

At the Crossroads of Contentment: Variations on an Augustinian Theme

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Prelude: The Perfectionist's Lament

It is a downhearted Augustine that we meet at the outset of *Confessions*, book 7. The idiocies of his younger days are dead to him, but he has little confidence and a great deal of worry about the adulthood into which he is heading (*conf.* 7.1.1):

The older I became, the more repulsive the emptiness (*vanitas*) that kept me from conceiving of anything as real unless it were the sort the thing that my eyes customarily see.¹

Emptiness of heart, for Augustine, is intimately connected with an overly conservative and empty way of seeing—a way of seeing that objectifies everything and reflects the heart's immature fixation on objects of desire and their relative permanence.

At the end of book 6 of the *Confessions*, Augustine gives us our best sense of why a certain kind of materialism hasn't been working out for him. He has been living in Milan and working as a professor of rhetoric in the pay of the imperial court. He doesn't like the work much—basically he is being paid to flatter—but he sees no alternative to the advancement of his secular ambitions. To move up in the world, he will need to ingratiate himself with the rich and powerful senators who live in the city, and that will require money. He resolves to break with the woman who has been living faithfully at his side for most of that dead youth of his and send her back to her native Africa; she is the mother of their son, Adeodatus, and Augustine's love, but not his wife. Her departure will free him to marry a society woman, one who brings a big dowry and a family name. His mother, Monnica, the *mater familias* in his household, soon finds him a suitable candidate, but the girl is only ten years old, too young even by Roman standards to be taken in marriage; he will need to wait a couple of years before marrying.

Augustine poignantly describes the heart-rend of his parting from his natural partner (*conf.* 6.15.25):

The woman with whom I used to share my bed, who was now an impediment to my marriage, was torn from my side; the heart in me, where once she was joined, was cut and wounded, leaching blood.²

But he is not so cut up that he refrains from bringing an intermediary woman into his household, a woman to tide him over from one woman to the next:

Because I was a slave to lust and not a lover of marriage, I got myself another woman, not a wife to be sure, but a means, as it were, of sustaining and drawing out my soul's disease, at its usual strength or worse, and of bringing my retinue of long habit into a wife's domain.

He speculates that at this time in his life he would have defined his life's end as the secure enjoyment of uninterrupted bodily pleasure (a bastardized Epicureanism; *conf.* 6.16.26), but it is not pleasure that he recalls feeling. His method of seeking object permanence dulls his pain but increases his desperation.

The chastened sensualist who wonders in *Confessions* 7 whether his thinking will ever escape the orbit of bodily images and imperfect goods is, a bit beneath the surface, the perfectionist who laments the dissipation of his desire. Augustine wants his heart's desire to be for incorruptible goodness, the goodness he believes God unimaginably to be, and he wants to be incorruptibly at one with his desire. He clings nevertheless to a career he no longer wants, and he forsakes a woman he has never stopped loving. His worry here is in part that he doesn't love very well—that he loves the wrong things, and that he loves against himself. But even more deeply than that, he worries that he has fallen outside the wisdom that would elevate his perspective and plant his affections, his mind's feet, on tractable, if not quite earthly, ground. He knows enough to know that his dissipated perspective is not piecemeal wisdom but a wall of ignorance, and he knows enough to know that true wisdom requires more than a dismantling: it is seeing in invisible light (or what Anselm will call *lux inaccessibilis*). Now he will have to do what perfectionists have the hardest time doing: be open to the messiness of an unexpected wisdom and resist tailoring the offering to the cramped integrity of a perfectionism that no longer serves.

In the second half of *Confessions* 7, following some ineffectual lamentation over his oddly unmotivated freedom to will what is evil and reject the good, his own included (see, e.g., *conf.* 7.3.5), Augustine describes the experience of having had his perspective unexpectedly revolutionized, from the inside out. These sections of the *Confessions*, from 7.10.16 through 7.21.27, have generally been taken by Augustine's professional readers to be the best window for framing his qualified embrace of Platonism, the philosophy he consistently credits with having managed not to confuse God, the source of all being, with a body of some sort. But in terms of what he actually describes in *Confessions* 7, the Platonists are not the agents of his change in perspective.

While still in the thick of his existential funk, he does begin to read through a compendium of Platonist literature, a gift of spiritual self-help from a man, likely a

wealthy pagan Platonist, whom he rather ungratefully calls “a monstrous windbag” (*immanissimo typho turgidum*; *conf.* 7.9.13). And at some point in his reading, he heeds an admonition, though he doesn’t say how, to return to his true self (*conf.* 7.10.16; *redire ad memet ipsum*). But from there God enters into and dominates the picture, a divine Virgil to a disoriented Dante, and Augustine descends into his most intimate depths (*in intima mea*), where he will discover—this is his first surprise—that he originates out of love’s invisible light. He has no other root. Then, just as he professes a first recognition of who God is, he finds himself—this is his second surprise—suddenly pained by divine light; blinding rays violently beat back the infirmity of his sight and leave him shaken in his love. When he is *able* to see again, a return in some measure of ordinary light, he notices that he is in an unfamiliar place. He calls it, echoing Plotinus, “a place of unlikeness” (*regio dissimilitudinis*; *conf.* 7.10.16).

It is unlike where God is, who, though not limited to a place, calls to Augustine from afar—in a securing voice: “always, I am who I am” (Exod. 3:14; *conf.* 7.10.16). It is unlike where creation is, whose all-inclusive beauty, seen from without, is both perfect and exclusive. Here is how Augustine puts the two paradoxes of unlikeness together, in an implicit confession of sin (*conf.* 7.13.19): “With you, there is absolutely no evil, and not only with you but with the entirety of your creation: for nothing can break in from the outside and wreck the order you have imposed upon it.” If the perfectionist insists on living outside the perfection that he seeks, or, alternatively, on breaking into it, then he is neither with God nor with the created order, and this leaves him literally with no place to be.

I am especially interested in how Augustine imagines his exit from his unlikely place of unlikeness. He describes, more or less in the same breath, perfection and its apparent undoing (*conf.* 7.17.23):

It astonished me that I already loved you, not some figment in your place, and I was not standing firm in my enjoyment of my God; I was snatched away to you by your beauty and just as quickly snatched back by my weight. I crashed with a groan into all-too-familiar things (*in ista*). That weight was the habit of my flesh.

At a first read, it would seem that Augustine is describing, first of all, his brief but astonishing enjoyment of a state of sublime contentment. He already (nothing further to do) loves the one being the love of whom should always be enough. When it proves not to be enough—familiar habits of desire, lodged in laborious flesh, make a fuss—Augustine finds himself, once again, caught up in the perfectionist’s lament. He has what he wants, God’s love, but not in the way that he wants it, securely. But it is far from clear, given the sublimity of what he has already realized, what it would mean for him to have added some missing security component.

Do we imagine him someday receiving—perhaps in a postmortem life—a supernatural dose of will-power, enabling him to shake off his mortal coil for good and achieve true perfection? That would be one way to take up his talk of humility, his insistence that the pagan Platonists know where they need to go, to God, but not how to get there (*conf.* 7.21.27), his reverence for the full presence of God in Christ, also

the man of perfect obedience. If humility is to surrender your will to the absolute will of God, creator of all things *ex nihilo* (wills included), then what chance does your labyrinthine flesh have against your perfected but alien virtue? (The humility that you will is not humility; the humility that you don't will is not yours and so alien—at least as a virtue.)

I want to explore a different arc of possibility. Suppose that Augustine is not giving voice to the perfectionist's lament in his striking conjunction of divine love and its refraction through mortal flesh. Suppose that perfection is not the goal of his life's labor but is instead its point of departure. Suppose that a human and divine conjunction—mortal flesh and immortal spirit—is less an ideal of containment, a territory with secure borders, than a crossroads: in one direction there is the absoluteness of will that fuels the perfectionist's lament; in the other there is, well, something like a true incarnation, a perfectly imperfect life in the flesh. I am being tentative here because I am aware that I cannot travel along an arc of possibility simply by piling up suppositions. I will need to enter more fully into conceptual spaces that entertain a sublime contentment—human without, God within—and end up articulating a crossroads.

I will briefly venture two such forays in what follows: one into Descartes and his postulation of a divine/demonic dematerializer (a *creator ad nihilum*), the other into Anselm and his reasonable mystery (*sola ratione*) of a will made flesh. It is not entirely useless to think of Descartes as Augustine's modern alter ego and Anselm as his medieval one. But I am conscious here of the temptation to overplay the antithesis between medieval and modern. It may be more modern than medieval to venerate will-power and more medieval to acquiesce to flesh, but at the crossroads of a sublime contentment, both directions are always in play.

Perfectionism Perfected: A Cartesian Exorcism

It takes Descartes a good twenty years before he is fully able to disentangle his authority as an adult knower from the murky dream revelations of his early twenties. He describes in a notebook that he was keeping at the time a sequence of three dreams, all of which take place on the night of the tenth of November 1619.³ The dreams convince him that his path in life is to forgo becoming a lawyer, the expected route of males in his family, and stake out a path that leads to demonstrative knowing, this being the work of the true philosopher. (In his dedicatory letter to the Sorbonne, Descartes characterizes the philosophers of his day as those who believe that “everything can be argued either way” and so pursue winning more than they do truth⁴; presumably he would not have had a higher opinion of lawyers.)

When Descartes drafts the *Meditations on First Philosophy*, his escape plan from the things of childhood, he never mentions his debt to dreams, but he does, in the first sentence of the first meditation, explain why he has been feeling so stuck: “Some years ago I was struck by the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood [*ineunte aetate*], and by the highly doubtful nature of the whole edifice

that I had subsequently based on them.”⁵ It is one thing to know, in retrospect, that you have believed too quickly or trusted too readily; it is quite another to know, looking forward, how you can become secure in your knowing. To have the first knowing but not the second is to be stuck in a cognitive adolescence, where skepticism teeters on the edge of regress: back to childhood credulity, but minus the innocence. Descartes seeks, through cathartic meditation, to scaffold a way forward.

Dreams still have a place in reconstituted knowing, but they are less nakedly prophetic. Their first function for Descartes—though, I think, not their most important one—is to undermine the credibility of the senses for those who, like the melancholic Augustine prior to his awakening, negotiate the world largely by the dim light of their animal sensibilities. (Begin with appetite, add the senses and a pinch of reflectiveness, and then stir.) Descartes assumes that these benighted empiricists still have it within them to know that when they are dreaming, they do not perceive things as they are but only as they imagine them to be. Because the ability to distinguish dream from reality, shadow from substance is not, for Descartes, an empirical matter, there are grounds for hope; no reasoner is doomed to live in a phantasy world, where imagination bleeds into and thoroughly contaminates sense. To the obvious rejoinder—that most of us most of the time are *sensibly* aware of the difference between dreaming and being awake—Descartes shows at most a glancing interest. Yes, he concedes the point, but most is not all; there are times, let them be rare, when a person gets confused by an especially vivid dream. “I see plainly,” Descartes is already prepared to conclude, “that there are never any sure signs [*certiis indiciiis*] by means of which being awake can be distinguished from being asleep.”⁶

The conclusion would be underwhelming for any sense-guided reasoner just trying to make it through the day. The normal signs, juiced with a bit of caffeine, more than suffice. But Descartes’s interests are not mundanely practical. They are not even skeptical; doubt, apart from a clear path to knowledge, is child’s play. It is really his adult drive for perfection that disposes him to disregard the degree of difference between the occasionally spotty borders between sense and imagination and a full-blown phantasy world. For the perfectionist, it is enough to discredit a mode of knowing (or of living) to point out its inherent imperfection, however slight—as if imperfection were itself a species of original sin or a fall from grace. When Descartes speaks of the fallibility of his senses, he might as well be talking about his lying eyes: “From time to time I have found that the senses deceive, and it is prudent never to trust completely those who have deceived us even once.”⁷ There can be no forgiveness in a transgressed relationship—one with border issues—unless it comes from on high. In the case where the senses have impinged upon the mind and clouded its vision, deliverance will come in the form of a knowing that both reinforces sensible perception and transcends the senses altogether.

A dream-tainted sensibility, admitting to only the barest possibility of things being other than as they seem, is enough to drive Descartes to seek deliverance. He comes to his meditations with little doubt about where to look. In the simple sciences,

paradigmatically arithmetic and geometry, where truth-seeking is not fundamentally a negotiation with material realities, there is no possibility of a gap between how things seem and how they are. The appearing just is the reality and without raising the worrisome prospect that something real, in some abyss of being, remains hidden from view—perfectionism’s spoiler. It turns out that the primary function of dream skepticism is not to darken sense perception (its limitations have never been hard to notice) but to highlight the transparency of truth: “For whether I am awake or asleep,” Descartes writes, “two and three added together are five, and a square has no more than four sides.”⁸

The beauty of such truthful, transparent simplicity is that it is both a world onto itself, perfect and eternal, and the support structure (or, to change metaphor, the inner life) of lesser, materially laden, worlds. To illustrate, and to oversimplify, let’s say that I own a vase of great beauty. It is one thing, and it is a material thing. In a distracted moment, I accidentally knock the vase off its pedestal, and it breaks neatly into two separate pieces. Whereas before I had one thing, a beautiful vase, now I have two, or perhaps two halves of one thing. I can speak intelligibly of these two possibilities—the thing divides, the thing multiplies—because in the simple, supporting world of arithmetic truth, oneness is not diminished by division or augmented by multiplication. Such constancy is true of all numbers and not just the number one; numbers enter into innumerable relations with one another and yet they remain, individually, wholly and simply what they are. (We express this miracle of oneness by way of equations.) That I can make use of arithmetic and geometric truths to frame the ambiguous history of my vase does not of course imply that my “real” vase exists eternally preserved in some immaterial realm. I am still looking at a broken vessel and wondering about its beauty.

Materiality, to the frustrated perfectionist, is more punishment than world; it is a thing, like brokenness, to be endured or overcome, but not embraced. When Augustine first wonders what has prevented him from staying fixed in his perfect love of God, a love wholly free (supposedly) of fantasy, his thoughts turn to his residual but remarkably stubborn attachment to sexual generation, to a life that ties him to the bodies of women. He speaks near the beginning of *Confessions* 8 of having been too “tightly tied” (*tenaciter conligabar*; *conf.* 8.1.2) to his origins *ex femina* to feel fully at home in God’s house on earth: the Church. His is the perfectionist’s lament over mortal life and its desperate investment in further flesh.

Descartes, no less than Augustine, is anxious to inhabit a perfect world as a knowing self and without the troublesome residuals. But what would it mean for a knowing self, when faced with beauties that break or bleed, to see only the eternally sunlit world of the simple sciences, and rightly so? The question already understates the challenge. If I am a perfectly knowing self, or a known one, it says too little to say that I am, in my essence, fundamentally unlike the self that I materially appear to be. The truth is that I don’t make an appearance at all in a world where it is possible to confuse reality with appearance.⁹ I am already more real than this so-called “world” could ever be.

Descartes tests for the possibility of simple selfhood against the idea of an absolute agential power over materiality, or what he takes to be, by and large, the traditional idea of God. He resolves to think of this God, not as good or benevolent (the other part of the traditional idea), but as malicious, some kind of “evil genius” (*genium aliquem malignum*).¹⁰ If he can resist consenting to any of the representations of the evil genius, he will be left in possession of his essentially unimaginable self.

Let’s be clear about what kind of deceiver the Cartesian Satan is. This is not Iago or Richard III or the serpent in the Garden. The Cartesian Satan deceives by being able to represent *nothing* as if *nothing* were *something*. You look outside: you think you see grey skies, a smattering of snow on the ground, your Chihuahua chasing a squirrel. But in reality you see nothing at all: “there is no earth, no sky, no extended thing, no shape, no size, no place.”¹¹ This is odd, even for a metaphysical fantasy. Deception is normally a form of a deliberate misrepresentation, but what is being misrepresented here? Nothing. The closest that the Cartesian Satan comes to being a recognizable deceiver is in its malign attempt to get the doubting self to represent itself in some way. This self, being the absolute will to self-assert negatively, has an inviolable prerogative to refuse any and all offers of self-representation. If it surrenders that prerogative of its own will, it ironically creates a world wherein genuine misrepresentation is now possible—for it is itself *something* that can be misrepresented, albeit by being represented at all. Such a surrender would be the Cartesian equivalent of original sin.

Think of the doubting self as a perfectionist. It refuses to know what it knows until it has (in its mind) legitimately ruled out even the most fanciful possibilities for error. It picks out knowledge to perfect not because it wants only a partially perfected life but because it finds the other aspects of its existence—notably its material bonds with others—to be messy and time-consuming and impossible to perfect. It has come in any case to think of its perfectible self as its true and only self. The thing that gets defined by a mind-body conjunction is fit concern for a mechanic, but not a philosopher-scientist. So far this self’s perfectionist efforts have resulted in a drastic simplification of its world. There are two beings there: the perfectionist self itself, living within the walls of a radicalized doubt; and whatever other being it is whose life’s mission is to breach the integrity of those walls.

Now think of the Cartesian Satan, the so-called *malignus genius*, as a benevolent being and not the monster that the doubting self, in its perfectionist paranoia, has been misrepresenting it to be. It has been furnishing the austere doubting self with thickets of sensuous representations not to ensnare its alter ego in an alien and empty reality but to evoke wonder and open the door to collaborative representation: the space for new material. But the genius soon realizes that the doubting self is not about to relinquish its perfectionist imperatives and so it radically alters its mode of dialectical offering. It continues to send sensuous representations, but now fully under the expectation that these will be deemed materially false and not to be trusted. Along with these (and this is the really important part), it sends logical scripts, arithmetic equations, and geometric drawings, all of which evoke in the perfectionist the sense of

an abiding structure that exists independently of a material order while still at every moment informing that order's intelligibility. The perfectionist is free to limit its acceptance of material reality to such an intellectualist editing, leaving heaps of residuals on the cutting floor; at least the genius and the perfectionist will have a common knowledge of what the editing has spared. This is dialectic lite, to be sure, but perhaps also the promise of a more reasonable discourse to come.

For Descartes the only real difference between the malignant creator who creates out of nothingness and the benevolent one is that the latter is not in the deception business. It is weakness, thinks Descartes, that moves a rational being, finite or otherwise, to deceive. If I intend to deceive you, I conspire to get you to accept an alien perspective, the one I create for you, as your own; I lack the courage, the wisdom, or the charity to be able to collaborate with you on a common vision of truth. Perhaps I just don't trust you. As a finite reasoner, limited by the opacities of material existence, I am as subject to your deception as you are to mine. Against a reasoner who lacks such limitation, a powerful creator *ex nihilo*, I am likewise subject to deception, but lack a corresponding power to deceive. The true God wouldn't want to deceive me, or couldn't, if deception is the weakness that Descartes says it is. Either way I am left with the thought, not entirely reassuring, that God is one with me even as I am one with God. Descartes, anxious to perfect his perfectionism, is ready to look past the opacity of that conjunction: "If I restrain my will so that it extends to what the intellect clearly and distinctly reveals, and no further, then it is quite impossible for me to go wrong."¹²

Perfectionism Transfigured: Anselmian Irony

If Descartes is primarily concerned not to lose cognitive control of his world and thereby risk being pulled unawares into another being's fiction, Anselm is more worried that he will become a prisoner in his own house. The *Proslogion*, written while he was still abbot at Bec, is his attempt to send forth words of invocation into the inaccessible light (*lux inaccessibilis*; 1 Tim. 6:16) that stirs and chastens his cloistered consciousness. If his words go begging and remain ambassadors of nothingness, with nothing to offer, then Anselm faces a fool's fate. The fool in the Psalms, a corrupt creature who consumes people as if people were bread, has said in his heart (*in corde suo*), "There is no God" (Ps. 14:1, 53:1). The fool in the *Proslogion*—the senseless *insipiens*—has no access to his heart and so finds it impossible to consummate that world-annihilating denial.¹³ But it is not better to be Anselm's kind of fool. If you have become *insipiens* in his sense of that perdition, then you haven't a clue about just how thoroughly you have managed to identify yourself with the emptiness of your desire. You will have become the paradox of an insignificant signifier, a word without reference, and as such you can never meaningfully enter into the prayers of others. Hell, for Anselm, is to be the perfect solipsist.

When Anselm, like Augustine before him, temporarily diverts his attention from his familiar preoccupations and is drawn into the most intimate of his inner spaces, the bedchamber of his true intelligence (*in cubiculum mentis*; Mt. 6:6, *Proslogion* I), he is

looking for love and for new illumination. Augustine feels for the first time the invisible, but not inaccessible, light of love, but then is startled to discover that he has to relearn not who God is, but where. Anselm emerges from his inner bedchamber, having sought for days to call to mind there the name of his beloved with these unbidden words (they come to him when he stops trying so hard): “something than which nothing greater is conceivable” (*aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari possit; Proslogion II*).

It is admittedly a tag that seems more suited to the austerities of logic than to a love story, but despite its venerable place in the history of the ontological argument (a favorite among theologically inclined logicians), I insist on the love part. That this is the invocation of a beloved and, more fundamentally, of a lover is absolutely determinative for the “one argument” (*unum argumentum*) that Anselm expects will give him access to whatever he would want to believe about God. I am not speaking of argument here (and nor is Anselm) as a rule-governed application of rules on unquestioned premises, resulting in doxastic rectitude, or properly fixed belief. I am speaking of argument as a well focused meditative practice that serves to release belief from unnecessary fixation. (Descartes might have gone this way, but his horror of error got the better of him.)

In the spirit of that kind of argument, I would ask you to focus on the inner logic of this Anselmian (if not quite Anselm’s) invocation: “Dear being greater than which no being is conceivable, I humbly ask you to step outside of inaccessible light and inform me of your presence.” Notice that I am invoking what I take to be a conceivable being. A being greater than which no being is conceivable lies at the limits of conception but is still conceivable. I conceive of God as the greatest being I can possibly imagine, but I also want, as any good lover would, to love a beloved who exists apart from my imagination, a being that, in its inalienable greatness, draws me out of myself and my solipsistic knock-off of inaccessible light. I crave material presence; without it I am *insipiens*, stupid, senseless when it comes to love—and knowledge.

Anselm does not speak of material presence in the *Proslogion*; he speaks of inconceivability. The being whose greatness limits of my world must also transcend it. This too is part of the inner logic of a sacred invocation: “Therefore, Lord, not only are you that the greater of which cannot be conceived; you are also something greater than can be conceived” (*quiddam maius quam cogitari possit; Proslogion XV*). The implied logic of that “therefore” (*ergo*) is in one sense clear. Suppose that you or I or some being of exponentially greater power, like an archangel, were to work through all of the yet-to-be conceived things about God’s greatness and arrive at perfect knowledge; even were this to take an infinite amount of time, as it surely would, we would each still be in the business of not needing God. The conception will do. (Such a schema makes us out to be mentally appetitive, pseudo-rational beings—or fools in the making in the realm of mind.)

But there is also a deeper, less apparent logic at work. Let me *begin* with the inconceivability of God. Too late, I have already cheated. I have used the word ‘God.’ A proper name, even. Really bad. I’ll drop the God-talk and confine my attention to

the something greater than which nothing is conceivable; that is a being that is, by Anselm's reckoning, both conceivable and not. I will still want to be able to derive conceivable being from a logically prior inconceivability. How could I not if (sorry) God is to be more than my mind's greatest fiction? But now I face the sublime mystery of condescension from on high. Let's say that the inconceivable, through an exercise of kenotic love, lends itself to conception. Surely it is not the case that all of my conceptions of a great, world-constituting being are spirit-filled; I am, in many ways, very much the mentally appetitive creature that I so causally invented in the previous paragraph. I hunger for a conception, but feed on emptiness. So what is it that makes a conception of God, for me or for any of my kind, true?¹⁴

The contemplative logic that takes in this question now nudges me out of the *Proslogion*, the great prayer of Anselm's cloistered years, and into a dialogical work of less leisurely spirituality, *Cur deus homo*, written during his unsettling tenure in the See of Canterbury and marked by a heartache (*magna cordis tribulatione*; CDH preface) that he forbears to specify. In *Cur deus homo* (Why God is a human being), Anselm and his trusted student, Boso, chip away at the mystery of the incarnation, put thusly (CDH 1.1, my emphasis): "By what logic, what necessity, did God become human and by his death, as we believe and confess, restore life to the world—when he could have done this either through a surrogate, angelic or human, or *simply by willing it (sola voluntate)*."

Anselm makes it seem as if there were a real choice here: either God remains abstract and wields the power of absolute will to render imperfect things, like the human sinner, perfect, or God consents to origination *ex femina*, enters the world as one particular human being, Jesus of Nazareth (nothing abstract here), and spends the better part of his life trying to love beings who have a very hard time, apart from miraculous side-shows (cf. absolute will), seeing his kind of love as a form of power, much less the ultimate one. But Anselm's choices, when it comes to ultimate things, are rarely what they appear to be. Either call out to God, *sola ratione*, with your naked will to relate, or give up on gaining access to inaccessible light. That seems to be the choice that the *Proslogion* frames. But when I disincarnate my reason and imagine that as an act of humility, am I really alone with something, my reason, and is this something truly to be my offering to another? (Recall Augustine's unlikely experience of perfect love, for God and without other people, and his distress over being returned to his flesh.) The fool stalks the *Proslogion*; we should be careful about what we assume we can imagine.

In *Cur deus homo*, Anselm invites us to imagine God *remoto Christo* (CDH preface; 1.10), literally God "with Christ removed," more liberally God as infinitely remote from the perspective and the life-experience of a particular human incarnation. As I try to imagine my way into a relationship with such a remote divinity, I mentally remove myself from the particulars of my life—particulars whose significance has never been mine fully to determine—and arrive at pure will to will communication, consent or dissent, no development, no forgiveness. Anselm invites Boso to entertain this scenario (CDH 1.21, on the weightiness of sin): see yourself in God's sight, and hear a voice

telling you to “look over there” (*aspice illuc*), away from divine illumination; also hear God telling you, like an undercurrent in your hearing, “I absolutely do not want you to look” (*nullatenus volo ut aspicias*). You search your heart in vain for a reason to look (*quaere te ipse in corde tuo*), and then you look. Anselm intends this scenario—a choosing of the nihil over God—to dramatize the divergence of two absolute wills, each sovereign in its own house. As the sinner in the scene (and each of us at every moment is the sinner in the scene), you will not be forgiven.

But this is not because infinite will is perverse or hard of heart. The block to forgiving out of mercy alone (*sola misericordia*; CDH 1.12) is, on the face of it, coolly logical. You enter into life not as a sinner but as a perfect innocent, cradled within a seamless pocket of divine regard; then absurdly you will your exit into unlikeness, a place void of love and creative light. Your sin is annihilating, and necessarily so, because there really cannot be *two* absolute wills—God’s and that of some *res volens*—but only the one. Logically it is too late for you to undo your birth; your redemption from the void just is and never has been anything other than your creation out of nothingness. God sees nothing else. (Recall Augustine’s vision of creation at conf. 7.13.19; there is no breaking in *or* breaking out.) The struggle with sin, tedious and titanic, that you have been calling your life cancels out in the divine-human equation.

Now entertain a new scenario. The world is full of sinners, save for one, well, maybe two: Jesus, born of Mary, never takes that look away from God and into the void. He lives out his mortal life wholly within the seamless pocket of divine regard: he and the Father are one. His perfect humanity renders his brutal, but freely chosen death on a cross a superabundant offering—that of a release of life, where before there was only payment. His divinity, sourced out of his Father’s will, gives him leave to distribute the wealth to the lot of us imperfectly loving but perfectly loved children of God, languishing in the shadows of inaccessible light. Christ is nothing if not forgiving.

Most traditional readers of Anselm will be able to detect in my scenario some gesture toward Anselm’s exit from God, *remoto Christo*. I am myself unsure of where, or whether, that exits comes. With Anselm’s Christ, I find myself perpetually at a crossroads, not a plentitude—or a void. There is God’s will in Christ, and Christ’s will in God. In one direction absolute will voids flesh, in a preemption of crucifixion; in the other I remain remarkably identified with my mundane reckonings with love and loss, hate and despair. The irony of this particular crossroads is that there has only ever been one road to travel along.¹⁵

Postlude: A Sanctuary for Grief

What does perfection have to do with grief?

Augustine and Monnica are leaning against a window overlooking the garden of their temporary lodgings in Ostia, Rome’s seaport. For months the two of them have been waiting for a naval blockade to end—yet another spasm of imperial power—and for a chance, along with a few African friends and fellow sojourners, to return home. But they are not thinking about worldly deliverance now. Their thoughts tend toward

eternal life and the delights that overwhelm mortal memory and release it from fixation on time and place. While still in communion with one another (though their words are hard to imagine), mother and son ascend in ardent affection to “the thing itself” (*in idipsum*; *conf.* 9.10.24), where, with “a pure thrust of the heart” (*toto ictu cordis*), they touch upon the wisdom that makes all things.

Augustine again gets a lesson from on high about the stubborn gravity of material loves, but now he has his mother with him on both sides of the equation. Together he and Monnica relinquish to heaven “the first-fruits of the spirit” (*primitas spiritus*; Rom. 8:23), the parts of themselves—sacrificed—that have always known perfection; and just as quickly the two of them are returned to the noisy music of mortal struggle. But Monnica tells her son that she is done with earthly matters. Her hopes for Augustine, whose conversion has been her life’s work, have been more than met, and so, she wonders, “What am I doing here?” (*quid hic facio?*; *conf.* 9.10.26). Five days later she lapses into a fever and dies. Augustine tries, uselessly, to restrain his grief.

What I have been calling “the perfectionist’s lament” is mainly just frustrated perfectionism. Maybe that is what is on display here, in the ecstatic aftermath of Ostia, at least in part. It is admittedly with a sigh (*suspiravimus*; *conf.* 9.10.23), with a touch or two of regret, that mother and son have left their perfected selves captive in paradise. They look forward to returning there one day and remaining forever fixed, *this* time, within a triune, relational harmony that is eternally friendly to origination *ex femina* and former prodigal sons. Monnica can’t wait and is soon taken up; Augustine still has years and years of work ahead of him. But this is not, I think, what makes him sad.

When he recalls his mother’s world-weary question to him—“What I am doing here?”—he speaks to us, his unknown and less than fully trusted readers, through a son’s discretion (*conf.* 9.11.17): “I do not well recall what I said to that.” I am not inclined to press here. What could he have said to her, after all? Yes, you are done with your life, well done, move on. No, you are not done, much is unfinished, I am unfinished, stay put. At times we may just want to convey to those we love, however imperfectly we love them, that their lives are not the projects they take them to be, that success and failure are indeed relative things, and that beauty is what everyone begins with. The free of heart convey these truths through innocent delight; the rest of us, cautious and more ragged in our affections, resort to the belated wisdom of grief.

What does perfection have to do with grief?

The perfection that is non-perfectible, that renders time into an immaculate conception, is grief’s sanctuary.¹⁶

Notes

¹ Translations of Augustine are my own. For the Latin of the *Confessions*, see O'Donnell (1992).

² Augustine's language here suggests he is alluding to the parting of the woman from the man in Genesis 2:21-23. But there, of course, there is no wounding, and the parting itself is party to a new intimacy. For an extended (and quite brilliant) reading of *conf.* 6.15.25 along these lines, see Shanzer (2002).

³ The Little Notebook is now lost and along with it the dream-account that Descartes had titled, "Olympica" (Olympian matters), but we still have the French paraphrase from Adrien Baillet, Descartes' biographer. For the relevant excerpts from his *Vie de Monsieur Descartes*, see Adam and Tannery (1996), pp. 179-188. For a concise and non-dismissive philosophical analysis of the Olympica, see Sebba (1987).

⁴ Descartes (1986), p. 5.

⁵ Descartes (1986), p. 12.

⁶ Descartes (1986), p. 13.

⁷ Descartes (1986), p. 12. Near the end of his classic study of Cartesian reasoning, Harry Frankfurt remarks: "Descartes cares less about the correspondence of his beliefs to 'reality' than he does about their permanence and constancy. What he wishes above all to avoid is not error, in the sense of non-correspondence, but betrayal." I am not sure about the first part, but Frankfurt is surely right about the betrayal. See Frankfurt (2008), p. 249.

⁸ Descartes (1986), p. 14.

⁹ I think here of a famous passage from Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*: "If I wrote a book called *The World as I found it*, I should have to include a report on my body, and should have to say which parts were subordinate to my will, and which were not, etc., this being a method of isolating the subject, or rather of showing that in an important sense there is no subject; for it alone could *not* be mentioned in that book." See Wittgenstein (1961), proposition 5.631.

¹⁰ Descartes (1986), p. 15.

¹¹ Descartes (1986), p. 14.

¹² Descartes (1986), p. 43.

¹³ See *Proslogion* IV. Translations of Anselm are my own. My source for Anselm's Latin is Schmitt (1946).

¹⁴ The ready answer, "God does," is formally correct but, at this point in the argument, none too helpful.

¹⁵ I believe that this irony is Anselm's, and that he is, as much as anyone can be, in control of it. In my reading of Anselm I have been gratefully and deeply influenced by Burcht Pranger (2003).

¹⁶ Many thanks to Miroslav Volf and the Yale Center for Faith and Culture for the opportunity to present a version of this essay in February of 2017. I would especially like to thank my respondent, Tomas Sedlacek, for his discerning comments.

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