

**ON ANSELM OF CANTERBURY.
TOWARDS A NEW DEFINITION OF HUMAN NATURE.**

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ABSTRACT: The current paper discusses the concept of human nature within the works of Anselm of Canterbury. In “Why God became a man?” the medieval philosopher explicitly criticizes for the first time in western European thought the classical Aristotelian definition of human nature as “a rational and mortal being”. This definition, according to Anselm, excludes the very purpose of human creation - eternal and blessed life - and thus it is not compatible with the Christian doctrine. He truly uses the definition a couple of times in his works, but he does so only in a strictly instrumental manner. At the same time Anselm has not left us an alternative for a definition of human nature or a broader analysis on the same topic. Using Anselm’s philosophical framework and his main anthropological assumptions I want to argue that following his works a definition of human nature could be redefined. Even though this could be completely done in a broader research, here I would like only to trace the connection between his main notions of freedom, truth and rightness (*rectitudo*) of the will and to suggest a possible solution for the problem.

KEY WORDS: Anselm of Canterbury, human nature, definition, freedom, truth, rightness, purpose, choice, mortality, immortality

In the end of his life – judging from Anselm’s biographer – we find Anselm answering to a question concerning his bad health condition in this manner: “However, if He (God) prefer me to remain among you, at least until I can settle a question about the origin of the soul, which I am turning over in my mind, I should welcome this with gratitude, for I do not know whether anyone will solve it, when I am dead.”¹ Unfortunately however Anselm did not have the opportunity to write such a treatise and passed away the next day.

¹ Eadmer, “The Life of St. Anselm: Archbishop of Canterbury”, T.Nelson, 1962, London.

We shall begin with a brief reference to two of the most important concepts in Anselm's philosophy – namely the notion of will and the notion of rightness – and their relation and interaction.

In his treatise “On truth” Anselm develops his notion of rightness – *rectitudo* – and through it Anselm explains the way that each created thing exists in the way that it was meant to exist. *Rectitudo* plays the role of the norm of the being of each existing entity. A norm that not just constitutes the existing entities as static presences but rather plays the role of a teleological norm to which each existing entity is headed during its existence. However due to some passages² from this treatise it can be noticed that not everything that is created is in perfect accordance with its own being norm given from God. And namely the rational creatures are those, who can abandon the rightness.

What distinguishes the rational creatures from the other created entities is the fact that the first have a soul which also has a specific feature - the will. Only through their own will rational creatures can fallout from the striving to *rectitudo*. Furthermore, through this feature only rational creatures can also keep *rectitudo* and here exactly begins Anselm's freedom theory. Freedom is defined as “the ability to keep rightness of will for the sake of this rightness itself”.³

This definition is provoked by Anselm's attempt to define freedom in a way that it would be plausible for all rational creatures – men, angels and God. And since angels and God do not have the ability to err Anselm seeks to define freedom – for God and angels are undoubtedly free – in an autonomous from the sin way. Therefore, neither sinning, nor anything that is somehow connected to sin or sinning, can play any role in the definition of freedom. Freedom is only the ability for a rational agent to be just and righteous. Justice itself is defined as “the rightness of the will kept for the sake of this rightness itself”⁴. Thus *rectitudo* manifests itself in the case of the rational will as justice.

Therefore, when the will is turned towards its own *rectitudo*, it is then turned towards justice. And both the will and its ability – freedom – are the instruments through which a

² Cf. Anselm of Canterbury, “On truth”, mainly chapters 5 and 9, dealing with some distinctions on a language level, that imply a strong discontinuity in the level of the being of things. (All quotations of Anselm's texts are made in accordance with “St. Anselmi, Cantuariensis Archiepiscopi. Opera Omnia. Tomus primus”, published by Franciscus Salesius Schmitt, Stuttgart – Bad Cannstatt, 1968, Friedrich Frommann Verlag.)

³ Anselm of Canterbury, “On the freedom of will”, III.

⁴ Anselm of Canterbury, „On Truth“, XII.

rational agent can keep the being norm and the being guarantee that it is given. In “Why God became a man?” when discussing how could Christ die, since given His divine nature He is immortal, Anselm does a minor excursion. He denies that mortality in Christ can come through the receiving of the human nature, because *pura hominis natura*, i.e. the pure human nature is not mortal by itself. If men had never sinned, they would have not become mortal and moreover when the dead resurrect for eternal life, they are not going to be less human.⁵ Adding the two already mentioned notions – (1) the concept of *rectitudo* as a being norm and (2) freedom – the ability to preserve this *rectitudo* to this statement that excludes death to play a role in defining human nature – may lead to the idea that simply through the righteous act itself the human nature is given the opportunity to keep its own being. And if humans sin, then they will become mortal and therefore lose part of their nature. Which means that human nature reassures and reconfirms its existence exactly as a *human* nature through the concrete just acts that it executes. And since the human nature is realized in individuals themselves (and something more – in persons) then it is not as if a quasi-platonic idea could continue its own existence, but it is each concrete person himself, that is given the opportunity to choose what shall be the destiny of its own, personal being – to be, or not to be.

This however, leads Anselm in a clear disagreement with the classical definition of man as a “rational and mortal being”. Aristotle’s definition receives recognition not only in ancient and Hellenistic times, but in medieval texts as well. And even though that it may seem Anselm accepts the definition in his earliest text this can be hardly the case.

There are some places, where Anselm quotes the classical definition. Once that’s the case with a chapter from his earliest text – *Monologion* - where Anselm clarifies how the mind perceives the universal being of things – *universalis essentia* – and gives the example with the human nature – *animal rationale mortale*.⁶ However here Anselm doesn’t even reflect on the content of this definition. He barely uses it just as an example for his thesis. Another passage where Anselm quotes the classical definition is in his treatise *De grammatico*. While discussing the specific status of some words which could be considered both as a substance and as a quality, Anselm mentions the definition for man: *animal rationale mortale*.⁷

⁵ Anselm of Canterbury, *Cur Deus Homo*, II 11, p.109 8-18.

⁶ Anselm of Canterbury, *Monologion*, X, p. 25 4-9.

⁷ Anselm of Canterbury, *De Grammatico*, VIII, 152–153, 32-2.

However if we follow the whole text and consider its purposes, we shall see that it has nothing to do with the definition, or the nature of man. The classical definition is used just as another statement that should ease the argumentation in the treatise. Together with other “self-evident” statements such as “Every man is, necessarily, rational”, “No man is more or less a man” or “No stone is a man” the classical definition for human nature is used only in terms of its formal logical legitimacy and widespread acceptance. However here again Anselm doesn’t bother to treat the content of the definition, but just uses it because it is useful enough for proving other thesis.

Furthermore, there are left other positive statements for the human nature, which play a significant role in Anselm’s thought. Example for this is a passage in *Monologion* consisted of 11 chapters⁸ in which Anselm deals with the significance of the supreme nature for human beings. After discussing the fundamental notions for the supreme good and the internal Trinitarian interactions, Anselm devotes a section to the rational agents and specifically to men, because “without doubt the human soul is a rational creature”. Here Anselm discusses what the soul may deserve according to its own actions. And after concluding that it could deserve either eternal happiness, or endless misery for being either righteous, or sinful, he says that it could receive this two states under one very important condition – the soul must be immortal by its own nature.⁹

If we turn back to the already quoted chapter from “Why God became a man?”, we shall see that Anselm adds to his statement that mortality is included in the definition of human nature from philosophers who do not believe that the whole human, *totus homo*, once was able or (even more) is going to be able in the future to be immortal. And this according to Anselm could be done only from people who do not accept the principles of the Christian doctrine, which includes the possibility that men can become once more immortal.

Apparently immortality plays an important role when speaking of Anselm’s anthropological thought, but the problem is to be said what kind of role exactly.

Therefore – concludes Anselm in “Why God became a man?” – mortality and immortality do not play any role in the true human nature, because neither of them

⁸ Anselm of Canterbury, *Monologion*, LXVII – LXXVIII.

⁹ *Idem*, Anselm of Canterbury, *Monologion*, LXXII, 82, 6-8.

does not create or destroy the human, but one of them relates to his misery and the other – to his happiness.¹⁰

Using this conclusion as a start point, I would try to explain what kind of difficulties exist when if we were to say that “man gives himself his own being” and also how exactly could be interpret this in accordance to other Anselm’s works and the thoughts of human nature, that he mentions there.

The first question which should be answered is – what exactly is “true human nature” – *sinceritatis humana natura*. The problem comes from the fact that this could not be considered as a strict term in Anselm’s texts. When Anselm wants to speak about the true nature of some existing entity he usually uses the notion of *rectitudo*, as we already mentioned. However, there seems to be nothing that contradicts the usage of *sinceritas* as a substitute for *rectitudo*, given that neither happiness, nor misery can make the being be more or less being and therefore – the man to be more or less a man. The same thought can be traced also in a section from another late Anselm’s treatise – “The compatibility of God’s foreknowledge, predestination, and grace with human nature” (for easier referred just as *De concordia*). The will – as something that was created by God – is therefore something good, regardless of the fact is it willing good or bad. For a comparison a sword or the power for speaking are not good or bad with regard to the way they are used (because they are just instruments). The same way the essence of the will does not change accordingly to its right or wrong usage. Thus whether the will is just or unjust, whether it is holding fast to *rectitudo*, or abandons it, this would not make it to be more or less will.¹¹

However, falling out from *rectitudo* means failing in the performance of one’s duty, given to each existing entity from God with the act of its very creation. In the case of human nature this duty can be traced in a couple of passages, which lead to similar conclusions. Monologion’s chapter 68 states: “The rational creature was made to love it [the supreme nature]”.¹² The rational creature was made to love the supreme nature more than all other goods as far as it is the supreme good. And in order to do so, the rational creature ought to remember and understand the supreme nature and therefore to devote his entire ability

¹⁰ Anselm of Canterbury, *Cur Deus Homo*, II 11, p.109 18-20.

¹¹ Anselm of Canterbury, *De concordia praescientiae et praedestinationis et gratiae dei cum libero arbitrio*, *Quaestio I*, VII, 259, 10-17.

¹² Anselm of Canterbury, *Monologion*, LXVIII, 79, 1-9.

and his entire will to remembering, understanding and loving the supreme good – which was the initial purpose of it receiving its own being in the first place.

Moreover, in “Why God became a man”, Anselm clearly states – God created the rational nature so that it could be happy through enjoying Him¹³. He created the man rational so that he could distinguish on the one hand between bad and good and on the other between a greater and a smaller good. Additionally, man was created just so that it could always be able not only to distinguish the greatest good, but also to choose it and prefer it instead of other goods. And therefore the man, who is a rational creature, was created just in order that he could be eternally happy.

Through these brief examples we could conclude that the being of the man was created with a certain essence and nothing – neither sinning, nor right and just acts – can change the amount and quality of the being that it was given. Consequently, the being was not made with the purpose that it itself should be preserved. Therefore, there is a different reason for giving the human a being – a reason that exceeds this very being and with this exceeding the human himself. The being of a rational creature was given to the rational creature itself, (which is another way of saying that) the rational creature was created so that it would be able to exceed its own being and with this enjoy and love God. However, succeeding or failing with the accomplishing of this purpose would do no harm to the very essence of the created being of rational creatures. It would only affect his happiness or misery in the afterlife, where man will be fastened to the status that he deserves.

The nature of the human being is just an instrument and not a goal. Thus the rational agent is namely rational, i.e. is given the capacity to think not for the sake of this capacity itself. The rational agent should distinguish with its mind both the good from the bad, and the good from the better and consequently the best. Because namely distinguishing the supreme good from all other goods is the purpose for which man was created. Furthermore, only with the mind the rational agent can direct itself towards the supreme good and thus understand it and remember it. Therefore, the mind has not purpose in itself alone but its purpose – namely finding, understanding and remembering God – lies outside its own being.¹⁴

¹³ Anselm of Canterbury, *Cur Deus Homo*, II, 1, 97, 4-15.

¹⁴ Anselm of Canterbury, *Monologion*, LXVIII.

The very same could be maintained in respect of another property, specific for the rational agent. The will was not created for the act of willing itself. The will was created so that it can choose from itself to will good in the exact amount it was meant for it and thus to hold fast to justice, i.e. the will of God. But the will itself, even though it is something good, is not worth only for itself. It is worth only when it is used and used in the right way.

Therefore, man does not lose or gain his being with regard of his actions, but he only loses or gains his happiness. And we can see that the case with angels – the only other rational creatures that exist – is perfectly the same. In “On the Fall of the Devil” Anselm gives a linguistic argument through which we can consider that somehow and in some meaning we can say that the good angels gave themselves the justice in which they are confirmed. Even though they haven’t done anything that was not initially given to them as a power or ability by God, they did something that was in their own power – they did not sin. As a consequence they received from God the confirmation in justice and indirectly they gave justice themselves.¹⁵ Applying the same to the men we can say that those who avoid sinning would be confirmed in justice and thus in some sense they will have given justice to themselves.

However, the following problem occurs. If we say that the being of the human was given to him (i.e. that the human was created) only for the sake of exceeding this being itself (i.e. for exceeding himself) we would fall into a contradiction, which Anselm himself tried to resolve. The root of the initial Anselm’s criticism against the classical definition of human nature stems from the fact that people who condemn the human to be mortal, do not understand that he was made for an eternal and blessed life. And in attempt to solve this problem, I think, Anselm falls in another contradiction – the human must exceed himself. What however happens when he would have exceeded himself? Is he still going to be a human or not? Thus the main worry for Anselm seems to be left unresolved.

At least we can state this – even though Anselm never accomplished to complete a finished criticism on the antique definition and also never actually provided a better alternative, he succeeded in the following: pointing out theoretically that the current situation of the human being is problematic, contradictive and should not be taken for

¹⁵ Anselm of Canterbury, On the fall of the Devil, XVIII.

granted. Moreover – pointing out that the being of the human itself is not a goal. The purpose for creating the human being does not end with the very existing of this being. While in the field of separating the two different being levels – this of the Creator and this of the created entities – was enough discussed and debated, the problem for the human condition was still left untouched. The special condition of the human nature, which at the moment seems to be in between the other two levels, is simultaneously either both of them and with this neither of them. The man was created as all other existing entities and neither is eternal, nor is his being self-sustainable. However, unlike all other existing entities the man was created for an eternal and blessed life just as the status of his Creator. Thus the man *does not have* eternal life, but he was *made for* living an eternal life. The greatest accomplishment of Anselm is to show that in the widespread definition of human nature two notions which should be separated are combined, and thus the real status of the human was somehow overshadowed.

And still – if we seek to define a term for the human nature throughout Anselm’s works, we need to solve the problem with the current human situation between different being stages. The solution I want to propose uses Anselm’s notion of God and the being status that God has. Anselm explicitly devotes three consecutive chapters of *Monologion* to the well-known debate of the relationship between God and the concept of being. Is God Himself the Supreme Being, or is He the entity that exceeds every being, that transcends and constitutes the being itself? In the beginning Anselm states that while each substance has its accidents and its distinguishing features and thus change its form through combining and subtracting different characteristics, the supreme nature is pure and unchangeable. Therefore, the supreme nature is not a substance. It may be said that it is substance only if the term “substance” is used instead of “essence” because the supreme essence stands “beyond”, just as it is also “above” each substance. And thus God is an entity which exceeds every being.¹⁶

Each substance, continues Anselm, can be thought either as a universal, or as an individual substance. Thus the first one is that, which different individuals share as something that they have in common and the second one is that, which shares something common with other individuals. For example, a substance can be either the human nature, or the

¹⁶ Anselm of Canterbury, *Monologion*, XXVI, 44 9-15.

concrete human himself. However God cannot be considered neither as something that is shared, nor as something that shares common essence with other entities, and therefore he may be thought to be substance, but in a specific way.¹⁷

In the end Anselm concludes that it seems reasonable that because of his unchangeable essence God should be called not just existing, but the only thing that in own sense exists. “But surely what exists so unqualifiedly and what is alone in every respect complete, simple, and absolute, can in a certain respect rightly be said alone to exist. On the other hand, surely whatever through the above reasoning is known not to exist in an unqualified sense and completely and absolutely, but to exist scarcely at all or almost not exist, is in a certain respect rightly said not to exist. So according to this reasoning the sole Creator-Spirit exists, and all created things do not exist. Nevertheless, created things do not altogether lack existence, since from nothing they have been made something through this Spirit, which alone exists absolutely.”¹⁸

Taking this passage, I want to argue that even though the human being will exceed the being that it was given to use and which we can currently observe, he will not stop being a human.

When considering the reward for the human, who accomplishes his duty – namely to love, remember and understand God – Anselm states: “Given that the rational creature (which is useless to itself without this love) so excels all other creatures, its reward can only be that which more than excels all other natures [...] With what, then, does the supreme good reward that which loves and desires it if not with itself?”¹⁹

God Himself is the reward for the men, who desire and love him. Because “anything else would just not compensate the love or satisfy the lover. Nothing else would satisfy the desire.” Thus the righteous will experience immutable sufficiency, while the punished will experience insatiable need, because the righteous men will have subordinated their will to the will of God. Moreover – as God can do what he can do through Himself, men are going to be able to do whatever they want through Him.

Thus combining the notion of God as the being itself and the reward which should be given to man, we can conclude that men will be awarded with the being in its own sense, which

¹⁷ Idem, XXVII, 45, 13-15.

¹⁸ Idem, XXVIII, 46, 24-31.

¹⁹ Anselm of Canterbury, Monologion, LXX, 80, 24-31.

shall replace the being-instrument, which was given only to be used. The human will become human in the strictest sense and therefore there he can find his true nature.

Moreover, Anselm devotes an entire chapter from *Monologion* just to make a distinction between striving towards God and striving in God. In order to conclude that it is possible and even more appropriate to say that men must not just have an attitude of faith **towards** God, but to have faith **in** God, Anselm argues that is clearer to say that men do not strive **toward** God, but they strive **in** God, because “whoever striving for it (the supreme good) will arrive, will remain **within it**, rather than remaining **outside it**.” And there should be no possible way in which men are going to be in God and yet will somehow keep their semi-existing or even hardly existing being.²⁰

This, of course, excludes the people who are condemned and according to Anselm however they are not going to be not-human. Moreover, he denies the fact that a sinner should be punished through the destruction of his own being, because this would not be just. If the being as a sinner was turned back into non-being (namely the status that the being had before being created), then there would exist no difference between the case of greatest guilt and the case of no guilt. Moreover, it would mean that God would not make any difference between what can do no good and will no evil, and what can do the greatest good, but wills the greatest evil. So the despising soul will grieve in eternal punishment and experience insatiable need. But it will remain in its existence and it is needed to be a human, so that the punishment will be just.²¹

Therefore, if search for a definition of human nature, it should be found a common feature for these two agents, which are differing in an extreme and radical way. The blessed will subordinate their will to the will of God and therefore they are going to reach the goal they are willing. The condemned are going to be left in the insufficiency of their needs, but the very intention towards eternity and goodness, will not be abolished. Consequently, the only common feature that seems to leave is the intention of the will towards an eternal and blessed life.

In addition, however may be argued that if the created entities are “almost not existing” in comparison to God, then how much less the condemned people, which are going to be

²⁰ Anselm of Canterbury, *Monologion*, LXXVI, 83-84, 25-2.

²¹ *Ibidem*, LXXI.

absolutely denied from the possibility to be with the will of God, are going to exist? And how much more the blessed people, who will live with the will of God are going to be existing? Therefore, it may be said that in the strictest sense humans are going to be those who are unchangeably willing how God wills and the condemned will continue to be human, but just on the last spark of human nature – the intention towards eternity and happiness.

This however leaves the question about the difference between angels and humans. At the end of his treatise “On the freedom of choice” Anselm makes a brief quick distinction between different modes of freedom in the different rational agents. And here it is clear that there is a different kind of freedom whether it can be diverted from its current state or not. Thus in the chosen angels and man is present a kind of freedom that is inseparably fastened to justice, while in condemned angels and men there is a kind of freedom lacks justice irreversibly.²² Therefore the nature of angels is already distinguished from the human nature due to the fact that angels are no longer able to change their current status. Both good angels and demons once had the opportunity to choose whether to keep fast to justice or not. And once they have made their choice they can no more change their current state. The good angels, who preserved the rightness of will, are already fast connected to justice in a way that they are eternally and absolutely free and just. At the same time demons have abandoned justice and with this they have been condemned to eternal pain and punishment. In other words – they could never be able again to choose and will justly.

On the contrary, when Adam sinned, the human nature was punished, but not directly condemned to irreversible punishment. Human nature is given the opportunity to choose the destiny of its own being through the developing process of history. Thus even though both angels and men participate in the evolvement of the historical process, only men are given the opportunity to still change the status of their own being, while angels are already fastened to either happiness or misery.

However, we have to make clear one more question concerning the status of people who are going to be condemned to hell. The chosen men just as chosen angels are going to be irreversibly fastened through their free will to justice. Condemned people are however

²² Anselm of Canterbury, On the Freedom of choice, XIV.

going to be fastened to a status in which freedom could not be recovered. But as we said men can keep and strive towards justice only through freedom, which is the ability to keep the justice itself. Therefore, even though the condemned are going to keep intention of the will towards good, there are going to miss the intention towards justice. In Anselm terms, these are namely the two inner inclinations of the will – the inclination towards good and the inclination towards just.²³ However the distinction between the good and the just consists mainly in this that the just is only the specific quantity of good that the human was allowed to will. When men sinned they have not chosen something that is evil, but something that they should not have chosen. And they should not have chosen it only because this was God’s commandment. Therefore, the just is not something that is completely opposed to the good, but is only a right amount of good that should be wanted. Thus the condemned people are going to be left only with the blind inclination of the will towards the good, while the chosen are going to be fastened to the specific amount of good that they should will and therefore to justice. And this means that freedom is playing a crucial role in the very constituting of human nature not only in this life, but also in the afterlife. Condemned people are going to be existing as humans just on the very edge of human nature – a will that has an inclination towards the good and a missing inclination towards the just, which should be present. And namely this lack of justice which should be present is the last connection of the condemned with human nature.

In conclusion we may say the following. Anselm attempted an unheard criticism of the classical definition of human nature. Not only that the human is not just a “rational and mortal creature”, but he should use this being only as an instrument for achieving something that transcends this rational and mortal existence. Anselm acquired to split two notions which were badly mixed and with this the truth for the existential human situation was overshadowed. Moreover, he had left us enough passages through which we could be able to try to redefine human nature in a way that it shall include some important parts of the Christian doctrine, which contradict the classical Aristotelian definition. And such a new definition should try to neglect the current mortal situation that the human is mortal through the idea that the human is by God’s design immortal. The current situation in which we find the man existing as a mortal creature is only an accidental and a

²³ Anselm of Canterbury, *On the Fall of the Devil*, XIV.

substantial feature of his being. Man made himself mortal through his own will. However, this same will was also designed to be free, so that it can will just and rightful through itself. And that the soul wills what is just is another way of saying that the soul wills what God wants it to will. And He wills from men to subordinate their personal wills to His eternal and incorruptible will and through this achieve eternal and blessed life in loving and enjoying him. Therefore, even though the human nature is mortal, human nature is striving towards immortality through the free righteous choices. And since a hypothetical “one righteous choice that shall save humans” does not exist, it is each concrete just act, that moves the concrete person closer to his eternal goal. End exactly this intensity of just choices is what makes humans to be human. The more one is willing righteous, the more one is human. Consequently, the human being could be redefined as a volitional creature that strives freely towards immortality, through its concrete just and good actions.