

HOW NOT TO DEFEND ANSELM

by

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In an article rife with self-confidence Steven S. Aspenson claims to be defending Anselm's reasoning in the *Cur Deus Homo* against certain misinterpretations of it by Hopkins, Quinn, and Scotus.¹ This bold article, however, does not succeed in its defense of Anselm. I will concentrate on its claim that the interpretation of Hopkins is misguided. In doing so, I will mention, but pass over, certain trivial objections to Aspenson's article and then will clarify certain of the article's points, before proceeding to focus on the article's central weakness.

A. Trivial Objections.

1. Aspenson indicates (p. 33) that the purpose of the *Cur Deus Homo* "is to show that, given religious and non-religious beliefs held in common by Christians and Muslims, both the Atonement and the Incarnation of God required for it are required to be fact, something Muslims deny." Here Aspenson should say: the purpose of the *Cur Deus Homo* is to show that, given "beliefs held in common by Christians, Jews, and Muslims" For the *Cur Deus Homo* aims (indirectly) more at the Jews than (indirectly) at the Muslims,² who are sometimes thought to be included in Anselm's reference to the pagans. (The same failure to mention the Jews occurs at the bottom of p. 37.)

2. Aspenson should refrain from referring to an angel by the pronoun "it," as occurs on pp. 33 & 34.

3. The word "devil" should be capitalized when it is used to refer to Lucifer, the Devil (pp. 34, 35, *et passim*).

4. On p. 36 the direct quotation from Hopkins is wrongly punctuated and slightly misworded, thereby disclosing an intellectual laxness that also conduces to the article's conceptual imprecisions. Hopkins writes:

...when Anselm argues "Only man ought to; only God can; therefore, necessarily a God-man," he is equivocating on the meaning of "ought." For the sense in which man *ought* is the unconditional sense in which

he *owes*. (The Latin verb *debere*, used repeatedly by Anselm, contains the notion of owing.) But the sense in which the God-man *ought* is the conditional sense in which He *ought* since (if) He *wills to*. In *Cur Deus Homo* II, 18 Anselm acknowledges these two different senses (S II, 129:3-8). But he fails to realize that their appearance invalidates his argument.³

In quoting from this passage, Aspenson (a) leaves aside the essential last two sentences, (b) elides the reference to the Latin verb “*debere*” without using ellipsis marks, (c) eliminates all italics, (d) writes “God-Man” in place of “God-man,” and (e) writes “For this sense” in place of “For the sense.”

5. Aspenson should not be using the translation of the *Cur Deus Homo* that is found in S. N. Deane’s *Saint Anselm: Basic Writings* (Open Court, 1962).⁴ For the translation found there is not Deane’s but is James Vose’s from 1854-55. It is out of date inasmuch as it is not based on F. S. Schmidt’s critical edition of the Latin texts. Aspenson might better have used Hopkins and Richardson’s translation of 1976, which *is* based on the critical edition of the texts.⁵

The foregoing five objections, though trivial, nonetheless point to a lack of scholarly rigor.

B. *Needed Clarifications.*

1. Anselm is said by Aspenson to hold the view that Christ’s death “vindicates God to the angels by conquering the devil” (p. 35). This statement is all right as far as it goes; but it needs to go further. Because the God-man freely let Himself be killed for the sake of the truth—i.e., because He refused to deny that He was Son of God and was God, while knowing that His refusal would occasion His death—He remained sinless and thus vindicated God (of not having created a defective angelic nature and a defective human nature) not only in the eyes of the angels (*CDHI*, 22) but also in the eyes of men. For God thereby restored the orderliness and the beauty of the universe, which seemed to have been marred by Satan’s and Adam’s sins and fallenness (*CDHI*, 15).

2. Aspenson needs also to clarify the point about man's debt to God being an infinite debt (p. 35). For he needs to preempt the thought that the Jews who demanded that Christ be put to death committed an infinite sin and are infinitely guilty. Likewise, he needs to preempt the thought that any sin at all is a sin of infinite guilt.

In *CDH* I, 21 Anselm reasons that any sin at all, no matter how small, is a violation of the will of God and therefore ought not to be committed even if committing it could save from destruction this entire world and an infinite number of other such worlds. Anselm then goes on in I, 21 to promulgate the principle that no one makes satisfaction for his sin unless he pays "something greater than is that for whose sake ... [he] ought not to have sinned."⁶ So if a man ought not to have sinned even were his sinning to result in his saving from destruction an infinite number of worlds, then his payment for sin must be *greater* in value than the value of an infinite number of worlds such as our present world. As Anselm notes, no one who is merely a human being can possibly make this payment.

Although a given sin is infinitely grave, Anselm never states that one who sins—i.e., one who does anything at all against the will of God—is infinitely guilty or has committed an infinite sin. That is, one's being guilty of a sin that is infinitely grave is not identical with one's being infinitely guilty, according to Anselm. Any sinfulness, however small—whether the sinfulness be a personal sin as in the case of an adult or an inherited sinful nature as in the case either of an infant or of an adult—shall, unless forgiven, keep an individual from entering Heaven, teaches Anselm. Thus, a small personal sin (in the case of an adult) may well have very grave consequences. Yet, the sin does not bring upon one infinite guilt. Indeed, no sin brings upon one infinite guilt—not even the sin of putting Christ to death. In this regard Anselm reasons that those who put Christ to death did so in ignorance of the fact that He was also God. Therefore, they were guilty only of a venial sin. Although, as Anselm indicates, there is such a thing as an infinite sin, no one could ever know-

ingly commit it, so as to incur infinite guilt:

For a sin done knowingly and a sin done in ignorance are so different from each other that the evil which these men [viz., the Jews who contributed to putting Christ to death] could never have done knowingly, because of its enormity, is venial because it was done in ignorance. For no man could ever will, at least knowingly, to kill God; and so those who killed Him in ignorance did not rush forth into that infinite sin with which no other sins are comparable. Indeed, in order to ascertain how good His life was, we considered the magnitude of this sin not with respect to the fact that it was committed in ignorance but as if it were done knowingly—something which no one ever did or *ever could have done* (CDH II, 15; italics and bracketed words added).⁷

Although Aspenson does not attribute to Anselm the view that the death of Christ brought upon the Jews infinite guilt or that Adam's sin brought upon Adam's race infinite guilt, he needs to forestall this inference by distinguishing expressly between an actually infinite debt and an actually infinite sin.

3. A third clarification that is needed has to do with the translation of the title "*Cur Deus Homo*." Aspenson needs to stress the point that the construal of the title as this construal appears in S. N. Dean's *Anselm of Canterbury: Basic Writings*—namely, the construal "Why God Became Man"⁸—tends to be misleading. For on Anselm's theory God did not become man *as such*, did not become universal man, did not assume universal human nature. Rather, He became *a* man, a particular man, by assuming not Adamic human nature as such but a particular Adamic human nature. A preferable translation, though an interpretive one, would be "Why God became a [God-]man," or even, more interpretively, "Why God Assumed a Human Nature."

C. Central Objection.

We come now to the central criticism to be made of Aspenson's article: namely, that the article shows a misunderstanding of Hopkins' charge against Anselm and thereby overestimates the success of its own self-styled defense of Anselm.

Anselm argues (*CDH* II, 6):

...if only God can make this satisfaction and only a man ought to make it: it is necessary that a God-man make it.

Hopkins responds that this argument is a *non-sequitur* because it equivocates on the meaning of the word “ought.” There is a double sense in which a man ought to make satisfaction: (a) the sense in which Adam and Eve and/or their descendants ought to make satisfaction and (b) the sense in which the God-man ought to make satisfaction. The sense in which Adam or Eve or one of their natural descendants *ought*₁ to make satisfaction is the sense in which Adam and Eve and their descendants *owe* to God repayment for the honor that Adam’s and Eve’s sin of disobedience “robbed” God of, so to speak. Adam’s personal sin (as *De Conceptu Virginali* states expressly) contaminated his nature, with the result that his naturally propagated descendants inherit a sinful nature. This nature, in turn, inclines, but does not compel, his descendants to sin personally, as they all at some point do, once they reach the age of accountability. Thus, the entire human race is guilty of dishonoring God and must make satisfaction (i.e., “repayment,” or restoration, of God’s honor plus payment of amends). So Adam and Eve’s natural descendants ought to make satisfaction because they are indebted to do so. But the God-man is not a natural descendant of Adam and Eve. For God miraculously assumed a human nature from Eve (who has an Adamic nature, since she was taken from Adam) apart from the procreational power of a male seed. Accordingly, the God-man has a human nature that is uncontaminated by sin. He therefore does not *owe* the Adamic human race’s debt. Yet, as a member of the Adamic human race He *ought*₂ to make satisfaction in the sense that it is *fitting* for Him to do so, if He wills to.

If one views Anselm’s argument charitably, one can view it as enthymematic. Instead of interpreting it as ‘Only man ought to; only God can; therefore, necessarily a God-man, [who both ought to and can ...],’ one will expand the argument as follows:

- Only a member of the human race *ought*₁ to make payment, because only the human race *owes* payment.

- Only God *can* make payment because only God has the means to pay “something greater than every existing thing besides God” (*CDH* II, 6).
- Either man qua natural descendant of Adam ought₁ to make the payment to God because he owes a debt to God, or man qua supernatural descendant of Adam ought₂ to make the payment to God if He wills to, because it is fitting that He make the payment on behalf of the human race, of which He is a member.
- Human nature as it naturally descends from Adam is sinful; hence, God cannot acceptably assume it. So if God wills to, He assumes a human nature that supernaturally descends from Adam.
- God does will to assume a human nature that supernaturally descends from Adam. (See *CDH* II, 8. Also note *De Conceptu Virginali* 8 & 20 & 23.)
- Accordingly, this God-man, who is both Son of God and son of the Virgin, has the power to make satisfaction and ought₂ to do so since He wills to.
- Therefore, the God-man does make satisfaction because He *can* and *ought₂ to* and *wills to*; and whatever He wills to do He does do.

Hopkins thinks that Anselm’s more simplistic way of articulating his argument (“Only man ought to; only God can; therefore, necessarily a God-man, [who both ought to and can ...]”) blurs the fact that “ought” is used in two different senses. In the first sense *ought* is an unconditional *ought*: the human race and its sinful members owe payment unconditionally. But in the case of the God-man, the *ought* is conditional: the God-man, who is not sinful, does not owe the debt; yet, He ought to pay it in the (second) sense that it is *fitting* for Him, as a member of Adam’s race, to do so AND in a third sense, which is also conditional: He ought to do so *if He wills to do so*. Precisely because Christ’s meritorious death is freely undergone as a work of supererogation, Christ only need meritoriously sacrifice His life and have the merit transferred to other human beings if He wills to. And He does will to. But He need not will to, in one sense—although He needs to in another sense (namely, a further conditional sense): if God’s

work in creation is not to seem to have been done either ineffectively or in vain, then the redemption of human beings is necessary; and this redemption can only fittingly occur by means of the meritorious sacrificial death of a (sinless) God-man. And in the case of God, Anselm reminds us, “just as an impossibility results from any unfitness, however slight, so necessity accompanies any degree of reasonableness, however small, provided it is not overridden by some other more weighty reason” (CDH I, 10).

Unless Anselm’s reasoning is explicitly expanded by pointing out its implicit reliance upon two—even three—different senses of “ought,” Anselm’s argument will not be valid. For the sentence “*Sed nec facere illam [=satisfactionem] debet nisi homo*” (CDH II, 6) will not be unequivocally true. For it will not be clear in what sense deus-homo *debet*; i.e., it will not be clear just why *nesse est ut eam [= satisfactionem] faciat deus-homo*. Aspenson points to a sense of “ought” that applies both to man qua purely human and to man qua God-man: namely, the sense in which “what is necessary for accomplishing God’s goals ought to be,” or the sense in which “what is necessary for accomplishing a praiseworthy goal ought to exist” (p. 37). But introducing this sense of “ought” does not save Anselm from equivocation. For Anselm’s argument still trades on the fact that Adam and his natural descendants *ought* to make satisfaction to God in the unconditional sense that they *owe*—whereas the God-man (who descends from Adam supernaturally rather than through natural propagation) *ought* to make satisfaction in the sense that it is *fitting* that He do so *if* He wills to; and since He does will to, then that which He wills ought, necessarily, to occur. And associated with His willingness is His aim to restore to the whole of creation its original beauty and orderliness, lest, as God, He seem to have created defective angelic and human natures—natures that were destined to fail because of an inherent weakness.

So Aspenson’s appeal to a univocal sense of “what is necessary for accomplishing God’s goals ought to be” does not save Anselm from the charge that (a) he is equivocating on the verb “*debere*” and that (b) his argument does

not stand up unless it is expanded explicitly along the foregoing lines or something like them.

NOTES

1. Steven S. Aspenson, "In Defense of Anselm," *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 7 (January, 1990), 33-45.

2. See *CDH* II, 22. See also F. B. Asiedu, "Anselm and the Unbelievers: Pagans, Jews, and Christians in the *Cur Deus Homo*," *Theological Studies*, 62 (September, 2001), 530-548. See also René Roques, "Les Pagani dans le *Cur deus homo* de Saint Anselme," pp. 192-206 in Paul Wilpert, editor, *Die Metaphysik im Mittelalter. Ihr Ursprung und Ihre Bedeutung*. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1963.

3. Jasper Hopkins, *A Companion to the Study of St. Anselm* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1972), pp. 195-196.

4. In his footnote Aspenson cites the title of this book as "*Saint Anselm*" instead of as "*Saint Anselm: Basic Writings*." He does not indicate that the 1962 printing is the second edition, the first edition being in 1903.

5. *Anselm of Canterbury*, Vol. III (The Edwin Mellen Press, 1976). In the body, and in the notes, of this present short article, "*CDH*" is used to abbreviate the title "*Cur Deus Homo*."

6. All of my own Anselm translations as used here are taken from Jasper Hopkins and Herbert Richardson, editors and translators, *Complete Philosophical and Theological Treatises of Anselm of Canterbury* (Minneapolis [today Loveland, Colorado]: Banning Press, 2000).

7. See J. Hopkins, "God's Sacrifice of Himself as a Man: Anselm of Canterbury's *Cur deus homo*," pp. 237-257 in Karin Finsterbusch *et al.*, editors, *Human Sacrifice in Jewish and Christian Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

8. The title that appears in Deane's *Anselm of Canterbury: Basic Writings* is simply the Latin title "*Cur Deus Homo*." However, throughout the translated text it is clear that Deane and Vose understand this title as "Why God Became Man." E.g., see *CDH*, preface and first chapter, where Anselm's topic is expressed in English as "why God became man." Correspondingly, see the very last sentence in the body of Aspenson's article (p. 43), which even capitalizes the word "man": "Why did God become Man?"