Freedom and the Ability to Sin

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-- Draft Only --

Saint Anselm never wanted to be Archbishop of Canterbury. Born into a wealthy family in Burgundy in 1033, Anselm's happy childhood soured in adolescence. His mother died. His father became difficult. He wandered the countryside in search of pleasure, but ended up finding a home at the recently established abbey of Bec. Gifted and pious, he was soon promoted to prior, and then, in 1078, to abbot. It is reported that he wept at the thought of his new responsibilities. Later, dukes, bishops and even the King of England pressured him to take up the position of archbishop. Anselm is said to have "almost worn himself to death" objecting before finally yielding and being enthroned 1093. He was soon thrust into the heart of the power struggle between church and state known today as the investiture controversy. More scholar than diplomat, Anselm was out of his depth. He endured being exiled twice before passing away 1109. One can only imagine him relieved.

When not occupied by the administrative responsibilities he hated, Anselm busied himself with the philosophical and theological reflections that he loved. In his elegant dialogue *On Free Choice of Will*, Anselm asks a clever question: does freedom of will presuppose the ability to sin? It is tempting to think so. One might suppose that a creature that could do no wrong could also do no right, or at least could do no right *freely*. Anselm, however, answers his own question negatively, insisting that "the ability to sin is no part of the freedom of the will." In support of his view, Anselm offers two lines of argument. First, he maintains that God, although incapable of sinning, is free above all. If God is maximally free and cannot sin, then, Anselm reasons, the ability to sin must not be essential to freedom itself. Second, he argues that no one is made freer by being susceptible to harm. One's freedom isn't increased by, say, the ability to be sick or injured. But what, Anselm asks, could

be more harmful than sin? To be unable to sin, he concludes, is a sign of greater, not lesser, freedom.

If the ability to sin is no part of freedom, we might wonder if we can sin freely. After all, it might seem that if the ability to sin is no part of freedom, then our ability to sin must not be due to our being free, and so must occur independently of our being free, that is "of necessity." Taking up precisely this worry, Anselm makes a subtle move. In effect, he argues that our ability to sin is grounded in our ability to preserve virtue, in our ability to uphold what is right. More specifically, we sin by failing to preserve our virtue, by failing to uphold what is right. Since we are free to not preserve our virtue, to not uphold what is right, Anselm reasons, we are also free to sin, and that in spite of the fact that our ability to sin is no part of freedom itself. If we lost our ability to fail in preserving our virtue, if we were no longer able to not uphold what is right, we could no longer sin, but we would still be free. Indeed we would be freer since freedom is tied to promoting virtue, not to destroying it, to doing what is right, not to doing what is wrong.

Anselm's reasoning points the way towards an understanding of freedom that is often neglected today. Many people today think of freedom in terms of the absence of constraints. Philosophers may argue that we cannot be free if our actions are constrained by causal laws and antecedent events. Citizens may think that civic laws – constraints imposed by the government – necessarily diminish our freedoms. To Anselm's way of thinking, however, the essence of freedom is not to be found in either the absence of constraint or in the right to do anything whatsoever. By such a measure, he reckons, we would have to say that God, unable to do wrong, is less free than we are. On Anselm's understanding, the essence of freedom is to be found rather in the ability to do what is right, good, and beneficial. On such an understanding, our freedom isn't necessarily diminished by the imposition of constraints. We might be free even if our actions are constrained by causal laws and antecedent events. We might be more, not less, free when constrained by laws that promote the good and prevent the bad.

One can see an echo of Anselm's conception of freedom in the "capability approach" recently developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum. Central to their account is the thought that the sense of freedom we have most reason to care about is the freedom to achieve well-being, and that the freedom to achieve well-being is to be understood in terms of our ability to promote ends we have reason to value. A child born

into a society with few laws but much poverty should, in their view, be counted as less free than a child born into a society with many laws but little poverty. To promote freedom, in their view, is to promote people's capacities to lead healthy, happy, human lives.

The capabilities approach has largely been a secular movement, a movement grounded in public policy and Aristotelian philosophy. But it is a conception of freedom that Christians might find attractive as well. For Christians, as Christians, have recourse to a robust conception of a full human life and what capacities are required to realize such a life. Like Anselm, they are in a position to distinguish between bare freedom from constraints and freedom to realize what is right, good, and truly beneficial. Perhaps they are also uniquely positioned to appreciate how Anselm, compelled to serve the Church throughout his life, might nonetheless have counted himself as supremely free.