

How To Repair Human Nature: Anselm's Understanding of the Relation Between Belief, Understanding, Will, and Grace

Abstract: Saint Anselm of Canterbury argues that we come to understand and love God through a lifelong, holistic process that involves belief, understanding, will, and grace. He contends that it is only through this developmental process that we can come to see God's countenance, which is the purpose for which we were made. Leaving aside Anselm's argument for humanity's having this goal, I attempt to explain exactly how Anselm thinks that this process is supposed to go, of how we can sharpen our gaze, orient ourselves properly, and come closer to God.

Explaining the relationship between belief, understanding, will, and grace is a major project of Christian philosophy because the pre-theoretical point that religious faith is incompatible with critical thinking is often taken as a decisive blow against Christian philosophy by non-Christian philosophers and lay persons. Thus, showing that Anselm is correct that belief, understanding, will, and grace are not incompatible, and in fact depend holistically on each other in the process of coming closer to God, serves to make Christian philosophy more plausible to those skeptical of the field's internal coherence.

I begin by situating Anselm's description of this process within his general theological and philosophical picture. Then, I argue that this process is best understood as an upward spiral towards a more complete understanding of God, rather than as a linear process that involves discrete steps occurring in a certain necessary order. I conclude with the point that this upward spiral interpretation of Anselm fits well with his overall understanding of human development.

Keywords: Anselm, faith, belief, understanding, will, grace, Christianity, medieval philosophy

I. Introduction

Saint Anselm of Canterbury, an 11th century Christian theologian and philosopher, argues that we come to understand and love God through a lifelong, holistic process that involves belief, understanding, will, and grace. He contends that it is only through this developmental process that we can come to see God's countenance, which is the purpose for which we were made.¹ Leaving aside Anselm's argument for humanity's having this goal, I shall attempt, in this paper, to give an in-depth interpretation of exactly how Anselm thinks that this process is supposed to go, of how we can sharpen our gaze, orient ourselves properly, and come closer to God.

¹ Anselm, *Proslogion*, in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, trans. Brian Davies and G.R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), S. 1, p. 84-5. (Hereafter referred to as *Proslogion*.)

I begin by situating Anselm's description of this process within his general theological and philosophical picture; this serves both to orient the reader and to make clear why Anselm is concerned with giving an account of the process of coming to see God's face. Then, I argue that this process is best understood as an upward spiral towards a more complete understanding of God, rather than as a linear process that involves discrete steps occurring in a certain necessary order. This upward spiral interpretation, I contend, makes sense of Anselm's claim that grace is necessary for both the beginning of and throughout the process, allows us to understand how the so-called Fool² and people with dead faith³ can exist, and gives us a way to account for individual differences in how people come to love God and strive to see His face. I conclude with the point that this interpretation of Anselm seems to fit well with his overall understanding of human development.

II. The Big Picture

Anselm, as a Christian Platonist,⁴ argues for a teleological understanding of human nature. He claims that the purpose for which it was made by God, its *telos*, is to "love the supreme essence above all other goods...and only to love other things for the sake of the supreme essence."⁵ As this is our purpose, or that for which we were made,⁶ we ought to strive to achieve it; that is, we ought to strive to love God above all things, and to love other things only because, and insofar as, God wants us to love them. However, Anselm also thinks that we cannot truly love God without understanding Him; he writes that human nature "cannot love the

² Proslogion, S. 2-4.

³ Anselm, *De Concordia*, in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, trans. Brian Davies and G.R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), S. 3.2. (Hereafter referred to as *De Concordia*.)

⁴ Marilyn McCord Adams, "Fides Quaerens Intellectum: St. Anselm's Method in Philosophical Theology," *Faith and Philosophy* Vol. 9, No. 4 (October 1992): 410.

⁵ Anselm, *Monologion*, in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, trans. Brian Davies and G.R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), S. 68, p. 74. (Hereafter referred to as *Monologion*.)

⁶ Proslogion, S. 1, p. 85.

supreme essence unless it strives to become conscious of and to understand it,” and so concludes that what “the rational creation ought to do, is to put all its power and all its will into becoming conscious of, understanding and loving the supreme good.”⁷ To contemplate and love God is our purpose; therefore, in pursuit of this goal, we ought to strive to understand and enjoy the beatific vision and to grasp the Divine nature insofar as we are able to do so.

However, it is not as easy to achieve this goal as one might think; according to Anselm, there are two obstacles in our way. The first is our metaphysical incommensurability with God—He is “perfect, unqualified and absolute,” while we are “fleeting [and] extremely brief.”⁸ Compared to the Supreme Being, we “barely exist,” and this incommensurability makes it extremely difficult for us to clearly grasp God’s fundamental nature.⁹ He is, to some degree, cognitively inaccessible to us,¹⁰ simply in virtue of being “that than which a greater cannot be thought.”¹¹ Furthermore, our understanding of God is limited not only by this metaphysical fact,¹² but is additionally constrained by the second obstacle in the way of us achieving our purpose. This second obstacle is the damage suffered by human nature as a result of Adam’s fall from grace.¹³ As a result of the fall, man is weak and corrupted: he has lost his image of God,¹⁴ that clarity of vision and understanding necessary to grasp God’s countenance,¹⁵ and his uprightness of will,¹⁶ without which he cannot will justly, i.e. he cannot will as he ought to will, as God

⁷ Monologion, S. 68, p. 74.

⁸ Monologion, S. 28, p. 43-4.

⁹ Monologion, S. 28, p. 44.

¹⁰ Proslogion, S. 1, p. 87.

¹¹ Proslogion, S. 15, p. 96.

¹² Proslogion, S. 14, p. 95-6.

¹³ Proslogion, S. 1, p. 85. Anselm, *Virgin Conception and Original Sin*, in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, trans. Brian Davies and G.R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), S. 2, p. 360-1. (Hereafter referred to as *Virgin Conception and Original Sin*.)

¹⁴ Proslogion, S. 1, p. 85-7.

¹⁵ Proslogion S. 1, p. 85-7.

¹⁶ Anselm, *On Truth*, in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, trans. Brian Davies and G.R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), S. 4, p. 156. (Hereafter referred to as *On Truth*.)

wants him to will.¹⁷ That we originally had uprightness of will points to another aspect of our *telos*, our that-for-which-we-were-made; because God is justice,¹⁸ part of loving and contemplating God is to will justly, to self-determinately will in accordance with how God wants us to will.¹⁹ Because this forms part of our *telos*, we ought to will in this way; as Anselm puts it, “the obligation persists for human nature to have the power it was given to be just.”²⁰ And while we cannot re-gain this power on our own, we can re-attain it with a combination of hard work and God’s grace.²¹ Thus, Anselm indicates that we can, via an involved, difficult process, repair the damage done to human nature, and furthermore, argues that we have an obligation to repair it as much as possible, because only by repairing our damaged nature can we even come close to achieving the purpose for which we were made. In short, of the two obstacles blocking our path, the second can be overcome, and because we have an obligation to follow the path, we have an obligation to overcome that obstacle.

III. How to Repair Our Damaged Nature

Anselm’s strategy for overcoming the obstacle posed by our damaged human nature is one of rehabilitation—through God’s grace and our own hard work, we can correct those aspects of our damaged nature that keep us from understanding and loving God. I suggest that this process of rehabilitation takes the form of an upward spiral, suffused with grace, that is aimed towards the achievement of our vocation of experiencing God. This process, claims Anselm, involves not only our belief and understanding, but also our will; all of these powers must work together in the service of coming to love and contemplate God, for if they do not, we are not

¹⁷ On Truth, S. 12, p. 167-9.

¹⁸ Monologion, S. 16, p. 29.

¹⁹ Anselm, *Why God Became Man*, in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, trans. Brian Davies and G.R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), S. 2.1, p. 315-6, S. 1.11, p. 283. (Hereafter referred to as *Why God Became Man*.)

²⁰ Virgin Conception and Original Sin, S. 2, p. 360.

²¹ De Concordia, S. 3.3, p. 455.

coming closer to God in the correct and proper way.²²

III.a. Belief and Understanding

There is a “right order” that we must follow in the process of rehabilitation, and, while it “demands” that belief come before understanding, it also claims that it is “negligence” if “we do not make an effort to understand what we believe.”²³ So while Anselm insists that belief, not intellectual understanding, is the appropriate starting point for the process of rehabilitation, he contends that understanding is an important element in it. If we do not seek to understand what we believe, i.e., the tenets of the Christian faith, we are guilty of negligence, specifically, of neglecting our *telos*. According to the “right order” dictated by our *telos*, while it seems that belief must come first, understanding must follow if we are to fulfill the purpose for which we were made.

However, despite the demands made by our *telos*, it seems that we should “not necessarily” view Anselm’s process of rehabilitation as a simple two-step process that “assert[s] the absolute priority of faith over understanding.”²⁴ As Marilyn Adams argues, to insist that, for Anselm, belief *must* come before understanding is to miss both the flexibility of Anselm’s position and his overall understanding of human development as holistic and progressive.²⁵ In light of these two points, Adams suggests that a better understanding of Anselm’s view involves the less strong claim that, however one begins one’s inquiry, “faith will eventually be required to see the investigation through to the end.”²⁶ According to this interpretation of Anselm, faith, or belief, is necessary to have the fullest understanding of God possible, but is not a prerequisite for having any understanding at all. This allows for the possibility of converting non-Christian

²² De Concordia, S. 3.2, p. 453-4. Monologion, S. 68, S. 76, S. 78. Proslogion, S. 1, S. 4.

²³ Why God Became Man, S. 1.1, p. 266.

²⁴ Adams, 424.

²⁵ Adams, 424-5.

²⁶ Adams, 424.

intellectuals through a process of reasoning, and also makes sense of Anselm's strategy in both the *Monologion* and the *Proslogion*. In both, Anselm provides arguments for God's existence that proceed *sola ratione*, or by reason alone.²⁷ He attempts to demonstrate that one can, through pure intellectual inquiry, come to know that God exists. The use of this strategy suggests that Anselm himself did not think belief was the necessary starting point, for if it were, then it would be impossible for his strategy to succeed, that is, it would be impossible to gain any conception of God at all solely via the use of reason. So, on the assumption that Anselm would not deliberately adopt an unsuccessful strategy, it seems that we should agree with Adams' interpretation of Anselm as holding the less strong view that belief, while necessary to see God's countenance, is not necessary for any understanding to be achieved at all.

Further evidence that at least some minimal understanding can be achieved without belief comes from Anselm's description in the *Proslogion* of the so-called Fool, who, despite having some conception of God, claims that He does not exist.²⁸ Anselm's Fool is not an idiot; he "understands what he hears" when people are trying to convince him of God's existence, and "what he understands is in his mind."²⁹ The Fool is essentially someone who is attempting to gain an understanding of God through purely intellectual inquiry; despite lacking belief, he does have in his mind some conception of God, namely, a conception of Him as "something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought."³⁰ And the Fool concedes that God exists in the mind, if not in reality, because he concedes that whatever is understood is in the mind.³¹ In short, it is not that the Fool does not have any understanding at all; rather, it is that he thinks that God exists only in the mind and not in reality. His understanding of God is limited to an intellectual

²⁷ *Monologion*, esp. the Prologue and S. 1-14. *Proslogion*, esp. the Preface and S. 1-5.

²⁸ *Proslogion*, S. 2-4.

²⁹ *Proslogion*, S. 2, p. 87.

³⁰ *Proslogion*, S. 2, p. 87.

³¹ *Proslogion*, S. 2, p. 87.

conception. And while this allows the Fool to understand what is said when people discuss God, he nevertheless does not grasp the fact that God necessarily “possess[es] existence to the highest degree.”³² The Fool is not talking past his interlocutors, according to Anselm; he both understands the topic under discussion, i.e., he has a conception of God, and maintains that God does not exist in reality.

Now, if we were to claim that belief is a necessary prerequisite for understanding, it seems that we would have something of a problem on our hands, for it seems that it would be difficult to explain the existence of the Fool, who understands but does not believe. We could say that the Fool’s understanding of God is faulty *because* he does not believe, but this does not solve the problem entirely, for we would still need to explain how the Fool is able to have any understanding at all without belief. However, if we interpret Anselm as saying simply that belief is necessary before full understanding can be achieved, then we can easily explain the existence of the Fool. The Fool, we can say, in virtue of having the human capacity for intellectual inquiry, is able to investigate, to a certain degree, God’s nature. Thus, he gains some understanding of God, to the point where he is able to converse meaningfully with his interlocutors. However, he is not remotely close to the point of being able to contemplate God in all His glory. To achieve this level of understanding, the Fool would have to believe; without belief, he can attain some understanding, but it will be quite limited.

Anselm’s own analysis of the Fool’s mistake seems to support my proposed explanation of the Fool; he argues that the Fool’s principle error is not lack of belief, but lack of logic. If the Fool were to think, carefully and rationally, through his current understanding of God as something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought, Anselm contends, he would have to

³² Proslogion, S. 3, p. 88.

conclude, simply on the basis of reason, that God must exist.³³ Thus, Anselm insists that even if the Fool “did not want to *believe* that [God] existed, [he] should nevertheless be unable not to *understand* it.”³⁴ That the Fool should conclude that God necessarily exists has nothing to do with belief, and everything to do with logic; Anselm contends that it simply follows from the Fool’s understanding of God that God necessarily exists. So while the Fool’s understanding of God is quite minimal, it is nevertheless substantive enough that he can reason from it. Thus, when he fails to reason appropriately from it, he is making a logical error, not an error at the level of belief. (Of course, the Fool also errs in that he does not believe, but as I have been trying to show, that is a separate mistake.) Anselm’s analysis of the Fool suggests, then, that some understanding, although of a quite limited sort, can be attained through the process of intellectual inquiry, even in the absence of belief.

Thus, we can make a distinction between having a “bare bones” conception, or understanding, of God, so to speak, versus having a richer, more complete understanding of God.³⁵ Belief is necessary for the latter, but not the former, and it is the latter that our *telos* demands that we seek. I take it that it is the latter kind of understanding that Anselm is referring to when he asserts in the *Proslogion* that “I believe so that I may understand...unless I believe, I shall not understand.”³⁶ He cannot be asserting that belief is necessary to have any understanding at all, because if he were, then he would be invalidating his own proposed strategy to provide even those who do not believe in God with a rational proof of God’s existence, i.e., to provide even nonbelievers with some minimal understanding of God. Given that this is his strategy, a

³³ *Proslogion*, S. 3-4, p. 88-9.

³⁴ *Proslogion*, S. 4, p. 89.

³⁵ We can never have a totally complete understanding of God, of course, because of the metaphysical difference between Him and us. (See section 1.) Nevertheless, we can have a better or worse level of understanding, and our purpose is to strive to grasp the highest level of understanding possible for us as humans. It is this level of understanding that I am referring to when I discuss having a more complete understanding of God.

³⁶ *Proslogion*, S. 1, p. 87.

less contradictory reading of Anselm seems to interpret his claim here to be that belief is necessary to have the kind of understanding that he is seeking, the rich, more complete understanding that is demanded by our *telos*. This kind of understanding, the kind that involves striving to see God's face, must be preceded by belief, and it is this sense of understanding that Anselm is referring to when he discusses the "right order" of the process of our rehabilitation. So while understanding alone is sufficient, it seems, to have at least a "bare bones" conception of God, it is certainly not sufficient to come to have a vision of God. For that, belief is needed.

When we look at the matter this way, we can see that, for Anselm, belief furthers understanding; belief allows us to attain a higher level of understanding than we can achieve through pure intellectual inquiry. Given that our purpose is to achieve the highest level of understanding of God's nature as is possible for human beings, we not only have good reason to believe, because it is through belief that we will come closer to attaining this understanding, but we also have an obligation to believe. Whether belief comes prior to understanding,³⁷ or whether it comes after a minimal understanding has been achieved,³⁸ it is an essential step in the process of our rehabilitation. And furthermore, understanding furthers belief; we "take delight in the understanding and contemplation of the things which [we] believe,"³⁹ and this understanding allows us to remain firm in the face of questions and objections from both believers and nonbelievers.⁴⁰ The more understanding we attain, the more it supports our belief. Thus, it seems clear that, for Anselm, there is a co-dependent relationship between belief and understanding. Put simply, each supports and sustains the other. However, it is more than a simple co-dependent relationship, because the exercise of each leads to more of the other. Thus, it is a co-dependent

³⁷ Why God Became Man, S. I.1, p. 266. Proslogion, S. 1, p. 87.

³⁸ Monologion S. 80, p. 80-1.

³⁹ Why God Became Man, S. I.1, p. 265.

⁴⁰ Why God Became Man, S. I.1, p. 265-6. Proslogion S. 1, p. 86.

developmental process, which I described earlier as a sort of upward spiral aimed towards the achievement of our *telos*. Belief leads to more understanding, and understanding leads to more belief, and so on and so forth. However, having both belief and understanding is not enough to move up the loops, or steps, of the spiral; also crucial is that we *will* rightly, that is, we will to work our way through the developmental process of rehabilitating our corrupted human nature for the sake of maintaining our uprightness of will, of existing in a state of justice.⁴¹

III.b. Will and Grace

As I mentioned earlier, part of the damage done to human nature as a result of the fall was that it lost its uprightness of will, without which it cannot be just. Justice, according to Anselm, consists in uprightness of will, and uprightness of will “is present in people only when they, for their part, will what God wants them to will.”⁴² So, to have uprightness of will, i.e., justice, we must will that which God wants us to will. And, given that God wants us to strive to achieve our *telos* of seeing His face, we can deduce, I think, that God wants us to will to realize the purpose for which we were made. In other words, it is not enough to both believe in God and seek to understand Him; we must also actively desire to achieve this, our purpose. We must not only strive to come to have a vision of God, but we must also want to struggle towards having that vision.⁴³ As Anselm writes, “the Holy Spirit does not judge someone to be upright of heart who only believes rightly and understands rightly. Right will is necessary as well.”⁴⁴ So, to be upright of heart, that is, to be actually on the path to achieving our *telos* of experiencing God, we must will rightly as well as believe rightly and understand rightly. And in order to will rightly, as I have attempted to show, we must want to work our way through the rehabilitative process; we

⁴¹ Do Concordia, S. 3.2, p. 453-4.

⁴² De Concordia, S. 1.6, p. 445.

⁴³ On Truth, S. 12, p. 168. De Concordia, S. 3.2, p. 453-4.

⁴⁴ De Concordia, S. 3.2, p. 454.

must, as Marilyn Adams puts it, “commit [ourselves] to God in living faith.”⁴⁵ Furthermore, we must will this not because we are forced to⁴⁶ or because we want to achieve some other end via this commitment (some intellectual or social end, perhaps), but rather because we love justice⁴⁷ and so want to preserve our uprightness of will for its own sake.⁴⁸

Anselm recognizes that there is a difference between merely willing that which we ought to will and willing it *because* we ought to will it—as he points out, “every will has a what and a why”—and he argues that right willing includes not only the appropriate what, but also the appropriate why.⁴⁹ We will rightly when we will that which God wants us to will for the sake of maintaining our uprightness of will.⁵⁰ When we will to fulfill our *telos* because we think that doing so will maintain our uprightness of will, then it seems clear that we are willing it for the sake of preserving our uprightness of will, and this shows that we love uprightness of will, or justice, for its own sake.⁵¹ Anselm confirms this when he writes that people “love that for the sake of which they preserve [uprightness of will].”⁵² So we can only be said to love justice if we both will as we ought, i.e., as God wants us to will, and do so for the sake of preserving our uprightness of will. Ultimately, then, we must fulfill these two conditions if we are to be just, if we are to truly will rightly. And, as we have seen, we must will rightly in order to be engaged in the rehabilitative process that will allow us to come closer to having the beatific vision, the attainment of which is the end dictated by our *telos*.

Willing rightly, as we have seen, consists in willing what we ought to will in order to

⁴⁵ Adams, 422.

⁴⁶ On Truth, S. 12, p. 168.

⁴⁷ As I mentioned in section 1, Anselm claims that God is justice; thus, to love justice is to love God. See Monologion, S. 16, p. 29.

⁴⁸ De Concordia, S. 3.2, p. 454. On Truth, S. 12, p. 168-9.

⁴⁹ On Truth, S. 12, p. 168.

⁵⁰ On Truth, S. 12, p. 169.

⁵¹ De Concordia, S. 3.2, p. 454.

⁵² De Concordia, S. 3.2, p. 454.

maintain our uprightness of will. As a consequence of this, people who do not *have* uprightness of will cannot will rightly, because they cannot maintain what they do not have. However, as I mentioned earlier, as a result of the fall, human nature lost its uprightness of will. So before we can will rightly, we first must acquire uprightness of will. Now, while the normal method of acquiring things is through an act of will, we cannot acquire uprightness of will via this method, because we are not “equipped” to do so.⁵³ As Anselm writes, the will “cannot will any uprightness at all unless it possesses the uprightness in order to will it.”⁵⁴ Before we can will uprightness, that is, before we can will rightly, we must first possess uprightness; thus, lacking uprightness, we cannot will to acquire it. In short, there is no way for us alone to obtain the uprightness of will necessary for willing rightly, and furthermore, we cannot attain it from another creature, because creatures “cannot give [other creatures] the means necessary for salvation.”⁵⁵ Anselm concludes that the only way that we can acquire uprightness of will, which is necessary for willing rightly and thus for achieving our *telos*, is through God’s grace.⁵⁶ God gives us uprightness of will, not because He must, but as a free gift—He bestows this grace on us so that we might reach salvation.

According to Anselm, then, we come to possess uprightness of will, which is necessary for us to will rightly, only by the grace of God. Now, once God gives uprightness of will to us, we are free to choose whether or not to will rightly. If we choose to will rightly, that is, if we choose to will as we ought to will in order to maintain our uprightness of will, then we increase our uprightness of will and power for justice.⁵⁷ If we choose not to will rightly, then we lose (again) our uprightness of will, and subsequently lose our ability to will rightly. The maintenance

⁵³ De Concordia, S. 3.3, p 455.

⁵⁴ De Concordia, S. 3.3, p. 454.

⁵⁵ De Concordia, S. 3.3, p. 455.

⁵⁶ De Concordia, S. 3.3, p. 455.

⁵⁷ De Concordia, S. 3.3, p. 455, S. 3.4, p. 456-7.

of uprightness of will, then, is clearly dependent on our free choice. However, it is also dependent on grace to a large extent, because “one cannot have it at all except by grace.”⁵⁸ So there is a sense in which the achievement of our *telos* hangs entirely on grace, because without grace, we would have no chance at all of accomplishing that for which we were made. And furthermore, Anselm argues, grace “assists free will” in various ways “when it is prevailed upon to surrender the received uprightness,” specifically by both increasing our love of justice and by lessening temptation’s hold on us.⁵⁹ So, while we can choose whether or not to will rightly, our willing rightly, Anselm thinks, should be attributed more to grace than to free will, because without grace, it would be altogether impossible. Grace is antecedently necessary for right willing because it gives us uprightness of will, and it is also subsequently necessary for right willing because it helps us to overcome various temptations to will wrongly, which would lead to us losing our uprightness of will and thus our ability to will rightly.

III.c. Fitting Everything Together

Overall, it is clear that, for Anselm, grace both enables and furthers right willing. Grace gives us uprightness of will, which enables us to will rightly. The more we will rightly, the more grace suffuses us, and the closer we come to being “free of all injustice,” that is, to achieving our *telos*.⁶⁰ Grace and right willing, like belief and understanding, seem to support and compound each other in what can be considered as a sort of positive feedback loop, or, as I have suggested earlier, a sort of upward spiral. Having established this, our task now is to get a firm grip on exactly how grace and right willing fit into the developmental process of rehabilitation with belief and understanding. I shall argue that all four fit together to form an upward spiral that, as

⁵⁸ De Concordia, S. 3.4, p. 456.

⁵⁹ De Concordia, S. 3.4, p. 456.

⁶⁰ De Concordia, S. 3.4, p. 457.

one travels up its loops, or steps, leads one towards loving and understanding God. To be engaged in this rehabilitative process, that is, to be traveling up the spiral, one must believe, understand properly, rightly will, and have been given the gift of grace. However, because it is a spiraling process, one need not do each of these in any particular order; as I have tried to suggest, each grows out of, complements, and compounds the others. The starting point, as we have seen and will see again, is grace, but from that starting point, the process does not follow a linear path, but rather spirals upward in whatever way is best suited to the individual person who is engaged in the process, i.e. who is attempting to ascend the spiral. So, while grace, right willing, understanding, and belief are all jointly necessary to achieve our *telos*, it is not the case that we must attain belief, right willing, and understanding in some particular order.

Hopefully, this overview of my understanding of the rehabilitative process will make clear the direction of the remainder of this paper. In order to demonstrate that this picture is correct, I shall argue that the other most plausible interpretation of Anselm, which takes him to be claiming that right willing is a necessary prerequisite for belief and understanding, cannot be correct. While there may be other interpretations of Anselm available, I shall confine my efforts to denying this one interpretation in favor of my own, and shall also, in my final section, offer some independent reasons for accepting my interpretation. That said, let us consider why a reader, on first glance, might make the error of taking Anselm to be saying that right willing is a necessary prerequisite for belief and understanding.

To begin with, as I have already suggested, it seems fairly clear from the text that you must will rightly in order to be engaged in the rehabilitative process at all. This is in line with Anselm's claim that right willing is necessary for being "upright of heart," and is also supported by two other claims he makes, a) that "someone ought not to be said to have right understanding

unless that person rightly wills as a result of it” and b) that “people have nothing but a dead faith unless they rightly will in accordance with that faith to bring about that for which faith was given them.”⁶¹ Unless a person rightly wills, then, it seems that she has neither right understanding nor live faith, i.e., belief.⁶² Right willing, according to this set of claims, is needed for both. So, we can see that a plausible reading of Anselm here is that he views right willing to be a necessary prerequisite for both belief and the proper, full understanding that we discussed above. However, while I think that it is correct to say that you must will rightly in order to be engaged in the rehabilitative process, to say that right willing is a necessary prerequisite for belief and understanding cannot be correct, specifically because it does not allow us to make sense of someone’s having dead faith and because of further claims that Anselm makes regarding the necessity of right understanding for right willing.

Let us look first at the person with dead faith. This is a person, according to Anselm, who does not rightly will in accordance with her belief. Despite believing, she does not will rightly, and so her belief is dead, that is, there is something wrong with it. Specifically, what is wrong with it is that it does not lead its holder to rightly will in accordance with it; it is “non-productive” belief.⁶³ The key thing to notice here is that Anselm does not deny that this person *has* belief; rather, he makes a claim about the nature of her belief. If it were the case that right willing was a necessary prerequisite for belief, it seems that the correct thing for Anselm to say at this point would be that the person who does not rightly will as a result of her belief does not, in fact, have belief at all. But Anselm does not say this; instead, he allows that she has belief, but asserts that there is something wrong with it, namely, that it does not lead the person who has it

⁶¹ De Concordia, S. 3.2, p. 454.

⁶² I understand ‘faith’ and ‘belief’ to be synonymous here. Although it sounds odd to our ear to call a belief dead, I think that we can make sense of it by bearing in mind that Anselm is considering specifically religious beliefs. More details can be found in my discussion of the person who has dead faith.

⁶³ Monologion, S. 78, p. 79.

to “produce a whole host of works.”⁶⁴ Considered in this light, right willing appears to be evidence for the existence of right belief, rather than a prerequisite for the existence of any belief at all. If you rightly will in accordance with your belief, then you have right belief; if you do not rightly will in accordance with your belief, it is not necessarily the case that you do not have any belief at all, but it is the case that you have wrong belief, i.e., dead faith. This is what Anselm seems to be pointing to when he writes that “the faith that merely believes what it ought to believe is dead [while] the faith that believes in what it ought to believe in is alive.”⁶⁵ Anselm is here distinguishing between two different sorts of belief on the basis of their consequences. That sort which leads to right willing, we can conclude, is right belief. And of course, right belief is the kind of belief that one who is attempting to rehabilitate her damaged nature ought to strive to have. Nevertheless, this is not to say that the person with dead faith, who does not rightly will as a result of her belief, does not have any belief at all; rather, it is to say that right willing must accompany belief if any progress is to be made towards achieving our *telos* of loving and understanding God. Although right willing is not a prerequisite for belief, right willing must be present alongside belief if the person who holds the belief is to ascend the developmental spiral. This is the sense in which right willing is necessary for one to be engaged in the rehabilitative process; it is not that right willing must come first in order for the process to begin, but rather that right willing must accompany belief if any *progress* up the spiraling process is to be made.

To sum up, it seems clear, contra the interpretation of Anselm which understands right willing to be a necessary prerequisite for belief, that the person with dead faith believes. My interpretation, by separating engagement in the rehabilitative process from simply believing, makes sense of both how the person with dead faith can be said to have belief at all and the claim

⁶⁴ Monologion, S. 78, p. 79.

⁶⁵ Monologion, S. 78, p. 79.

that right willing is necessary to be engaged in the process of repairing one's damaged nature. So, given the existence of the person with dead faith, there is at least some reason to think that right willing, although it *ought* to accompany belief, is not a necessary prerequisite for belief. And furthermore, when we consider Anselm's explanation of how we begin to understand and believe, it seems that we should conclude that right willing is not a necessary prerequisite for understanding, either. As Anselm points out, we cannot will that of which we have no conception. He writes that "no one can will something not first conceived in the mind...no one can will rightly without knowing what ought to be believed."⁶⁶ Without a conception of what we ought to will, it is impossible to will rightly.⁶⁷ And what we ought to will, as we saw earlier, is the fulfillment of our *telos*, that is, we ought to will to believe in, contemplate, and love God.⁶⁸ So it seems that we must have at least some understanding, or concept, of God before we are able to will rightly, to will to believe in God.

Now, in order to see how both claims, that understanding is needed for right willing and that right willing is needed for understanding, can be true, we must make use of the distinction I made earlier between the minimal understanding of the Fool and the proper understanding of one who is engaged in the rehabilitative process. The sort of understanding necessary for right willing to even be possible is the minimal understanding of the Fool. Of course, as we saw in the case of the Fool, having such understanding does not guarantee right willing, but it at least makes right willing possible. The Fool, if he were to carefully think through his understanding, could (and should, Anselm contends) come to will to believe in God, that is, to will as he ought.⁶⁹ If the Fool did not have the concept at all, though, he would be incapable of right willing—as Anselm

⁶⁶ De Concordia, S. 3.6, p. 459.

⁶⁷ On Truth, S. 12, p. 168-9.

⁶⁸ Part of willing rightly is to will to believe in God. "To will to believe what ought to be believed is to will rightly." De Concordia, S. 3.6, p. 459.

⁶⁹ Proslogion, S. 3-4, p. 88-9.

writes, “the mental concept alone,” while not enough, is “an essential condition.”⁷⁰ So minimal understanding makes right willing possible, but this minimal understanding is not right understanding because it does not engender right willing. We only have *right* understanding, as opposed to minimal understanding, if we actually rightly will as a result of that understanding. Just as in the case of belief, right willing is evidence that we have right understanding and are making progress towards rehabilitating our damaged nature and thus towards seeing God’s countenance. That we rightly will does not make it the case that we have understanding; rather, it makes it the case that we can classify our understanding as the right kind of understanding, and furthermore, makes it the case that we can classify ourselves (and anyone else who rightly wills) as being engaged in ascending the spiraling process towards loving and contemplating God. In short, we look for right willing in order to determine if the other three necessary elements of the rehabilitative process are present not because it is a prerequisite for their existence, but because it is evidence for their existence. And the existence of all four necessary elements, grace, right will, right belief, and right understanding, is necessary for one to be fully engaged in ascending the upward spiral towards attainment of the beatific vision.

The remaining question, I think, is how we attain the minimal understanding that, along with the gift of uprightness of will, makes right willing possible. This minimal understanding, Anselm claims, is also the result of grace.⁷¹ That the Fool, or any nonbeliever, does not hear “mere sound without meaning” when told of God by her interlocutor, but rather understands what she hears, is due solely to the “seed of willing rightly” that is planted in her by God.⁷² We can understand this seed of willing rightly to be the seed of uprightness of will, which, as we saw

⁷⁰ De Concordia, S. 3.6, p. 459.

⁷¹ De Concordia, S. 3.6, p. 458-9.

⁷² De Concordia, S. 3.6, p. 459.

earlier, is given to us by God's grace. So we attain by grace both the minimal understanding and the uprightness of will that jointly make right willing possible. As Anselm says, "the understanding which issues from the hearing is a grace and the righteousness of the will is a grace."⁷³ So it is by grace that we understand, and by grace that we receive uprightness of will, and we can refer to each as a grace, that is, as a separate gift from God. This makes clear just how infused with grace the entire rehabilitative process is; without grace, we would never be in a position either to begin the process or to make any progress towards coming to see God's face.

The base upon which the rehabilitative process stands, then, is grace. We must begin with grace, but, as I have argued, once we receive the gift of grace, our progress towards achieving our *telos* takes the form of a spiral rather than a line. Interpreting Anselm as arguing for a linear process of rehabilitation that proceeds step by necessary step, I have attempted to show, is incorrect because it does not fit fully with the text. In contrast, I have argued that understanding the process as an upward spiral both makes sense of the text and is intuitively plausible. Seeing right will, understanding, and belief as mutually co-dependent and reinforcing (such that the exercise of each leads to more of the others), rather than as having some fixed order of priority, allows us to make sense of the existence of both the Fool and the person with dead faith, and also, interestingly, gives us a way of cashing out the intuitive thought that each individual person progresses towards loving and understanding God in her own way. If the process were linear, then it would seem that everyone would come to have the beatific vision in the same way, but this is surely not the case. Rather, although each person's progress towards God will necessarily involve grace, right will, understanding, and belief, the order in which these occur may well be different in each person. This is the sense in which each person comes to God in her own

⁷³ De Concordia, S. 3.6, p. 459.

individual way, and we can say this because we understand the rehabilitative process to be a spiraling, rather than a linear, process.

IV. Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued for a certain interpretation of Anselm, namely, that the process by which we rehabilitate our damaged human nature and thus come closer to achieving our *telos* of loving and contemplating God should be understood as an upward spiral. This interpretation, I contend, is both supported by and makes sense of the text. It also, as I mentioned briefly, gives us a way to account for individual differences in how people come to love God. I would like to conclude at this point by suggesting that my interpretation accords with Anselm's overall understanding of human development. As I began by saying, Anselm regards human nature as having a teleological structure; this is why we have an obligation to strive to see God's countenance. However, he also recognizes, as Marilyn Adams points out, that humans have several powers (of the intellect, emotions, and will), all of which need to be honed and coordinated if we are to progress in our search for God.⁷⁴ Anselm thinks we can develop these faculties through intensive work and study, but because we are "multi-dimensional," it is possible, and indeed likely, for our development to be "lop-sided."⁷⁵ That is, it is entirely possible, Anselm thinks, for one to be intellectually brilliant but emotionally stunted, and vice versa. However, just because our development is lop-sided does not mean that we are not engaged in striving to achieve our *telos*; rather, it means that, in order to come closer to achieving our *telos*, we need to even out, so to speak, our development. If we do this, we will be better able to coordinate our faculties in our on-going search for God. And, as it turns out, we

⁷⁴ Adams, 412, 424-5.

⁷⁵ Adams, 425.

can even out our development through study, prayer and work.⁷⁶

This picture of human development suggests that we do not develop in a strictly linear fashion, but rather take, by nature, a more circular approach. We work through the development of our powers based both on what we do well and on what needs the most improvement, always bearing in mind that our goal is the attainment of the beatific vision. This understanding of human development, it seems to me, fits well with an understanding of the rehabilitative process as an upward spiral aimed towards God because both emphasize the importance of holistic development and that seeking God is a lifelong task that demands full commitment. Keeping this picture of human development in mind, then, I think that it is clear that regarding the rehabilitative process as an upward spiral gives us the best understanding of how one might go about undertaking this arduous, but worthwhile and ultimately obligatory, task.

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⁷⁶ Adams, 411-3, 425.