

“Be anxious for nothing”: Anselm on Fearing Evil

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(preprint of an article forthcoming in *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*)

Abstract. According to the privation theory of evil, evil is nothing. In *De casu diaboli* Anselm’s student-interlocutor raises three arguments meant to show that evil is in fact something: the argument from fear (if evil is nothing, there can be no reason to fear it), the argument from signification (if evil is nothing, ‘evil’ has no signification; if ‘evil’ has a signification, evil is not nothing), and the argument from causal efficacy (if evil is nothing, how can it enslave the soul to passion and cause it so much trouble?). I expound the account of language that Anselm uses to answer the argument from signification and the distinctions between justice and advantage and between positive and privative evils that he uses to answer the arguments from fear and from causal efficacy. I conclude that, by the time Anselm gets done with it, there is not much left of the privation theory.

I. Introduction

In chapter ten of *On the Fall of the Devil*, Anselm’s student-interlocutor raises an objection that is tediously familiar to all of us who teach the privation theory of evil: “I grant what you say about evil’s being a privation of good, but I also see that good is a privation of evil.”¹ Anselm’s student, however, unlike mine, offers some arguments for the claim that evil is in some way a *something*, not a mere privation:

For when we hear the name ‘evil’ there would be no reason for our hearts to fear what they understand to be signified by that name if in fact it signified nothing. Moreover, if the word ‘evil’ is a name, it surely has a signification; and if it has a signification, it

¹ *De casu diaboli* 10, 183 (I:247). References to Anselm are given by work and chapter number, followed by the page number of my translation in Thomas Williams, *Anselm: The Complete Treatises, with Selected Letters and Prayers and the Meditation on Human Redemption* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2022), and then, in parentheses, the volume and page number of the Latin text in Franciscus Salesius Schmitt, ed., *S. Anselmi Cantuariensis Archiepiscopi Opera Omnia* (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1946–61).

signifies. But then it signifies *something*. How, then, is evil nothing, if what the name 'evil' signifies is something? Finally, consider what peace there is, what rest, while justice endures: so that in many cases it seems that justice, like chastity and forbearance, is nothing but restraint from evil. But when justice is gone, what varied, troublesome, and multifarious feelings take possession of the soul; like a cruel master they force their wretched slave to be anxious about so many depraved and wearisome deeds and to labor so painfully in doing them. It would be astonishing if you could show that *nothing* accomplishes all this.²

There are at least three distinct arguments here, which I'll call the argument from fear, the argument from signification, and the argument from causality. The argument from fear is that if evil were indeed nothing, there would be reason for us to fear it. The argument from signification is that the word (or noun) 'evil' has a signification, and therefore signifies something; if 'evil' signifies nothing, it is not even a name. The argument from causality is that evil—supposedly the mere absence of justice—enslaves the soul to passion and causes it both anxiety and painful labor in carrying out depraved and wearisome deeds. That seems like an awful lot of causal power to be ascribed to nothing.

Anselm responds to the argument from signification immediately, in chapter 11, with an account of how negative, indefinite, and empty names have a signification without (directly) signifying or naming anything. The argument from fear and from causality are not taken up again until chapter 26, after Anselm has offered his full account of the creation of the angels, their primal choice, and the confirmation of the good angels and irretrievable fall of the bad.

The fact that Anselm postpones his reply to the argument from fear and the argument from causality until the material in those intervening fourteen chapters has been expounded surely means that we are to understand those replies in light of that material—he tells us so himself, in fact. And that in itself is philosophically significant. Anselm clearly thinks he already has a semantic theory at hand to dispose of the argument from signification right away, but he needs a good deal more apparatus to take care of the other two arguments.

Why does that matter? My big-picture argument, of which this paper is just a fragment,

² *De casu diaboli* 10, 193–4 (I:247).

is that the privation theory of evil in Anselm is not the same as the privation theory of evil in Augustine.³ The two bear at most a distant family resemblance, and interpreters are too often ready to read Augustine's theory into Anselm. It's understandable, because obviously Augustine is an important inspiration for Anselm and casts a long shadow over his work. But as a general point, it has not been adequately appreciated how creative, and even subversive, Anselm's use of his sources can be. And on this particular matter, the key thing to note is that Anselm's version of the privation theory of evil is rooted in a different metaphysic from Augustine's. It is much more nuanced. Perhaps most important, Anselm is clearly skeptical that a privation theory of evil can do all the work to which Augustine had tried to put it. In short, by the time Anselm gets done with the privation theory, there's not much left of it.

In what follows I look first at the argument from signification. What is the semantic theory that Anselm uses to answer it? Then I turn to the arguments of chapters 12–25 of *De casu diaboli*. What do those intervening fourteen chapters provide that Anselm finds necessary for answering the argument from fear and the argument from causality? And what do they, and the eventual answers, tell us about Anselm's distinctive version of the privation theory of evil? To state in a nutshell what I will proceed to elaborate, Augustine's privation theory is rooted in a general ontology of being and goodness, Anselm's in a specific metaphysic of rational choice.

II. The Argument from Signification

Here is what I have called the argument from signification in *De casu diaboli* 10:

Moreover, if the word 'evil' is a name, it surely has a signification; and if it has a signification, it signifies. But then it signifies *something*. How, then, is evil nothing, if what the name 'evil' signifies is something?⁴

³ See also my **Error! Main Document Only.** "Anselm's Quiet Radicalism," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 24 (2016): 3–22. Parker Haratine, "On the Privation Theory of Evil: A Reflection on Pain and the Goodness of God's Creation," *TheoLogica* 7 (2023): 35–58, offers a critique of the privation theory, responding to some recent defenses, and offers an alternative understanding of evil meant to accommodate the theological concerns that motivate the privation theory.

⁴ *De casu diaboli* 10, 194 (I:247).

Although this is the second of the student's arguments, Anselm replies to it first, turning to it immediately in the next chapter. Unlike the argument from fear and the argument from causality, which require a good deal of new philosophical apparatus to solve, the argument from signification can be answered using the semantic theories that Anselm has already expounded.⁵

In Augustine's *De magistro* Adeodatus and his father agree that every word is a sign, and something can be a sign only if it signifies something. Clearly, then, every word signifies something. They put this conclusion to the test by taking a line from the *Aeneid*—*Si nihil ex tanta superis placet urbe relinqui* ("If it pleases the gods that nothing be left of so great a city")—and trying to identify what is signified by each of the words in turn. The first word, *Si* (if), immediately poses a problem; but the second word, *nihil* (nothing), is even worse. Adeodatus proposes that *nihil* signifies what does not exist, but Augustine objects:

Perhaps so, but something you granted earlier makes me disinclined to accept this definition. There is no sign that does not signify something; but what does not exist cannot in any way be something. So the second word of this line is not a sign, because it does not signify something. And so either we were wrong to hold that all words are signs, or else it is not true that all signs signify something.⁶

We can recognize in this objection a distant ancestor of the argument from signification offered by Anselm's student in *De casu diaboli* 10, although Anselm probably did not know *De magistro* directly. He did, however, very likely know *De doctrina christiana*, in which Augustine sets out the account of signification that gives rise to the puzzles raised in *De magistro*.

Certainly Anselm knew the standard definition of signification that derived from

⁵ The exposition that follows depends for all of its analysis, and some of its language, on the account Sandra Visser and I offer in *Anselm, Great Medieval Thinkers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 34–7. Our account of what we call "negative names" (an umbrella term we use to cover privative, indefinite, and empty names) differs markedly from that offered by Peter King, "Anselm's Philosophy of Language," in Brian Davies and Brian Leftow, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Anselm* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 84–110, at 89–90, though our approach to Anselm's philosophy of language in general is deeply indebted to King.

⁶ *De magistro* 3, in *Contra Academicos. De beata vita. De ordine. De magistro. De libero arbitrio.*, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 29, ed. William M. Green and Klaus-D. Daur (Turnhout: Brepols, 1970).

Aristotle's *De interpretatione* in the translation of Boethius. "To signify," according to this definition, "is to establish an understanding" (*constituere intellectum*). That is, a word signifies because it makes you think of something; and what it signifies is what it makes you think of. That Anselm knew this definition is clear from the fact that he uses variations on it in *De grammatico* 14, the Lambeth Fragments, and (most important for my purposes here) *De casu diaboli* 11. This definition of signification, though not equivalent to Augustine's, poses a similar problem for understanding how *nihil* functions as a name or sign. If *nihil* signifies at all, it signifies nothing; but to signify nothing is not to signify anything.

Anselm's student, as we have seen, initially poses the problem, not for *nihil*, nothing, but for *malum*, evil. The discussion quickly turns to *nihil*, however, because Anselm initially responds to his student by reminding him that *nihil* is a name (a noun), and of course no one would argue that *nihil* signifies something and therefore nothing is something. The student (quite sensibly) says that *nihil* is every bit as problematic as *malum*:

An example that resolves one controversial issue by bringing in another is useless. For I don't know what nothing is either. So, since the question at hand concerns the evil that you say is nothing, if you want to teach me what I should understand evil to be, first teach me what I should understand nothing to be.⁷

The student then proposes a dilemma. 'Nothing' either signifies something or it doesn't. We can't say that 'nothing' signifies something, because "if what is signified by this name is not nothing but instead is something . . . then it is falsely and inappropriately called by that name."⁸ But we also can't say that 'nothing' signifies nothing, because that would mean that the word does not signify anything, and so it isn't in fact a name at all.

Anselm solves the student's problem by embracing both horns of the dilemma and showing how the two options can both be true. There are two ways of understanding the word 'nothing.' Taken in one way, he says, 'nothing' signifies something; taken in another way, it signifies nothing. He first claims that 'nothing' "does not differ in signification" from 'not-

⁷ *De casu diaboli* 11, 194 (I:248).

⁸ *De casu diaboli* 11, 194–5 (I:248).

something’:

And nothing is more obvious than this: ‘not-something’ by its signification requires that every thing whatsoever, and anything that is something, is to be excluded from the understanding; and that no thing at all, or what is in any way something, is to be included in the understanding. But since there is no way to signify the exclusion of something except by signifying the very thing whose exclusion is signified—for no one understands what ‘not-human’ signifies except by understanding what a human is—the expression ‘not-something’ must signify something precisely by eliminating that which is something.⁹

Thus, when we look at ‘nothing’ in one way, ‘nothing’ signifies something. It signifies the same thing ‘not-something’ does, namely, everything that is something—although it signifies this “by excluding” (*destruendo*) rather than in the more usual way, “by including” (*constituendo*). But when we ask what the significate of ‘nothing’ is—that is, what thing or essence is to be included in a person’s understanding as a result of hearing or reading the word ‘nothing’—we find that ‘nothing’ has no significate.

This distinction between the surface grammar of sentences and their logical form (to adopt more contemporary terminology) is not an ad hoc move to save Anselm’s account of the use and signification of *nihil*, but a fairly common feature of language. As Anselm puts it, “the form of an expression often doesn’t match the way things are in reality.”¹⁰ ‘To fear’ is an active verb, but fearing is passive. ‘Nothing’ functions grammatically like a name, but it does not name anything; it has no significate.¹¹

In the Lambeth Fragments Anselm offers a distinction that enables him to make this account clearer and to show how it fits into the broadly Boethian semantics that he accepts:

To establish an understanding is not the same as to establish something in the understanding. ‘Not-man’ establishes an understanding because it makes someone who hears it understand that man is not contained in, but excluded from, the signification of this word. It does not, however, establish something in the understanding that is the

⁹ *De casu diaboli* 11, 195 (I:249).

¹⁰ *De casu diaboli* 11, 196 (I:250): *Multa quippe dicuntur secundum formam quae non sunt secundum rem* (more literally, “Many things are said according to form that are not [so] according to reality.”)

¹¹ If *nomen* did not have to do duty in Latin for both ‘name’ and ‘noun,’ Anselm could say that ‘nothing’ functions like a noun but is not a name.

significate of this word, in the way that 'man' establishes a certain conception of that which this name signifies. In this way 'injustice' excludes required justice and does not posit anything else, and 'nothing' excludes something and does not posit anything in the understanding.¹²

To establish something in the understanding is to cause a conception of the thing that is the significate of the term. Negative names do not do this, for those names have no significate and therefore no corresponding conception in the mind. Yet they do establish an understanding: they convey informational content. In this way there can be signification without a significate, and we can speak meaningfully — significantly — of evil even though evil is, strictly speaking, nothing.¹³

III. The argument from fear and the argument from causality: philosophical underpinnings

Anselm's answer to both the argument from fear and the argument from causality rests on the distinction between justice and advantage that he draws in his analysis of the primal angelic choice. He treats justice and advantage as two irreducible classes of goods; it is possible to will one without willing the other, and indeed the angels who fell did so because they chose advantage over justice. Corresponding to the two irreducible classes of goods, there are two irreducible classes of evils: injustice and misfortune.¹⁴

Injustice is always purely privative: It is the lack of justice where justice ought to be.

¹² Franciscus Salesius Schmitt, "Ein neues unvollendetes Werk des hl. Anselm von Canterbury," *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie und Theologie des Mittelalters: Texte und Untersuchungen* 33 (1936): 1–48, at 43 (Williams, *Complete Treatises*, 449–50).

¹³ As we shall see in the discussion of the argument from fear, Anselm qualifies the claim that evil is nothing; but *some* instances of evil still turn out to be nothing, and his answer to the argument from signification shows that we can still speak meaningfully of those purely privative instances of evil.

¹⁴ These claims are contested. I assume them without argument here because I have argued for them elsewhere (see, for example, my review of Katherin Rogers's *Anselm on Freedom* in *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* [<https://ndpr.nd.edu/reviews/anselm-on-freedom/>]) and because Parker Haratine makes a thorough case for the anti-eudaimonist reading of Anselm in his article in this issue. See also Eileen Sweeney's article in this issue, at xxx–xxx.

Anselm has already established that claim to his satisfaction when the student poses his objections to the privation theory—it is precisely that claim that the student targets in his arguments. But Anselm is very precise about his metaphysics here. His question is not just “What is evil?” but “What is the very evil that *makes* a rational will, or a rational creature, evil?” That is the evil that we say is nothing.¹⁵ Anselm is much more emphatic than Augustine ever is that an evil creature—from here on I’ll use ‘creature’ to mean ‘rational creature’—is ontologically on a par with a good creature. A good creature is no more a something than an evil creature, a good will no more a something than an evil will, and a just volition no more a something than an evil volition:

A good will is no more a something than is a bad will, nor is a bad will more an evil than a good will is a good. For a merciful, generous will is no more a something than a merciless, rapacious will; nor is the latter more an evil than the former is a good. . . . Now what I said about the will can also be applied to the will’s turning (*conversio*): the turning by which a will turns from stealing to bestowing is no more a something than that by which the very same will turns from generosity to greed.¹⁶

That the privative character of evil does not imply any ontological deficit in an evil creature, an evil will, or an evil volition is striking.

Compare Augustine’s celebrated argument in *Confessions* 7.12.18 for the claim that evil is not a substance, that is, does not have positive ontological status. There he suggests very strongly that any diminution of goodness is a diminution of being. It’s not my purpose to argue that there is a real difference of doctrine, rather than merely of emphasis or expression, between Augustine and Anselm; but since the two thinkers are asking different questions, it wouldn’t be surprising if they return different answers, with different metaphysics to support them. Augustine is interested in the origin of evil generally. The privation theory vindicates the divine character while retaining the claim that God is the creator of all things distinct from himself. Anselm is not interested in the origin of evil generally, but in the origin of injustice in particular.

¹⁵ *De casu diaboli* 7–9, 191–3 (I:244–7).

¹⁶ *De casu diaboli* 8, 192 (I:245–6). I make the case for the ontological parity of good and evil choices, as well as their positive ontological status, at much greater length in “Anselm’s Quiet Radicalism.”

Injustice can exist only in the will of a rational creature, so Anselm does not need a general metaphysic of goodness and being, just an account of the goodness that can exist in creaturely wills.

That account of goodness makes very little use of the familiar Augustinian principle that everything is good insofar as it has being. In fact, that principle appears only in passing, once, in chapter 13. Anselm has at that point constructed an angel with only one will. That's will in the sense of affection, as Anselm will later clarify in *De concordia* 1.7, not in the sense of instrument (the faculty of will) or in the sense of use or exercise of that instrument (a choice or volition). An angel with only one affection will choose only what accords with that affection, only what falls under the description of the object of that affection, and the angel in chapter 13 has only an affection for advantage. That means he can will only advantageous things, which encompass all the things that the angel thinks can make him happy. He will will the "greater and truer" advantages if he thinks he can have them; if not, he will will "lesser things, even the very lowest, if he couldn't have greater ones." Those lowest advantages are "the impure things in which nonrational animals take pleasure."¹⁷

Once Anselm has reached this conclusion about what the hypothetical one-affectioned angel would will, he can address his main target, which (again) is not about goodness in general but about justice in particular. Is this angel's will just? No, because he wills advantage exclusively. Is this angel's will unjust? No, because he has not received the power not to will advantage. So whatever he wills, his will is good *inquantum essentia est*—insofar as it is a being, insofar as it has positive ontological status—but it is neither good nor bad *quantum ad iustitiam pertinet sive iniustitiam*—as far as justice or injustice goes.¹⁸

Moral goodness, in other words, is not transcendental goodness. The angel's will has

¹⁷ *De casu diaboli* 13, 204 (I:257). This is always the point at which I wish Anselm were less circumspect about engaging in speculative angelic psychology, because I would really like to know how that would work. If anyone can supply the deficiencies of my imagination and identify ways in which a disembodied rational creature could choose to wallow in swinish hedonism, I'd be genuinely grateful. But that's neither here nor there.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

transcendental goodness but not moral goodness—or moral badness, of course. The only reason for Anselm to make this glancing reference to the goodness that is coextensive with being is precisely for him to push it right back out of the way as irrelevant to his project. Now this by itself might not mark a departure from Augustine, except by way of emphasis: I'm genuinely not sure about that. But the way Anselm goes on to develop his metaphysic of rational choice—again, no longer a general metaphysic of goodness and being—certainly does mark such a departure. Because now when Anselm goes on to argue in chapter 15 that moral goodness, justice, is something, he has to find a different argument, one not based on any claim that a morally good creature has more being and therefore more goodness than a morally bad or morally neutral creature. (The first two hypothetical angels of chapters 13 and 14 are morally neutral. The final hypothetical angel in chapter 14, who has both affections, can be either morally good or morally bad, depending on whether justice is present or absent. That final hypothetical angel is no more an *essentia*, however, than either of the hypothetically morally neutral angels. And Anselm had already established before these intervening chapters that a morally good creature is no more an *essentia* than a morally bad one, and that a morally good volition is no more an *essentia* than a morally bad one.) Justice is something added over and above that *essentia*.

The argument that justice is something is—perhaps surprisingly, given the dialectical situation—an argument from causal efficacy: “when added to the will, [it] governs the will so that it does not will more than is fitting or expedient for it to will.”¹⁹ Justice must therefore be something, and indeed “something outstandingly good.”²⁰ The gift of justice confers an additional dignity on the created nature, Anselm argues, a dignity that remains even in the creature who spontaneously abandons justice. What we condemn in an unjust creature is not its being a debtor to justice—that indebtedness is a mark of the creature's nobility—but its lacking justice:

¹⁹ *De casu diaboli* 15, 205 (I:259).

²⁰ *De casu diaboli* 15, 206 (I:259).

Since nothing was added but justice, once justice is lost it is certain that nothing will remain besides what was there before, except that the justice it received made the will a debtor to justice and left behind, as it were, certain beautiful traces of itself when justice was abandoned. For the very fact that it remains a debtor to justice shows that it had been adorned with the nobility of justice. And it is quite just that what has once received justice should always be a debtor to justice, unless it lost justice by coercion. Certainly, if a nature is shown to have once had justice, and to be always obligated to have so noble a good, it is thereby proved to be of far greater dignity than a nature that is known never to have had this good or to have been obligated to have it.²¹

A lack of justice is no more something in a creature that is indebted to justice than it is something in a creature that has no such obligation. The absence of justice that calls for condemnation is a lack of justice where justice ought to be.

To highlight some crucial points before I proceed: Anselm has argued that good and evil creatures are both equally something, good and evil volitions are both equally something, but justice itself is something whereas injustice is purely privative. Whether standard privation theory can agree with the first two claims—about the parity in ontological status between good and evil creatures and between good and evil volitions—is not altogether clear to me, but this much I think should be uncontroversial. Classic privation theory is meant at least in part to deny God causal responsibility for evil, and (especially in its most anti-Pelagian guises) to withhold from creatures causal credit for anything good, including their own good wills. So the next stage of the argument should be a surprise. Anselm says that the good angels *made themselves just* and *gave themselves justice*. Granted, we understand this to mean that the good angels retained the justice God had given them, even though they could have abandoned it; but we can equally say that “God makes an evil angel unjust by not giving justice back to him even though he can.”²²

With 1 Corinthians 4:7—“What do you have that you did not receive?”—firmly in mind, the student objects that if every volition, just or unjust, has ontological status and is in that sense

²¹ *De casu diaboli* 16, 206 (I:259–60). The student is speaking here. Anselm replies, “You have thought this through very well” (*Bene consideras*).

²² *De casu diaboli* 18, 210 (I:263).

good, and everything good is received from God, the primal angelic unjust volition is received from God. Surely we can't say that God gave them their evil will. To which Anselm replies: Surely we can. God gives the angel the power to retain justice and the power to abandon it, and he leaves the angel free to exercise that power. Moreover, God could have prevented the angel from abandoning justice but didn't. That's reason enough to say that the angel received his evil will from God,²³ though we can equally say that he didn't receive his evil will from God on the grounds that God did not consent.²⁴

This conclusion is clearly not privation-theory orthodoxy. Although Anselm agrees with the standard Augustinian theory in insisting that the evil of evil volitions is nothing, he does not use the privative character of injustice to exculpate God or to deny credit to creatures for their goodness. This is a highly contentious matter and has given some interpreters fits, because "we all know" that Anselm is an Augustinian and a classical theist, and *of course* Augustinian classical theists hold that whatever has being, insofar as it has being, is good, and that God is the maker of all good things. Creatures cannot make; they can only mar.

Anselm disagrees. The bad angels bring about something with positive ontological status: their primal volition for advantage over justice. To the question "What do you have that you did not receive?" they can truly answer "Our primal volition" — though, as I've noted, it's true in an indirect sense that they received that volition from God in that (1) he gave them the power to will and (2) permitted them to exercise it. Worse yet (from the "classical theist" point of view), to that same question the good angels can say that they brought about something that not only has positive ontological status but is even morally good, that is, just: their primal volition for justice over advantage. They *made themselves* just or *gave themselves* justice, as Anselm does not hesitate to say.

23 *De casu diaboli* 20, 211 (I:265).

24 *De casu diaboli* 20, 212 (I:265).

IV. The argument from fear and the argument from causality, answered

Now that he has all this apparatus in place, Anselm thinks he has enough to answer the argument from fear and the argument from causality. Remember that there are two irreducible kinds of goods—justice and advantage—and so two kinds of evils—injustice and misfortune. Injustice is always a privation. Some misfortunes are also privations—blindness, for example—but some have positive ontological status—for example, sadness and pain. It makes perfect sense to hate and fear evils that are something.²⁵

That is part of Anselm's answer to the argument from fear. The rest of that answer is bound up with his answer to the argument from causality. When we say that injustice *causes* such troubles in the soul, making it a playground for depraved desires that the soul must labor mightily in carrying out, that's not a proper way of speaking. Injustice isn't anything, and what isn't anything has no causal power. What we mean is that *if* justice were in the will, the soul would not be a servant of those desires. It's like saying that the absence of the rudder causes the ship to run aground: properly speaking, what we mean is that the winds and waves cause the ship to run aground, and that wouldn't happen if there were a properly functioning rudder.²⁶ Depraved desires are the winds and waves of the tumultuous soul.

Depraved desires are something; they have positive ontological status, and efficient-causal power to go along with it. On Anselm's ontology they count as misfortunes of the positive, not the privative, kind. They do a lot of work too, both psychologically and metaphysically. There's not much work left for Augustine's venerable privation theory.

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²⁵ Anselm's acknowledgment that some evils are something requires him to argue that God acts properly in causing them (not merely permitting them). For a full account, see my "Anselm," **Error! Main Document Only**.in Andrew Pinsent, ed., *The History of Evil. Volume 2: Evil in the Middle Ages*, 121–34 (New York: Routledge, 2018).

²⁶ *De casu diaboli* 26, 220 (I:275).