

Anselmian Theism and Created Freedom: Response to Grant and Staley

Katherin A. Rogers
University of Delaware

*I thank Grant and Staley for their comments, both kind and critical, on my book *Anselm on Freedom*. I applaud Grant's defense of my overall project against those who claim that it is inherently anachronistic. In response to Grant and Staley I acknowledge that my terminology and language in the book was sometimes ill-chosen. However, I defend the thought that a choice does not have ontological status in isolation from the desires which led up to it, and I review the Anselmian texts which support this claim. I also respond to the suggestion that Anselm's four-dimensionalism is contrary to our experience. I conclude by noting that one way to avoid Anselm's conclusions, though not a move I find appealing, is to suppose that sin is less real or important than Anselm finds it to be.*

I would like to thank Matthews Grant and Kevin Staley for their comments, both kind and critical, on my book *Anselm on Freedom*. I appreciate Grant's defense of my overall project against those who say that you just shouldn't take medieval philosophers to be dealing with the same issues that contemporary philosophers address. I'm sure we'd all agree that it's important to be alert to the danger of importing anachronisms, and perhaps scepticism concerning the claim that the medieval and the contemporary ideas are the same or relevantly similar should be the appropriate default position until we have had a chance to study the text. But some scholars seem to hold that you can be sure, without ever consulting the text, that what the medievals said could not have been relevantly similar to what contemporary philosophers say. As Grant noted, *they* seem to assume that there are no perennial problems with answers in logical space, and no timeless truths at which all philosophers might aim. But there are deep difficulties with these assumptions. For one thing, the medievals predicated their work on the belief in timeless truth. If there is no timeless truth then all of their substantive conclusions are false and all of their projects failed. It may be the case that all of their substantive conclusions are false and all of their projects failed, but if so, let it be proven from the text. It seems dreadfully uncharitable to assume it as a methodological practice at the outset. Moreover, the assumption that it is always true that there are no timeless truths is self-refuting—which is bad—so let us be cautious when we think we see similarities between the work of the medievals and that of our contemporaries, but let's not assume such similarities could not exist.

Now, I do have to say that I think that Grant's comparison between the scholar studying the medieval philosopher and the teacher who can see more of good in the student's essay than the student's actual wording might allow does not really fit my relationship to Anselm. It is not impossible that, because of all the work done since his death, I might see a bit farther than he in the sense of being able to more fully develop some issue he addresses, but if so the more apt analogy

is the old one of the dwarf on the shoulders of the giant.

And so to Grant's and Staley's critiques. In that there is some overlap in terms of focus, I will address some of their points more or less simultaneously. There are two sorts of questions on the table. There is the historical issue of whether or not I am reading Anselm correctly, and the philosophical issue of whether the claim that God is the Creator Omnium can be reconciled with libertarian freedom as I understand it, such that a created agent's free choice is not brought about by God. I will be addressing both sorts of questions together since I take it that the two cannot really be separated. If the reconciliation is in fact impossible, that could be reason to suppose that Anselm did not attempt it. If Anselm insists that such a reconciliation is necessary, then he himself must judge it to be possible, and if Anselm takes it to be possible, then my initial thought is that he's probably right, and the question is just *how* to effect the reconciliation. And I do take it that Anselm sees such a reconciliation as necessary. So I do not back down on my basic philosophical and historical claims. However, I think, prompted by Grant's and Staley's criticisms, I can develop them more successfully, which will include my admission that in my book I spoke misleadingly and infelicitously at times.

Anselm is committed to the claim that God is the source of everything that has any ontological status, any real being. And I take it that he is equally committed to the claim that God does not bring about sin. That is, suppose someone, Fred, is a good guy and wants to do the right thing, but he is currently engaged in a morally significant inner debate between two, mutually exclusive courses of action, both of which he desires to pursue. He does desire to do the right thing, and he also desires to take something that doesn't belong to him, a sin. If I am understanding him correctly, Grant holds, and holds that Anselm holds, that within Anselm's version of classical theism it can happen that God causes Fred to steal rather than do the right thing. And here "causes" means that God brings it about by His choice and action in such a way that, had God chosen and acted otherwise in this situation, He would have brought it about that Fred would have done the right thing and not stolen. Whether or not Fred chooses to steal, he'll be choosing with or through his own will, but whichever option he chooses, he chooses because his opting for one over the other is caused by God. As I defined "determinism" in my book, this would be determinism in that the choice for one thing over another is causally necessitated by something causally antecedent to the agent, and the acts of the agent, such that, given that antecedent cause, the agent could not have chosen otherwise.

But as I read him, Anselm argues that it cannot be the case that God brings it about that Fred chooses to steal rather than to do the right thing. Why not? (Here I am using Chapter 8 of *De libertati arbitrii*. The chapter is entitled, "That not even God is able to take away rightness of will.") If God brings it about that Fred sins He, God, does so either willingly or unwillingly. But of course God does not act unwillingly. So He must do it willingly. That is, God must will that Fred should sin rather than will that Fred should do the right thing. But Anselm holds that to be

logically impossible. To choose rightly is to will what God wills that you will, and to sin is to will what God wills that you not will. "Therefore if God should take that oft mentioned rightness away from someone, [which is what He would be doing if he causes Fred to choose to sin rather than to choose to do the right thing] He would not will him to will what He wills him to will." To which the student in the dialogue responds, "Nothing follows more clearly and nothing is more impossible."

Staley suggests, at the end of his paper, that pointing to the ontological distance between God and man might allow us to say that God causes free choices, but I do not see how that move would address this problem of sin, as I have stated it. There is another way around the contradiction Anselm points to for someone who is willing to say, with Calvin, that God has an overt will, by which He commands people to do and refrain from doing things, and a secret will, by which He causes them to do whatever they actually do, including disobey His commands. So God, through His secret will, could cause the sinner to disobey what He wills Him to will through His overt will. Augustine may hint at such a position. Anselm never suggests it and given that he asked to have *De Veritate*, in which he argues that God is Truth, bound in the same volume with, and immediately followed by, *De libertati arbitrii*, I think it is safe to say that when he argues that it is just impossible that God should not will that someone should will what He wills him to will, he does not intend to qualify the claim with any suggestion of a "secret" will. God wills that Fred choose rightly. He cannot possibly will that Fred should sin. But He could not cause something unwillingly. So he cannot bring it about that Fred sins.

What to make, then, of Anselm's claims that everything including actions and even the turning of the will (*conversio*) are from God or caused (*facit*) by God? There are at least two key questions here: What do we mean when we say that something is from God or caused by God? And what do we mean by "a thing"? In response to the latter question, I do want to defend the position that what the created agent, from himself, contributes to a libertarian free choice has no ontological status. Back to Fred for a moment. (Here I am using *De casu diaboli* Chapters 13 and 14 with a nod to *De concordia* III.11.) Suppose God has given Fred only one desire, the desire to do what is right. In that case Fred willingly, that is, by his own will, follows the desire to do what is right, where "follows" just means he continues to desire and, if possible, acts upon the desire. Fred, his will as a faculty, and the desire to do what is right, all come from God. The power to act following from the desire, that is the systematic causal connection between the will and the consequent effects within the agent, such as the motions of the body when the will has chosen to do some physical action, this is all from God. There is no thing relevant to the choice which is not from God.

In this case, Anselm argues, although Fred does the right thing, he cannot be just (which is what Anselm is concerned with) because he wills what he wills by necessity since he had only the one desire. Now return to our original supposition about Fred. God has given him the desire to do

what is right, but God has also given him the desire for some benefit, knowledge let's say, which, it turns out by hypothesis in this situation, translates into a desire for a book which can only be had by stealing. Now Fred has two desires such that he could choose to do what is right or he could choose to steal. The "choice" here is just to follow and act upon one desire *rather than the other*. Suppose, as in the previous example when he had only the one desire, Fred does follow the desire to do what is right. Now Anselm says that he *is* just because he could have chosen otherwise and did not. That is, he chose to follow his desire to do what is right, *rather than* his desire to steal. In this case, there is a new thing added to the situation, the desire for the benefit, in this case knowledge. That comes from God. But I take it that that is the only *thing* that has been added. There is no thing, "rather-than-ness," no *potiusitas*. And even if there were, it was God who brought the options into being. So in following the one desire rather than the other, Fred does not produce anything new, any new being with ontological status.

But what about the choice itself, the decision to do one thing rather than another? I think it is plausible to hold and to understand Anselm to hold that the choice just *is* following one desire *over* the other. It is not, in Staley's words, simply a nothing. And it is known by God, though, of course, not in the first person as if He believed He Himself were doing it. But the choice is not some new and separate additional act. It is not as if Fred, when he has only one desire, engages in one act of choice when he follows it, while Fred, when he is struggling with the two desires, and finally follows one rather than the other, engages in two acts of choice. There is more involved in terms of the preceding, inner debate, but again, following one desire *rather than* another does not constitute more actions than just following one desire.

In the free will literature there is a lot of discussion of the "moment of choice", and I think it is natural on some libertarian theories to reify the choice as some separate and unique event. Sometimes people talk about the feeling of choice or the experience of choice, which might suggest that it is some new and special act beyond following a desire. Surprisingly little work has been done on the actual phenomenology of free will. To my knowledge there is none in Anselm. I do not find, in introspecting on my own experience, or in considering what theory of freedom fits best with moral responsibility, any reason to hold that a choice is some really existent thing above and beyond the following of a desire, and I do not see that following one desire *rather than* another generates some new being. What is up to the agent is that he follow one desire rather than another, but all that has ontological status in the process comes from God.

Grant charges my account with portraying the agent as too passive, in that expressing the choice as simply the "winning out" of one desire over the other suggests that the choice is something that happens in or to the agent, not something he does. And here I have to admit that my wording in the book was perhaps ill-chosen. In my present remarks I describe the choice as the agent's doing something, following one desire over the other. Even if, as in some of the examples above, the agent were motivated by only a single desire, he would *do something* in willingly

following that desire. It's just that he would not do something of moral significance since he would be following of necessity. The agent with competing desires maybe does a little bit more, in that he follows one desire, rather than another, and it is ultimately up to him which desire he follows. But it seems to me we can say that, while God causes the choice in the sense of causing every element of the choice which has any ontological status, God does not bring about the following one desire *rather than* the other. Thus it seems to me that, contrary to what Grant's "race" example purports to show, the claim that God is the cause of all that exists, in that He is its ontological support, does not entail that He is the cause of all that happens.

And I take it this is Anselm's position. In looking at the texts in the vicinity—often immediately preceding—the texts which Grant has cited as proof of God causing—*really* bringing about—choices, we find many qualifiers which support my interpretation. In *De casu diaboli* 20 (one of Grant's proof texts) Anselm points out that God may be said to do something when He refrains from doing something else. "Would it be surprising if in some sense God were said to lead into temptation when He does not free someone from it, in the same way He can be said to give an evil will by not preventing it when He could, especially when the power for willing anything at all comes only from Him?" "Therefore when the devil turned his will towards what he shouldn't, both that will and its turning were something, and yet he couldn't have anything that was not from God and through God, because he is neither able to will anything nor to move the will unless with the permission of Him who made all natures, substantial and accidental, universal and individual." In *De concordia* 1.7 he writes that, "And just as God does not cause injustice, thus He does not make any unjust thing to exist. Nonetheless he causes all actions and all movement, *because* he himself makes the *things* [my italics] from which and out of which and through which and in which they exist, and no thing has any power for willing or causing unless he has given it." The point that God can be said to cause something when He does not prevent it, and the point that He is the cause of actions and motions *in that* He causes the natures, the things, and the powers which produce these actions and motions, fits very nicely with my thesis.

If my interpretation is correct, then Anselm does deny to God the sort of absolute sovereignty ascribed to Him by Augustine and Aquinas. On Anselm's account, while nothing *exists* which is not caused to be by God, things happen in the universe—the sins of created agents—which He does not cause and which He would prefer did not happen. He permits them and brings good out of them, but He is not in total control. This is the inevitable conclusion if one takes as non-negotiable the points that sin happens and God is not its source. I argue that if we take the ability to make a creature which can act as an independent agent to be a sign of power, then it does not ultimately infringe upon God's omnipotence that He has chosen to set things up this way.

But what of Staley's points that it looks to be difficult to preserve divine simplicity and divine immutability in a universe where God makes libertarian free creatures? As Staley points out, I have tried to defend the compatibility in question, but I have done so by appealing to two, in his

view, dubious claims. First, there is a best actualizable world and it is the world God has made. I do not say ours is the “best *possible*” world. Given libertarian freedom, it is in part up to created agents how the world will go, and we have not done especially well. True, God brings the best out of our choices, but I do not rule out the possibility that, had we done better, the world would be a better overall world. The analogy between the concepts of a best actualizable world and a largest natural number seems to me not very compelling. Why think an infinite universe is intrinsically impossible? On the other hand, if, unlike the number series, an actualized universe cannot possibly be infinite, then there must be some story to tell about its necessary limitations. But couldn’t that story entail what constitute the minimum necessary limitations, hence allowing for a best actualizable, though limited, universe?

The other claim which Staley finds dubious is the view that the universe is a four-dimensional “block” in which all of time, what we consider past, present, and future, and all that is contained in all the “times”, exists equally. He asks what one is to do, “...if, on the plain evidence of the senses, one insists that the future is not?” There are at least two responses to this point. First, if you give me these three propositions—1.) God knows the future. 2.) Human agents have libertarian freedom. And, 3.) The senses give us an adequate picture of how the universe goes.—and tell me I can have any two, but not all three, I will certainly choose to drop #3. On the one hand, I do believe that the Christian philosopher has to take lived experience very seriously, since, presumably, our ultimate concern is salvation. (Not that seeking truth and wisdom isn’t important, but they would “bring no profit” to one who did not live in the presence of God.) But, on the other, the senses just do not seem to suffice, when the question is metaphysics. If they did, we could, perhaps, settle for physics.

Secondly, in this particular case, it is not at all clear to me that the senses tell us that “the future is not.” True, we do not, at some time t which we call the present, observe $t+1$, which we call the future, but all that means is that the future is not *in the present*, and we can all agree on that. Take a spatial analogy. While I am here in my office, I cannot observe my car there in the parking lot. I am sure my car is not here in my office, but it does not follow that my car does not exist at all. Later, when I go to get in the car, it will be “here” for me, and my—now unobservable—office will be “there”. But the fact that, at one temporal or spatial location, one cannot observe something at another temporal or spatial location, does not entail that the something simply does not exist. Moreover, the most viable alternative to four-dimensionalism is presentism, the view that all that exists is the present moment and its contents. The present moment is then, as Augustine describes it in *Confessions* 11. 15, the unextended point at which the non-existent future becomes the non-existent past. Surely the senses do not give us that picture, either.

So I think that it is possible to reconcile classical theism with libertarian freedom for created agents, although, as Grant and Staley have ably demonstrated, doing so presents a system in which there are points of stress and areas of weakness. I do not think that alone is reason to reject it, since

—at least judging by the evidence of history—any attempt at a systematic world view will generate difficulties. One final point to consider: It seems to me that a significant part of Anselm's motivation is his insistence on the reality and magnitude of sin—sin under his description as choosing what God truly wills you not to choose. One might almost say that his system is built on a foundation of sin. Could someone criticize the view by holding that it simply gives too much prominence to sin? Might it be better to water down our conception of sin? Doing so would allow us to say that, in the final analysis, God does cause it, and does want it to happen, perhaps to bring about some greater, but otherwise unobtainable, good. For myself, I find that I cannot root out the belief that sin is absolutely *bad* in the way Anselm understands it, but I would be interested to hear views from others on both sides of this question.