

## God's Personal Freedom: A Response to Katherin Rogers

Kevin M. Staley  
Saint Anselm College

*This paper defends the thesis that God need not have created this world and could have created some other world. God's freedom, as it pertains to creating, is the freedom of indifference. Many object that such freedom is incompatible with God's goodness, wisdom, and perfect love. They argue that the freedom of indifference implies arbitrariness and a lack of a genuine concern for His creation on God's part. I respond by showing that even if the notion of "the best possible world" were philosophically coherent, God's goodness, wisdom, and love would not be compromised were he to have created a world that is less than best.*

Among the predicates ascribed to God in Christian spiritual, philosophical, and theological traditions, two are especially noteworthy. God is personal, and God is free. Whatever else the term "personal" means, at the very least it means that when one addresses God, as in the sentence, "Lord, you are my strength," the term "Lord" is in some sense a proper name; that is, one refers to something more than an office or a function; one refers to someone in particular and does not merely entertain a description that someone or other might fit. It also means that the pronouns "I" and "me" in the sentence, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt...you shall have no other gods before me" (Ex. 20, 2-3) have more than metaphorical force. It means that God, like any person, is somehow aware of Himself as distinct from other persons and things and, as the passage from Exodus implies, is liable to be confused with some other particular person or thing.

In this respect, God, as understood and addressed by Christians, differs remarkably from Plotinus' One, which is neither aware of itself nor of its difference from others. Self-consciousness, according to Plotinus, implies a duality unbefitting the absolute simplicity of the One. God more closely resembles Zeus than Plotinus' One, at least to the extent that Zeus was also considered by many pagans to be someone who was aware of himself as a person and as a possible object of direct address by other persons.

That God is personal, possessing both self-knowledge and knowledge of others, is a non-negotiable datum of the Christian faith in a way in which simplicity is not. By calling it non-negotiable, I mean, for example, that should one who is a Christian become convinced for philosophical reasons that absolute simplicity does exclude self-consciousness, then he or she must simply bite the bullet and conclude that God is not absolutely simple rather than jettisoning God's personal self-knowledge.

God's freedom is also a non-negotiable datum of the faith since being free is part of what it means to be a person. If God is personal, then He must both know Himself and be free. But just what it means to say that God is free or that God exercises personal freedom is a good bit more ambiguous than saying that God has personal self-knowledge. The reason it is more

ambiguous, I believe, is that our own experience of freedom is a good bit more ambiguous than our experience of ourselves as self-conscious persons distinct from other persons.

## II

In articulating the nature of freedom, human or divine, philosophers generally call upon one of three models, each of which has some correlate in our experience of ourselves. They are the freedom of indifference, the freedom of spontaneity, and the freedom of rational optimality.

Freedom of indifference refers to one's ability or power to bring something about or to refrain from bringing it about. Emphasis is placed on the fact that one's power is indifferently disposed to the alternative actions that are within one's power, a fact which is usually expressed in a counterfactual of the following form: if an agent does X at T freely, then he could have refrained from doing X at T. One is free iff one could have done otherwise.

Freedom of spontaneity refers to one's doing what one wants to do. Emphasis is placed on the conformity between one's actions and one's desires, that is, on the fact that one is not compelled to act against one's desires. An agent's doing X freely does not mean the agent could have refrained from doing X. It entails only that she does X because she acts on the basis of an interior want which is genuinely her own and that she is not being forced to act by some external constraint.

Freedom of rational optimality refers not only to one's powers and desires, but also both to certain features of the objects which are within one's power and to one's knowledge of these features. Emphasis is placed on an agent's realization of the rational preferability of what she does. Her doing is said to be free only on the condition that her action is motivated by the realization of its rational preferability. An agent need not desire to do X or have it in her power to refrain from doing it and yet still act freely as long as she explicitly realizes that X is the rationally optimal thing to do.

## III

Of these three models of freedom, the freedom of spontaneity is the least problematic for describing God's freedom. Surely, of anything which God does it is true to say that God wants to do it, that His willing arises from within, and that His actions are not constrained from without. Understanding God's freedom as the freedom of spontaneity has the added advantage of providing a relatively easy solution to certain puzzles that arise when one asserts that God is both perfectly free to do whatever He wills and yet cannot will to do certain things. That God cannot sin, or that God cannot create a world in which a rational agent would be morally obliged to torture innocents, need not compromise God's perfect freedom. As long as sin and injustice are considered contrary to God's nature, any restraint in regard to God's preferring them arises strictly from within God Himself and, therefore, cannot be conceived as an external constraint

which limits God's freedom. In acting in accordance with His nature, God remains spontaneous and perfectly free.

That God is all-good is another non-negotiable datum of the faith in a way in which freedom is not. If one is convinced that freedom requires that one can do what is evil, then a Christian must bite the bullet and deny that God is absolutely free. Anselm denies God such absolute freedom by defining freedom as the willing of righteousness for its own sake. Aquinas also denies God absolute freedom by arguing that God wills His own goodness by natural necessity (*De Ver.* 23, 4, resp.); and since God's goodness is identical with His wisdom, which is definitive of justice, God cannot, as a matter of necessity, make the evil of torturing innocents for fun a good (*Ibid.* Art 6; resp).

In spite of its advantages, understanding God's freedom as the freedom of spontaneity has its problems too. Its chief difficulty, as I see it, is that it renders mute a traditional distinction between the Christian doctrine of creation and the neo-platonic doctrine of emanation, a distinction which is based on God's freedom. By reason of its goodness, Plotinus' One overflows and gives rise to Nous, the World-Soul, and the material world. The One is not compelled to do so by anything external to itself. Though automatic, its overflowing is, according to the model of the freedom of spontaneity, completely free. If, therefore, it is the freedom with which God creates that distinguishes creation from emanation, then God's freedom cannot be limited to the freedom of spontaneity. It must include something like the freedom of indifference. Sokolowski puts it this way:

In Christian belief we understand the world as that which might not have been, and correlatively we understand God as capable of existing, in undiminished goodness and greatness, even if the world had not been. We know that there is a world, so we appreciate the world as in fact created, but we acknowledge that it is meaningful to say that God could have been all that there is. Such a "solitary" existence of God is a counterfactual, but it is meaningful, whereas it would not be meaningful for the pagan sense of the divine.<sup>1</sup>

Those who oppose attributing the freedom of indifference to God do so for two very good reasons. First, it implies that God is indifferent, which has any number of pejorative connotations: apathy, listlessness, lack of concern, impersonal detachment, and so forth. Secondly, to be indifferent and yet to choose implies that the chooser is choosing arbitrarily, that he or she is acting on a whim or a caprice, lacking seriousness of purpose. That God's choices, as Christians understand them, should be characterized by whimsical indifference is unthinkable.

In order to ameliorate the negative connotations associated with the freedom of indifference, one can insist that though free, God is not arbitrary, that God acts for a reason, and

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<sup>1</sup> R. Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982) p. 19

that, because He acts for a reason, His choices are characterized by commitment and seriousness of purpose. But one might go even further and argue that God's freedom is the freedom of rational optimality and that God is free because whatever He chooses He chooses because it is rationally preferable to any other choice He might make.

The difficulty in attributing to God the freedom of rational optimality is that the attribution is unstable and ultimately collapses into attributing to God one of the other two kinds of freedom, the freedom of spontaneity or the freedom of indifference, which can be shown as follows: Either there is a best possible world or not. If there is, then God, in keeping with the freedom of rational optimality, must create that world. But what it is to be the best possible world is a function of God's nature, which is identical with His goodness and wisdom. Therefore, God's freedom in creating the best possible world, the world He must create, reduces to a freedom of spontaneity; His creating arises freely yet necessarily from His own nature. If there is no best possible world, then for any given world, there will be some world better which is rationally preferable to it. If there is no best possible world, i.e., there is no rationally optimal thing to do. Since God has created this, He must have picked it from the indefinitely many worlds that are compatible with His Goodness. So, if there is no best possible world, God's freedom of rational optimality collapses into the freedom of indifference.

#### IV

In this afternoon's presentation, "Anselm on God's Perfect Freedom," Katherin Rogers argues for three closely related theses: First, she argues the historical thesis that Anselm, following Augustine, attributes to God what I have called the freedom of rational optimality: God must do what is best and there is some best to do. Second, she argues that understanding God's freedom in this way is philosophically more adequate than understanding it as freedom of indifference. Finally, she argues that it is religiously more adequate as well: "His [Anselm's] position accords better with the Catechism and is a more philosophically and religiously adequate analysis of divine freedom."

I question her historical thesis because, although I argue that Anselm must do what is best, I do not think there is compelling textual evidence to conclude that he understands the scope of this principle to extend over all possible worlds. That is to say, as I read him, Anselm simply asserts that if God creates some world, he must make that world the best it can be, but not that God must make the best of all possible worlds.

But my disagreement with Dr. Rogers goes deeper than this because I think that the notion of "the best possible worlds" is an incoherent one. For if the goodness of any finite, created world is in part a function of its participating in God's goodness, which is infinite, then it seems to follow that, given the lack of proportion between the finite and the infinite, for any good but finite world, some better finite world can be conceived. I consider this to be a deeper point of contention because part of my motivation in reading Anselm as I do is that I do not want to saddle him with a position that I consider to be incoherent.

But deeper still, I think, is our disagreement about the religious or theological adequacy of understanding God's freedom as the freedom of rational optimality. For if, as Dr. Rogers contends, there is a best possible world and God must create what is best, then God's freedom reduces to, as I have previously argued, to freedom of spontaneity. God is free in creating this world only in the sense that nothing external to Himself compelled Him to create. But God does not have options. Given what God is, God must create and He must create this world. Even the Incarnation is necessary; though God is not compelled by another to become incarnate, His becoming incarnate "simply follows from the wisdom and goodness of God."

Theological misgivings sound in my soul when I contemplate the implications of Dr. Rogers' position: the gratuity of redemption has been compromised and the distinction between the orders of nature and grace has been blurred beyond recognition. These misgivings send me scurrying towards understanding God's personal freedom as a freedom of indifference.

## V

What's so bad about God's having options? If God has real options, argues Rogers, then He would be indifferently disposed to creating a world containing nothing but cosmic dust and to creating a world like ours in which rational animals know and love themselves, each other, and God. But how, one rightly asks, can God, who is good, wise and generous, be indifferently disposed to create either of these worlds when the second is clearly so much richer and more beautiful than the first? And what account can God give for having created this world rather than the world of cosmic dust? The apparent answers to these questions are harsh. God is indifferently disposed to each of these worlds because, given the fullness of His own interior perfection and goodness, neither world can matter to Him more than the other. As to God's account for creating this world rather than a cosmic dustbowl, the answer is "just because." God exercised a completely arbitrary choice. God flipped a coin. The problem that these responses pose for understanding God's freedom as involving real options is a formidable one. Given these answers, God cannot be meaningfully described as a loving God. To quote Rogers again: "If God's love might equally have issued in a world of dust or nothing, then it is hard to see what that love means to us." I suggest that it would mean nothing.

That our God is a loving God is another non-negotiable datum of the faith in a way in which doctrines about the gratuity of salvation and the distinction between nature and grace are not. In fact, emphasis is usually placed upon salvation's gratuitousness in order better to articulate what God's love means for us. If one is therefore convinced that the gratuity of the Incarnation and Redemption requires that God's freedom is a freedom of indifference, and if God's indifference precludes any meaningful way to describe God as loving, then it is better to bite the bullet, concede that the Incarnation is not absolutely gratuitous and to accept whatever implications this has for understanding the distinction between nature and grace.

## VI

My contention is that ascribing to God the freedom of indifference does not compromise, rather it enhances one's understanding of God's love. My case for this thesis is as follows.

First, even if God's freedom is a freedom of indifference, it does not follow that God's love "might equally have issued in a world of dust." Such a world is pointless. Since God's purpose in creating is to share His goodness with His creatures and since part of God's goodness is His self-knowledge, whatever God creates must be able, in whole or in part, to know itself and God, however imperfectly. Creating a cosmic dustbowl is contrary to God's goodness and cannot, therefore, be among God's options. But it does not follow that God has no options at all.

Second, that God has options in creating does not imply that His decision to create this or that world is completely arbitrary, as is evident in those cases of human choice in which real options are involved. Imagine that on a crisp and pleasant Saturday morning you awoke without having anything in particular to do. You have no pressing obligations. The dishes are done, and the bills are paid. Two courses of action come to mind. You can go outside for a healthy walk or you can visit a local art museum. Each option is good in its own right, though each is better from different perspectives. You pick one. You go to the art museum. Your choice is clearly a rational and intelligible one precisely because aesthetic goods are real goods, and their goodness suffices to render your actions intelligible. Your choice is hardly arbitrary from the point of view of the good chosen. Your choice is arbitrary only relatively speaking, that is, relative to your not choosing the healthful hike. Such relative arbitrariness does not render choice unintelligible. If it did, then no choice would be intelligible unless one specified why one did not choose whatever other options one had. In like fashion, if there are innumerable many worlds that are consistent with God's goodness and are not consistent with one another (i.e., are not compossible), then God must pick one. But God's choice is not for this reason absolutely arbitrary; the goodness of the world He has created suffices to render intelligible His having created it. What more could one ask for?

One could, I suppose, demand an explanation of God's not having created any of those innumerable other worlds whose goodness would also suffice to render God's choice intelligible. But unless there is a best possible world, there is no answer. There is no reason. "This," argues Rogers, "seems (to me) to introduce a very disquieting arbitrariness at the heart of things...insisting on divine freedom of indifference with regard to creation reintroduces unreason at the very source of things." She is correct. God's choice is relatively arbitrary. There is no reason for God's not having created any of the innumerable many good worlds He might have created, were it not for the fact that He created this one. God's creating this world is not the result of a prudential calculus, a rational deliberation in which He sized up various possible worlds. God's creating this world is a-rational, or transrational, but it is not irrational; for the goodness of this world suffices to render His choice intelligible.

Is such a-rationality on God's part disquieting? Is it contrary to His wisdom or goodness? Does it make understanding God as a loving God impossible? Rogers and others think that it does; and it is for this reason, I contend, that they are motivated to argue that our world is the best of all possible worlds. If our world is best, then one can understand both why God would create it (because of its own intrinsic goodness) and why He did not create any of the other possible worlds (which are at best second best). I do not find such a-rationality on God's part disquieting, for which reason I am not so intent on defending the coherence of the notion of "the best possible world." In fact, I think it is incoherent, for the reason I mentioned earlier.

But rather than debate about possible worlds, I want to cut to the chase and address the question which lies at the very heart of our debate: Is the divine a-rationality which follows from understanding God's personal freedom as the freedom of indifference incompatible with God's goodness, wisdom, and perfect love? This is the question which Rogers rightly remarks "goes to the very center of the most heartfelt questions the believer can ask: 'What is God like?' and 'Why did God make me?'"

I do not think divine a-rationality is incompatible with God's wisdom, goodness, and love. In making my case, I will stipulate that the notion of "the best possible world" is after all a coherent one. I will suppose in addition that the actual world, the world God has in fact created, is at best second best. Finally, I will stipulate that the only difference between this and the best possible world lies in the fact that in this world an individual exists (let's call him Oscar) who does not exist in the best possible world because in that world another individual would have existed (Stuart) who, by reason of his poise, intelligence, good will, and the life he would have led, would have made that world better than Oscar's world. Unfortunately, also by hypothesis, Oscar and Stuart are impossibles. If one exists, the other cannot. But God is indifferently disposed to creating the best possible world and has opted to create Oscar's world instead. Oscar grows up to be a philosopher and, in a moment of prophetic vision, God reveals to Oscar that He could have created "the best possible world," but did not because Oscar would not have existed in that world. The question is this: If Oscar remains philosophically reasonable, must he deny God's infinite goodness, wisdom, and love? The answer is, as I see it, not at all.

God remains good. There is no injustice in His not having created Stuart; for Stuart is a "could have been" and as such he cannot be treated either justly or unjustly.

Does God remain wise? What sense does it make to choose second best when one could have chosen what is best? God's only reply in this case is that had He chosen to create the best world, Oscar would not be. If Oscar demands an answer to the question "Why me?," God's only recourse would be to point out what's good about Oscar. Were Oscar to understand the extent of his own goodness, God's decision to create Oscar would be in itself an intelligible one.

Oscar could still object that God has not acted wisely and justly in regard to Himself, that is, that God could have done better by God by creating the best possible reflection of His infinite Goodness. Does not wisdom require that one choose the best possible means towards one end?

Here God could only point out that creation is not a means to some further end at all, that He loves Oscar as Oscar, not for what Oscar can do for God. God's creating Oscar is not an opting for second best. Rather it is an act of loving Oscar for Oscar's sake.<sup>2</sup>

I do not think that at this point Oscar has any rational ground for denying that God loves him. In fact, he is in a better position to understand God's love than Stuart would have been. Had God created Stuart, Stuart might well wonder whether God loved him in and for himself apart from his role in making his world the best possible world. Oscar, on the other hand, knows that God loves him for himself. Thus, my initial contention: ascribing to God the freedom of indifference does not compromise, rather it enhances one's understanding of God's love. Since the freedom of indifference has the added advantages of maintaining a clear distinction between the doctrines of emanation and creation and of preserving the gratuity of God's redeeming incarnation, I consider that it is the philosophically and religiously more adequate analysis of divine freedom.

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<sup>2</sup> Thus, meditation on the worlds of Oscar and Stuart strongly suggests that were there a best possible world, it would be better for God to create a world that is less than best, for in such a world those creatures who know Him would be better able to appreciate the depth of His love for them. This is something of a paradox, to be sure; and it is another indication of the incoherence of thinking some possible world could be best. Aquinas makes a similar point as to why God might opt for a temporally finite rather than ever enduring world, given that either alternative is metaphysically possible. See SCG II, 35, 8.