Chapter 7

Of Human Hubris

Similarities and Differences

Genesis 3:1–6 recounts the first human sins:

Now the serpent was the most cunning of all the animals that the Lord God had made. The serpent asked the woman, “Did God really tell you not to eat from any of the trees in the garden?” The woman answered the serpent: “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; it is only the tree [of knowledge of good and evil] in the middle that God said, ‘You shall not eat of it or even touch it, lest you die.’” But the serpent said to the woman: “You certainly will not die! No, God knows well that the moment you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods who know what is good and what is bad.” The woman saw that the tree was good for food, pleasing to the eyes, and desirable for gaining wisdom. So she took some of the fruit and ate it; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.

Hugh accepts the traditional interpretation of this passage, in which the first man and woman, Adam and Eve, live in the Garden of Eden, where they are permitted to eat the fruit of all the trees growing there except the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Like the serpent Satan, Adam and Eve are intelligent creatures possessing reason and volition. Presumably, Hugh thinks that after Satan and the other rebel angels sinned through an inordinate desire for justice, Satan persuades the first humans to sin through the same kind of inordinate desire.

But there are also dissimilarities between angels in the primordial situation and humans in the state of original innocence. “God had
placed two things in man from the beginning, by which his whole nature might be ruled and led to the fulfillment of its end. These two were desire for the just and desire for the beneficial.”¹ Desire for justice and desire for the beneficial are reminiscent of affectio iustitiae and affectio commodi, the two volitional capacities Anselm attributes to primordial angels. Nowhere does Hugh explicitly ascribe to the angels a capacity to desire for what benefits them and makes them happy; he only ascribes to angels a capacity to desire what is just, which they can exercise either according to proper measure or contrary to it. Does Hugh extend his non-Anselmian account of primordial angelic sinning to the first humans? Or does he provide a hybrid account: Anselmian for the first angelic sinners, non-Anselmian for the first human sinners?

An answer emerges from what Hugh immediately goes on to say about the two desires that God places in human nature:

One, that is, desire for the just, He had given so that it might be present for the will. The other, that is, desire for the beneficial, He had given so that it might be present according to necessity. One, voluntary; the other, necessary. He wished that the desire for the just be voluntary on this account, that in it man might deserve either good, if he clearly retained it and was able to desert it, or evil, if he deserted it when he was able to retain it. God wished that the desire for the beneficial be necessary, in order that in it man might be rewarded either unto punishment, if he should abandon the other desire, that is the desire for the just, or unto glory, if he should retain this same desire, namely, for the just.²

According to Anselm, a rational agent can freely choose to desire justice rather than the beneficial as whatever will make her happiest, and hence she can choose not to desire whatever will make her happiest. But Hugh denies that a rational agent can ever avoid desiring whatever will make her happiest. He takes her desire for the beneficial to be nonvoluntary and no less a part of her nature than are human desires for food and water. Hugh thinks that a rational agent can only freely choose to desire justice either according to measure or inordinately. If she chooses to desire justice according to measure, then God rewards her by satisfying her necessary desire for whatever will make her happiest—that is, eternal beatitude. If she chooses to desire justice inordinately, then God punishes her by not satisfying her necessary desire for whatever will make her happiest, resulting in her anguish and frustration.³ Since both angels and humans are rational agents, there is no reason in principle why they cannot possess a