simplicity and brevity, he explicitly claims that the latter work also argues for the existence of God as *summum bonum*. Inasmuch as the *Proslogion* argues for the identification of God as the being than which none greater can be conceived, being the *summum bonum* must be an essential feature of God: no being can be better than the best conceivable being.¹¹

How does proposition (5) interact with proposition (1)? Being good and being just seem to be two different properties; different enough for them to part ways on occasions of human behaviour. A person's decision can be good without being just (and without thereby being unjust), and a person's action can be just without being especially good. But Anselm's belief in God's simplicity, invoked earlier in defence of (1), entails that God's being completely and supremely good is strictly identical with God's being completely and supremely just. It would seem, then, that God's goodness and God's justice get along swimmingly . . . until, that is, we ask how they comport with God's mercy. Anselm himself supplies us with ample opportunities to disrupt the happy union of God's goodness and God's justice, opportunities enabled by propositions (6) and (7).

Anselm appeals to (6) to bolster his claim that God 'would be less good' if God 'were beneficent to none of the wicked'. Proposition (6) is thus presented as a general claim, applicable to all agents, including God. As we noted above, (6) in tandem with (5) presents a strong case for some version of proposition (3).

Nonetheless, Anselm has excellent dogmatic reasons for disavowing (6), reasons that pertain to his Church's condemnation of universalism. Presumably the following are instantiations of (6):

- (6') If God is good both to all of the good and to all of the wicked, then God is better than a being who is good only to all of the good.

(6*) If God is good both to all of the good and to some of the wicked, then God is better than a being who is good only to all of the good.

In conjunction with thesis (5), that God is completely and supremely good, (6') provides a charter for universalism. Anselm is not apt to abandon (5), so fidelity to the Church dictates that he should reject (6'). However, he might have been tempted by the weaker (6*). To reject (6*) would be to maintain that although God is good to all of the good and to some of the wicked, God is not thereby better than a being who is good only to all of the good.

Anselm has good reason to reject (6*). For Anselm, God is *completely* and *supremely* good. As such, God cannot be exceeded in goodness by anyone, not even Godself: there can be no God 2.0. The *Proslogion* makes it clear that 'to be good' to a human is to confer everlasting life on that person. No being other than God can do that. It follows that if God saves all and only the good, God would not be made better by saving wicked Wilbur. Even if Wilbur would thereby be made better – even if the world would be a better place with Wilbur saved in it – 'better' would attach to Wilbur and the world, not to perfect God.

As it stands, proposition (7) is amphibolous, or syntactically ambiguous, depending on how one understands the population of the wicked that is to be benefited 'both by punishing and by sparing'. On one interpretation, call it (7'), those who are punished and those who are spared fall into two mutually exclusive classes, the condemned and the saved. A second interpretation, call it (7*), also identifies two classes of sinners, but partitions the classes differently. According to (7*) the first class contains the wicked who will be punished *and then* spared, as a consequence, one might presume, of the intervening rehabilitative effects of their punishment. (7*)'s second class is populated exclusively by those sinners who are punished but never spared. I do not know how Anselm interpreted (7). No matter, however, since the criticism just raised against (6) also applies to (7): finitely good beings can become better or worse, but not an infinitely good being.

The seven propositions I have identified in *Proslogion* 9 are a mixed lot. Some, such as (1), (2), and (5), I attribute to Anselm in their full, robust form. Proposition (3) survives, but only in diluted form. Proposition (4) requires special handling. Propositions (6) and (7) should be rejected on Anselm's own principles. I hope to have made some progress in elucidating Anselm's views and commitments. But so far I have only made gestures to the problem that monopolizes Anselm's thinking in *Proslogion* 9–11: how can God be supremely good, supremely just, and merciful all at once?

Three properties in search of lodging

Let us begin with God's goodness: it was the first item on Anselm's agenda in *Proslogion* 9 after his initial flurry of questions leading to propositions (1)–(4), and Anselm's discussion of it served as a segue to propositions (5)–(7).

Anselm suggests that God's goodness is incomprehensible, perhaps because it is concealed in God's 'inaccessible light' (1 Tim. 6:16), and that 'in the highest and most secret place of Your goodness is concealed the fount whence flows the river of Your mercy'. Three notions introduced here deserve comment: incomprehensibility, inaccessible light, and fount. In saying that God's goodness is incomprehensible, Anselm is not maintaining that we cannot understand anything about it, or that it bears no relation to goodness manifested in creatures. It is helpful to recall *Proslogion* 15, in which Anselm argues that in virtue of being the greatest conceivable being, God is greater than can be conceived. Our various modes of cognitive awareness are capable of initiating a process in which we discover that those modes are insufficient to apprehend the magnitude of the process's completion. The goodness that we find in creatures is a dim image of God's goodness, so dim that creatures accustomed to it cannot bear to apprehend the intensity of the image's ultimate source. Even if we allow that some creatures are better than others, no stepwise process of ascent in the realm of creaturely betterness comes close to the intensity and extensiveness of God's goodness. In obvious metaphorical terms, Anselm describes God's goodness as containing a 'fount' from which God's mercy flows. The metaphor suggests that divine mercy is to be explained by God's goodness, but it is silent about the question why the river of mercy flows as it does, this way and that.¹²

What is to prevent the river of mercy from being irreversibly dammed up by the solid embankment of divine justice? Anselm assures us that that cannot happen, because although God is completely and supremely just, 'still for that reason You are beneficent even to the wicked for this reason: because You are completely and supremely good'. This claim receives the following support immediately: 'For indeed You would be less good if You were beneficent to none of the wicked.'¹³ The supporting claim in turn introduces proposition (6), from which the supporting claim is supposed to receive its justification. But (6) entails that God's complete and supreme goodness depends on God's being merciful to those who do not deserve mercy. The entailment puts the order of dependency precisely backwards: God's being merciful to Wilbur, for example, depends on God's goodness, not on Wilbur's being wicked.¹⁴ I suggest that we look elsewhere if we seek Anselm's resolution of the relations among God's goodness, God's justice, and God's mercy.

Anselm seems to be aware that he has not successfully alleviated the tensions among goodness, mercy, and justice, for though he now believes he has located God's mercy in the impenetrable loftiness of God's goodness, and that this mercy extends to the righteous, it is still unfathomable to him how a completely and supremely just God can nevertheless will mercy to the wicked. At this point he attempts to show how justice fits into the realm of goodness and mercy:

For although it is difficult to understand how Your mercy is not distinct from Your justice, yet it is necessary to believe that it is, because in no way is that which pours forth out of goodness opposed to justice. Goodness is nothing without justice – on the contrary, it truly agrees with justice.¹⁵

Anselm immediately offers the following syllogism in support of the claim that God's mercy is not distinct from God's justice: 'Indeed, if You are merciful because You are supremely good, and if you are not supremely good except because You are supremely just, then truly You are merciful for the reason that You are supremely just.'¹⁶

An uncharitable interpretation of the syllogism suggests that it is invalid by isomorphic counterexample: 'If 6 is even because 6 is divisible by 2, and if 6 is not divisible by 2 except because 6 is a rational number, then 6 is even for the reason that 6 is a rational number.' This interpretation, however, is too uncharitable, and perhaps Anselm was too hasty in constructing the syllogism. If we look back at the sentence immediately preceding the syllogism, we can find two features that are not represented in the syllogism. The first is exemplified by the description of things 'pouring forth' from God's goodness, preserving and amplifying Anselm's earlier imagery of God's goodness as a fount. Few images can convey more strongly the notion that God's goodness is incessantly active, and that what is 'downstream' from God's 'fount' owes its being and goodness to its source.

The second feature can be found in Anselm's claim that God's mercy is not distinct from God's justice. The Latin is *miser cordia tua non absit a tua iustitia*, and the question is how Anselm understood the phrase *non absit a*. Charlesworth translates the passage as 'Your mercy is not apart from Your justice.' Jasper Hopkins has 'Your mercy is compatible with Your justice'; Thomas Williams has 'your mercy coexists with your justice'.¹⁷ To be sure, these translations have the virtue of not reading too much into Anselm's language. Perhaps, however, they read too little into it. I suggest that Anselm uses *non absit a* to convey more than compatibility or coexistence. He intends for us to understand strict identity: God's mercy is God's justice.

To support further my contention, I want to examine Sadler's discussion of Charlesworth's translation of *miser cordia tua . . . immo vere concordat iustitiae* as 'Your mercy . . . indeed really coincides with justice.' Sadler writes: "Coincides" is a somewhat misleading rendering, for the Latin has *concordat*, which does not simply assert an equation or equivalence.¹⁸ *Concordare* is best translated as 'to be on good terms with' or 'to harmonize with', not 'to be equal to' or 'to be equivalent to'. Sadler continues: '[W]hat mercy derives from, goodness, must coincide or concord [sic] with justice, so that mercy is in fact part of the way in which God's justice is manifested.' But among creatures, goodness is not always in concordance with justice: as Anselm sees, the discord is salient in human cases of mercy versus justice. What Anselm seeks to establish, in the face of this discord, is that God's goodness is always in concordance with God's justice. *Concordare* is a transitive verb authorizing a symmetric relation: *x* is in concordance with *y* if and only if *y* is in concordance with *x*. Anselm can say, for instance, that if God's goodness is in concordance with God's justice, then God's justice is in concordance with God's goodness. But this result does not entitle Anselm to conclude

that God's goodness *is* in concordance with God's justice. Invoking God's simplicity, I suggest that *concordare* be interpreted as allowing for strict identity. In that case God's goodness is simply and necessarily God's justice, unfazed by the perspectival differences humans experience between goodness – including mercy – and justice. By alluding to God's simplicity Anselm had already laid the foundation for such an interpretation.

There is no doubt that Anselm believes in God's ontological simplicity. That doctrine does not tolerate fractional acceptance. Mercy should be no exception: if God is merciful then God is mercy itself. If strict identity holds between God's mercy and God's justice, and also between God's justice and God's goodness, as is required by doctrine of God's simplicity, then (given the transitivity of identity) Anselm's trio becomes a unity.

At this point one may expect a critic lodging a very reasonable protest, along the following lines. 'Think of cases of perennial human conflicts between what is good and what is just. Sample the unconvincing theoretical attempts to harmonize them according to the principle of utility or the categorical imperative or some other putative supreme principle of morality. Think especially of cases of unmerciful justice and unjust mercifulness, cases not satisfactorily resolvable even by Dworkin's Hercules. If it was Anselm's intention to invoke God's simplicity to deal with the relations among justice, goodness, and mercy, he has merely converted the intractable into the intellectually indigestible. On what basis can one maintain that the attributes of justice, goodness, and mercy really are indistinguishable? And if they are indistinguishable, how can goodness, for example, be the *source* of mercy? Alternatively, how is God's mercy *born* from God's justice?'

In order to reply to this protest, let us collect the various images that Anselm invokes to describe the relationships among the three attributes. Then we will see whether they can find lodging in the metaphysically austere confines of God's simplicity.

- (8) God's mercy flows from (the fount of) God's goodness.
- (9) God's mercy is not distinct from God's justice.
- (10) God's mercy is born from God's justice.
- (11) God's goodness is nothing without God's justice.

In *Proslogion* 10 Anselm harks back to a manoeuvre he had made in *Proslogion* 8 concerning God's mercy. At the beginning of *Proslogion* 8 Anselm had asked provocatively how God can be both merciful and passionless. Qua passionless God has no feelings or emotions. In particular God is not saddened out of *compassion* (a kind of empathic suffering-with) for the wretched, which, one might reasonably suppose, is required for one to be merciful. Anselm's response to his own question hinges on a distinction between God's awareness and valuation of the world and human awareness and evaluation, a distinction that affects the application of the concepts of mercy and justice. The crucial passage from chapter 8 maintains that

God is 'merciful according to our way of perceiving and not according to God's way'. Our way of perceiving and evaluating is conditioned by the fact that we are capable of suffering and its alleviation; we can thus experience the effects of God's merciful activity. But God's activity is not accompanied by any affect, neither a feeling of sadness nor an emotion of compassion. Some may argue that Anselm is equivocating on the notion of mercy, that God's 'mercy' has nothing to do with our concept of merciful behaviour toward humans. Besides uncharitably interpreting Anselm, that kind of argument, if generalized, should lead us to believe that because an acid is capable of turning litmus paper red, the acid itself must be red. What Anselm is calling attention to is that one salient difference – perhaps *the* salient difference – between God's mercy and our mercy is simply perspectival.

Anselm redeploys this chapter 8 manoeuvre in chapter 10 to answer the question of how God justly punishes and justly spares the wicked. The wicked are justly punished because punishment 'fits with their merits'. The wicked who are spared – who receive everlasting life – are spared justly because 'it is becoming to God's goodness'. If Anselm had said no more than this, we would be back at square one: how to serve all the clamouring demands of justice, goodness, and mercy. But Anselm presses on further. Here is a hypothetical case designed to illustrate his procedure. Suppose that God chooses to confer everlasting life on demonstrably wicked Wilbur. Seeing what we see of Wilbur's debaucheries and depredations, it is unjust from our viewpoint for Wilbur to be rewarded. We appeal to Wilbur's palpable demerits to substantiate our case. Not even Hercules can muster the evidence to overturn our opinion.

God's viewpoint is not ours. When Anselm says that it is becoming to God's goodness to spare Wilbur, he signals that considerations of earthly demerit must give way to considerations of divine goodness. From God's viewpoint the justice in sparing Wilbur is lodged in its being just for God to be completely and supremely good, and in complete and supreme goodness being manifested in God's sparing Wilbur.

Anselm does little to defend his perspectivalism. I think that, to a surprising degree, he could have. The first step would be to distinguish between his metaphysics and epistemology. His metaphysics divides everything that exists into created beings, on one side, and God the creator on the other. Created beings are time-bound, existing sequentially from past to present to future, possessed of some powers but only to a limited degree. In contrast, God is eternal and perfect; qua perfect, God is ontologically simple. Every divine attribute is necessarily identical with every other divine attribute. In the case at hand,

(Value Ident) \square (God's goodness = God's justice = God's mercy).

The next step is to impute to Anselm a belief in two modes of cognitive activity in humans. Because we are time-bound, we acquire beliefs from experience about

the way the temporal world works, and form educated guesses about its future behaviour. We have more or less confidence in those beliefs and guesses; all of them are subject to doxastic revision. The other mode of cognition is illustrated by the *Proslogion* itself, written in the form of a meditative prayer.¹⁹ Anselmian contemplation prescind from attention to sensory beliefs generated by an unstable empirical world. It seeks instead to uncover indubitable truths delivered to reason alone by the grace of a Wonderful Counsellor (*Proslogion* 26; echoing Isa. 9:6). Anselm has reported on some of his discoveries: that there is a being than which no greater being can be conceived; that such a being is whatever it is better to be than not to be; that such a being is ontologically simple. Though he is confident in the necessary truth of these propositions, he must be prepared to grant that they are difficult even for the faithful to grasp; if not while writing *Proslogion*, then certainly upon reading Gaunilo's reply. Our reason is not all that it might be. Moreover, it is feeble enough to be co-opted by our will, as Paul famously noticed about himself (Rom. 7:14–20).

Consider the case of wicked Wilbur. From God's perspective, sparing Wilbur is an act of mercy, goodness, and justice: how could it be otherwise if God is simple? From our perspective, conferring everlasting life on Wilbur contravenes justice. But our perspective is limited. We can be misinformed about what, to us, is past. We can misinterpret evidence. In any case we can be aware of only segments of Wilbur's life. Our judgements can be distorted by the clamour of conflicting opinions. We can be wilfully against Wilbur with a bias impervious to reason. God has none of these liabilities.

To return to the bafflement expressed by our critic, it would help to dispel some of the bafflement if we can show how Anselm could expound propositions (8)–(11). To begin with (8): the imagery of mercy flowing from a fount of goodness suggests a river and its headwaters. Suppose that the river is constituted exclusively by water, and compare the water to God's goodness. An attempt at comparison here may seem daft initially, like trying to compare zinc to equanimity. 'Water' is a mass noun; 'goodness' is an abstract singular noun. Even so, there are grammatical commonalities between the two terms. Both are nouns that resist numerical modification, the indefinite article, and qualification by degree terms like 'many' and 'few'. All of the following phrases are grammatically deviant:

a water, two (or more) waters	a goodness, two (or more) goodnesses
many (or few) waters	many (or few) goodnesses

Of course, there are significant differences. Water is a physical stuff, the sort of substance that can retain its identity through dividing and recombining. Goodness is . . . what? A universal? A concept? A Platonic Form? The set of all good things? Suffice it to say for present purposes that Anselm favours some version of Platonism.

Just as the water issuing from the river's fount is all alike but, depending on circumstances downstream, can slake thirst, benefit crops, power milldams, and

destroy settlements, so God's activity, which is one eternal action, can save good Genevieve, good Gregory, and wicked Wilbur. We might think that the first three stages in the water's progress are beneficial while the fourth one is not. But it is easy to imagine circumstances in which we would retrospectively come to regard a settlement's destruction as salutary. Similarly, we might be mistaken in regarding Wilbur's salvation as unjust.²⁰

Proposition (9) is a straightforward consequence of the doctrine of God's simplicity. But if God's mercy is necessarily identical to God's justice, how can God's mercy nonetheless be *born from* God's justice, as proposition (10) maintains? For that matter, why is (10) important to Anselm and why use the imagery of birth to express that importance?

Since Anselm claims that God's mercy contains no tincture of emotions like pity, his concept of mercy appears to be judicial. This kind of mercy comes into play, so to speak, after an initial determination of guilt, and it involves the search for extenuating or mitigating circumstances in the career of the accused. Perhaps it is this sequence that leads Anselm to say that God's mercy is born from God's justice. But the sequence is literally a sequence only for creatures whose lives play out in time. Even if Hercules were temporally immortal, his judgements would conform to that sequential pattern. God, however, is eternal in the Boethian sense: God's life is 'an illimitable life existing in its perfect entirety all at once' (*Monologion* 24). When we say that *x* is born from *y*, we suppose that *x*'s coming to be depended on *y*'s temporal activity prior to *x*'s coming to be. We expect the same pattern to hold when we come to (10). It does not. When Anselm asserts (10), he has not forgotten, as (9) maintains, that God's mercy is God's justice, full-stop.²¹

Finally, let us examine proposition (11). When Anselm maintains that God's goodness is nothing without God's justice, it would do him a disservice to interpret him as holding that God's justice is an essential component of God's goodness: were that so, God's goodness would depend on or be subordinate to God's justice. Put another way, talk of components invites thoughts of plurality. We get closer to an acceptable reading of (11) if we consider its converse:

(11') God's justice is nothing without God's goodness.

Propositions (11) and (11') are straightforward entailments of (Value Ident); as such they are necessarily equivalent. Why, then, do they appear to be staking out different claims?

Recall Anselm's distinction between our way of perceiving and God's way. We perceive goodness and justice as two different dimensions of appraisal, and are inclined to enquire which dimension takes precedence in cases of conflict. But now consider an analogy. Does a triangle's equilaterality explain its equiangularity, or does its equiangularity explain its equilaterality? The answer depends on all sorts of factors extraneous to the triangle, including but not limited to the interests

and capacities of the audience for whom the explanation is intended. Successful explanations are context sensitive. It is easy to imagine that in some contexts the *explanandum* is equiangularity and equilaterality is the *explanans* while in other contexts those roles are reversed. This is the case in spite of the fact that it is a necessary truth that all and only equilateral triangles are equiangular triangles. And this provides an answer to the question how (11) and (11') can appear to be non-equivalent claims even though they are necessarily equivalent: they can appear non-equivalent *to us*. There are, after all, many necessary truths whose status is not obvious to us, for which we need an explanation appropriate to our limited cognitive circumstances. As a consequence we can earnestly subordinate goodness to justice in some circumstances and reverse our ranking in others. Depending on circumstances, (11) and (11') allow us to say that it is good that God is just and that it is just that God is good. To complete the answer we need to suppose, on Anselm's behalf, that God's way of perceiving entails omniscient, immediate, flawless understanding. God needs no explanations.

Final observations

Anselm defends the compatibility of the Psalmist's claims about God's justice and mercy by declaring that 'for those You will to punish, it is not just that they be saved, and to those You will to spare it is not just that they be damned'. Anselm defends the declaration by appealing to the principle that 'that alone is just which You will, and that alone is not just [= unjust] which You do not will'. That Anselm endorses this principle may come as a surprise because it appears to be a clear enunciation of theological voluntarism, not a position to be ascribed lightly to him. Anselm, however, has the wherewithal to rebut an imputation of theological voluntarism while acknowledging a robust version of voluntarism. It is Paul who in Romans bears witness to the fact that humans can *know* the good but fail to *will* it. Intellect and will are separate faculties in humans. But if God is ontologically simple, there is no compartmentalization in God's mental activity: in addition to (Value Ident) we can posit

(Mental Ident) \square (God's willing = God's understanding).

(Mental Ident) is hardly a peg on which to hang a charge of theological voluntarism.

My interpretation of *Proslogion* 8–11 relies heavily on the doctrine of God's simplicity. Though there is no doubt that Anselm is committed to the doctrine, he does not apply it as explicitly to chapters 8–11 as I have done. Appeal to it does not help to resolve the question that has exercised him throughout these chapters, to which he gives final, poignant expression:

If in some way it can be grasped how You can will to save the wicked, certainly no reason can comprehend why, with respect to similar wicked people, You save these rather than those through supreme goodness, and damn those rather than these through supreme justice.

As confident as he is about the reasonability of religious belief, Anselm realizes that he can go no further; God's reasons outstrip ours.²²

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Notes

1. Leftow (2004), 153. Visser & Williams (2009), 108 concur.
2. *Proslogion* Preface.
3. All translations are my own, based on the Latin text as printed in Hopkins (1986).
4. *Proslogion* 5. See also *Monologion* 15 and the Reply to Gaunilo 10.
5. Hercules first appears in 'Hard Cases', reprinted in Dworkin (1977) 105.
6. [*H*]omo non potest esse iustitia, sed habere potest iustitiam.
7. See also *Monologion* 15–17.
8. *Proslogion* 11.
9. *Proslogion* 9.
10. See the entries on 'universalism' and 'Pelagianism' in McFarland et al. (2011).
11. *Proslogion* Preface.
12. Note that Anselm depicts mercy as a river, not as a delta spreading indiscriminately over all of humankind. After enunciating propositions (6) and (7), Anselm repeats his claim that God's mercy results from, or is a manifestation of, God's goodness, insisting that though this can be seen (*videtur*) it cannot be fully seen (*pervidetur*); it can be discerned (*cernitur*) but not fully ascertained (*perspicitur*).
13. *Proslogion* 9.
14. There is one sense of 'depends' in which God's mercy depends on Wilbur's being wicked, namely, if Wilbur were not wicked, and if mercy is the remission of deserved punishment, God would lack an occasion to be merciful to Wilbur! We can safely ignore that kind of dependency.
15. *Proslogion* 9. The Latin text is challenging. For recent alternative translations one may consult Hopkins (1986), 237 and Williams (1995), 105.
16. *Proslogion* 9.
17. Charlesworth (1965), 129; Hopkins (1986), 237; Williams (1995), 105.
18. Sadler (2006), 53.
19. See especially the preface and chapter 1.
20. Anselm returns to the imagery of a river when discussing the doctrine of the Trinity in his *On the Incarnation of the Word*.
21. Why did Anselm use the notion of being born in (10)? Why not stay with the imagery of flowing water? Perhaps because (10) invites comparison with the doctrine of the Trinity: as God's mercy is born from

God's justice, so the Son is born from the Father. The problem with taking this comparison seriously is that pursuit of it appears to ensnare Anselm in a heretical, modalistic interpretation of the Trinity. Propositions (8)–(11), interpreted in conformity with Anselm's commitment to God's simplicity, entail that there are no distinctions intrinsic to God between God's goodness, justice, and mercy: all there is are the ways in which humans are affected by the one divine action. A generic version of modalism maintains that there are no distinctions intrinsic to God between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Creator, Redeemer, and Spirit are merely three guises under which humans experience the one God. (See 'modalism' in McFarland et al. (2011).) A full assessment of the aptness of this comparison would involve an examination of identity conditions for persons and identity conditions for attributes. It is worth reporting that when Anselm writes that God's mercy is 'born from' God's justice, he uses *nascitur*. But when he describes the Son as 'born from' the Father, he uses *gignitur* (compare *Monologion* 41 to *Proslogion* 9).

22. An early draft of this article benefited from comments by Brooks Colburn and an anonymous referee. This article is a kind of bookend to my 'Divine simplicity', which appeared in this journal in 1982.