

Anselm on God's Perfect Freedom

Katherin A. Rogers
University of Delaware

According to the Catechism, "...God created the world according to his wisdom. It is not the product of any necessity whatever,...it proceeds from God's free will; he wanted to make his creatures share in his being, wisdom, and goodness" (section 295). Anselm and Thomas Aquinas offer significantly different analyses of divine freedom, especially freedom to create. Anselm holds that God "must" do the best. From the perspective of divine creation, setting aside the impact of creaturely free choices, ours is the best and only world God could actualize. Thomas holds that God might have made other, better or worse worlds, or he might not have created at all. I argue that Anselm's position accords better with the Catechism and is a more philosophically and religiously adequate analysis of divine freedom.

The most striking example of God's free agency is his creation of our world. According to the Catechism, "...God created the world according to his wisdom. It is not the product of any necessity whatever, nor of blind fate or chance. We believe that it proceeds from God's free will; he wanted to make his creatures share in his being, wisdom, and goodness" (section 295). But what exactly does divine freedom consist in? This is not simply an abstract metaphysical issue. It goes to the very center of the most heartfelt questions the believer can ask, "What is God like?" and "Why did he make me?" Anselm and Thomas Aquinas offer significantly different analyses of divine freedom, as is especially clear in their treatment of God's decision to create. Anselm follows the Augustinian, Neoplatonic line that God, in his wisdom and goodness, could not fail to do the best, and our world is it. It is important to note that Anselm is not claiming that our world is the best possible world *simpliciter*. Anselm holds that rational creatures have libertarian free will and so it is in part up to us to choose how good a world it will be. A world with no free creatures would certainly be a worse world than ours, but had all the free creatures in the actual world always chosen the good, ours might have been a better world than it is. Thus Anselm holds that our world could have been better, but from the perspective of divine creation, ours is the best and hence the only world God could actualize. Thomas, on the other hand, holds that God might have made other, better or worse worlds, or he might not have created at all. Though it is Anselm who allows for a sort of "necessity" in the creation of our world, I will argue that his position accords better with the Catechism and is a more philosophically and religiously adequate analysis of divine freedom. First a quick discussion of Anselm's view, then why it is preferable to Thomas's, and finally responses to some standard criticisms.

Throughout his work, Anselm holds that God "must" do the best. This point is perhaps most striking in connection with his provocative claim to be able to prove the Incarnation through "necessary reasons." In the first chapter of his *Cur Deus Homo* he proposes to show "by what reason or necessity God became man" (*quo ratione vel necessitate deus homo factus sit*). He explains his method in Book I, Chapter 10, "For just as in God impossibility (*impossibilitas*) follows upon the smallest unsuitable thing, so necessity (*necessitas*) attends the smallest reason, if it is not

outweighed by a greater.” And throughout the *Cur Deus Homo* he continues to speak of various divine acts as “necessary”.¹ But, of course, the term “necessity” often means compulsion or prohibition, and Anselm is careful to insist that this meaning cannot attach to God’s action. It is correct to say that “it is necessary that God always tell the truth” (*nesesse est deum semper verum dicere*), but what this means is that God is so truthful that nothing could possibly make Him lie.² It is legitimate to claim that it is necessary that God should complete what He has begun with respect to human nature (*Nesesse est ergo, ut de humana natura quod incepit perficiat*) but what we mean by “necessity” here is the immutability of the divine honor (*nesessitas non est aliud quam immutabilitas honestatis eius*).³ God cannot fail to become man and so the Incarnation is “necessary” in a way that does not suggest any sort of compulsion but simply follows from the wisdom and goodness of God.

One might propose that in Anselm’s view the “necessity” at work here is a consequent or “ordained” necessity such that, having chosen in some radically undetermined way to create us and our world, God is *then* bound to save us by becoming Incarnate should we sin, but that there is no inevitability to the original creation. This is not a view that Anselm expresses anywhere in his work. On the contrary, he consistently holds that it is impossible that God do less than the best, and seems to hold that there is, on the occasions at issue, some best to do. And there is at least some evidence that he would not abandon this principle when the question is creation.

First it should be noted that Anselm cites Augustine as his major influence. Augustine repeats the standard Neoplatonic line that the absolute Good cannot fail to create. In *De Genesi ad litteram* IV, 16, 27 he discusses the seventh day of creation, and holds that we are told of God’s rest so that we may understand that God has no need of creation. As perfect already He is not made happier or more complete by creation. Nonetheless, it would be inconsistent with His goodness to fail to create.

Of what good things could He laudably feel no need if He had not made anything?
For He also could be said to need no good things, not by resting in Himself from the things He has made, but just by not making anything. But if He is not able to make good things then He has no power, and if He is able and does not make them, great is His envy. So because He is omnipotent and good He made all things very good.

In the absence of evidence to the contrary, it is generally safe to assume that Anselm followed Augustine.⁴ And there is further evidence that Anselm holds that failure to create our actual world would mean that God does less than the best. He argues that there is a perfect number of rational creatures and then a perfect number of created natures such that “we dare not say of the

¹ For a list of passages in which God’s action is described as “necessary” see Rogers (Neoplatonic Metaphysics, 1997) pp. 65--74.

² *Cur Deus Homo* Book II, Chapter 17.

³ *Cur Deus Homo* Book II, Chapters 4--5.

⁴ Rogers (Neoplatonic Metaphysics, 1997) pp. 14--18.

nature of the smallest worm” that it is superfluous.⁵ And in *Monologion* 33 he says that God speaks Himself and what he makes in a single Word. But the Father’s begetting the Son is not contingent in the life of God, and if the creation of our world occurs in that begetting, then Anselm seems to be saying that God could not fail to create.

But doesn’t the claim that God’s decision to create is inevitable render the divine act of creation unfree? If freedom *must* entail indeterminately open options, then a choice that could not be otherwise is not free. But by Anselm’s definition, freedom does not require indeterminate options and in this, I take it, he is in the company of many if not most western philosophers, including Augustine and Thomas. Anselm explicitly rejects the view that freedom is the ability to sin or not, since he wants a definition which can apply univocally to men, angels, and God. But the good angels in their present state cannot sin, and God never could.⁶

I am not aware of any theist until the twentieth century who seriously suggests that God has “morally significant” freedom. The God of Anselm, Augustine, and Aquinas is the *standard* for value, and necessarily does what is best.⁷ Assuming that the Catechism is not wildly at odds with the classical theism of these pillars of Christian philosophy, when it says that creation, “...is not the product of any necessity whatever,...” this phrase must be interpreted in less than its broadest sense. God himself is a necessary being. In his perfect being and simplicity, he just is an act, and that act is necessarily perfectly and infinitely good. The question is not, “Does creation involve any necessity?” Obviously it does. The question is whether or not the necessarily perfect divine action inevitably produces one best creation, our world, which is the position I have attributed to Anselm, or might it have ended in some entirely different creation, or no creation at all, as Thomas holds.⁸

Anselm defines freedom as “the ability to keep rightness of will for its own sake” and being able to choose otherwise is not a requirement for this ability.⁹ Interestingly, Anselm does conclude that rational *creatures*, in order to merit praise and blame, must, at some point in their careers as agents, have been able to choose between radically open options. Created agents do need the sort of “morally significant” freedom that involves being able to choose between good and evil. This is the only way in which the creature, which exists entirely *per aliud*, can make a choice on its own. In Anselm’s view, in order to be free and praiseworthy a being must be able to choose *a se*, from itself. But God exists entirely *a se*, and so, while open options are very important in creaturely free choice, they are completely irrelevant for God. God’s inevitably willing the best due to His wisdom and goodness does not conflict with divine freedom.¹⁰

⁵ *Cur Deus Homo* Book I, Chapters 16 and 18.

⁶ *De libertati arbitrii* I. On Anselm’s doctrine of the univocity of language about God see Rogers (*Neoplatonic Metaphysics*, 1997) pp. 199--215.

⁷ It is incoherent to posit God’s actions falling short of his nature since he is perfectly simple. See Katherin A. Rogers, *Perfect Being Theology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000) pp. 120--26.

⁸ *Summa Theologiae* I, Q.25, articles 5 and 6.

⁹ *De libertati arbitrii* 3.

¹⁰ Anselm’s indeterminism comes out clearly in *De casu diaboli*. See my “Anselm’s Indeterminism” in *The Anselmian Approach to God and Creation* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1997) pp. 91--101.

Thomas, on the other hand, insists on God's freedom of indifference. That is, though God does not have morally significant freedom, there are options open to him such that he has no reason to prefer one over another, and he can choose among them. It is plausible to interpret Aquinas' position as almost the inverse of Anselm's. Anselm held that creatures need libertarian, morally significant choice, while God's freedom does not entail options. For Thomas, the created will voluntarily chooses on the basis of what it prevolitionally deems preferable, so the agent does not have literally open options at the moment of choice.¹¹ Were the created agent confronted with two equally desirable objects, it could not move at all, barring the introduction of some external cause. But this is not the case with God's will. "The divine will, however, which by its nature is necessary, determines itself to will things to which it has no necessary relation."¹² Thomas holds that, having once chosen to create a given world, God's goodness requires that he see to it that that world is perfectly ordered internally. So God does not have the freedom to produce an inherently badly ordered creation. But with regard to creation itself, God has freedom of indifference. He is perfect in himself and does not need any creation, so it is indifferent whether his perfect act should terminate in our world, some other world, or not end in any creation at all.¹³

But herein lies the problem for Aquinas' position. The Catechism says that "God created the world according to his wisdom...he wanted to make his creatures share in his being, wisdom, and goodness." The implication is that pointing to God's wisdom and goodness offers an explanation or a reason for why he made the world. But on Thomas's analysis, there is no reason why God made the world. That is, God had no *preference* for making our world rather than some other world or no world at all. All the options were indifferently good, and he simply chose. His wisdom might have issued in a world with nothing but cosmic dust, or it might not have issued in any created world at all. Thomas can grant that our world is a better world than the world of dust or nothing, but God chose it arbitrarily and he does not view his *choice* of our world as preferable to the equally open options of a world of dust or nothing.

This seems to me to introduce a very disquieting arbitrariness at the heart of things. No reason can be given for why things ultimately are as they are. One of the great advantages of theism over its ancient and powerful rival, naturalism (the universe is just atoms and the void) is that the theist can point to an ultimate meaning and purpose to the world. Insisting on divine freedom of indifference with regard to creation reintroduces unreason at the very source of things. The religious believer is inclined to give some content to the idea that God made the world including the believer, out of love. Doesn't that mean that God wanted *this* world with *these* people, to be? 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. There would have to be an overridingly powerful philosophical or religious reason to insist on God's freedom of indifference in the face of these costs.

One such reason might be the indisputable point that the rational creature owes an enormous debt of gratitude to its creator. But if, in his wisdom and goodness, God could not have failed to

¹¹ ST I, Q.82, art. 3, ad 2.

¹² ST I, Q.19, art. 3, Obj. 5 and response.

¹³ ST I, Q. 19, art. 3.

make us, then, the argument goes, we need not feel grateful. The underlying principle seems to be that gratitude is the wrong response to a benefit bestowed, unless the giver had the freedom of indifference not to give it. But it is hard to see what could ground such a principle. Even in human affairs it does not hold. Suppose you are glad to be alive and express gratitude to your parents for bringing you into being. If they should respond that they always wanted a child like you, it never occurred to them not to have children, and they are as happy as can be that you were born, I do not see why this should lessen your gratitude. But what if they should respond that not having a child was as viable an option for them as having a child and so in the end they tossed a coin? It came up heads and they had you. You are a good child and they are very happy they had you, but not having children would have been equally as good and they would have been just as happy had you never been born. In that case it seems appropriate that you would not be as grateful to your parents. Instead you should be happy about the chance outcome of the coin toss.

But this response to the issue of gratitude raises what is for Aquinas the strongest reason to insist on divine freedom of indifference. If your parents would not have been as happy had they not had you, then your existence fulfills some need for them. They could not attain their goal of happiness without you. But surely we do not want to say that God is limited and imperfect such that he needs creation to “complete” him. Aquinas writes that: “...God wills things other than Himself in so far as they are ordered to His own goodness as their end.” But one only wills something by necessity if one cannot achieve one’s end without it. God does not need anything outside himself to make him perfect, and so there is no necessity in his willing any creature. God does not need any creature as a means to his ends, and thus regarding creation God has freedom of indifference.¹⁴ (Given this argument it is hard to see why Aquinas holds that God “must” ensure the perfect internal order of a world once he has chosen to create it. Would making a world, but failing to order its elements properly leave some lacuna in the divine perfection?)

Anselm, following Augustine, rejects the underlying assumptions of this argument. God’s inevitably willing creation is not a matter of willing the means to achieve an otherwise unobtainable end. Creation is not a means to some further end at all. For the Augustinian, creation out of love is God’s willing the good creature to exist because it is good. Certainly all good is entirely derived from and dependent upon God, but God’s act of creation is an outward-turning choice, made not out of some need to perfect himself, but out of an abundance of wisdom and goodness. God loves our creation for itself, not for what it can do for him. Here the analogy between human love and divine love fails. Even the purest human love is rooted in a radically weak and limited being for whom complete happiness is a distant ideal. Human love cannot help but be self-serving. God’s love is identical with his necessarily perfect being, and creation does not add to that perfection, but rather expresses it. Being perfect love, God would not settle for the possible worlds of dust or nothingness.

But still, continuing the analogy with the parents, on the Anselmian/Augustinian analysis,

¹⁴ ST I, Q. 19, art. 3 and ST I, Q.25, art. 5. In discussing the choice of created agents Aquinas seems to advance a compatibilist position as a sort of third option between necessity and indifference, but in Questions 19 and 25 the clear implication is that God wills either necessarily, as in the case of willing his own goodness, or indifferently, with no third way.

is not one required to say that if God had failed to create he would somehow be less happy since he would lack the creation with which he is delighted. But the Anselmian rejects the question. If our universe follows necessarily from God's wisdom and power and goodness, then if God cannot or does not create, God is not God.

But even if we allow the Augustinian move disconnecting the choice based on wisdom and love from the satisfaction of need, problems remain with the view that God could not fail to make our world. It is hardly surprising that Aquinas attempted to eschew any hint of necessity in God's will to create, given the status of the question at the time. The Latin West had inherited the issue from earlier Islamic thinkers, among whom it had provoked bitter and divisive debate. Philosophers like Avicenna and Averroes had claimed that reason (a.k.a. Aristotle) proved that divine creation is necessary and, since God is absolutely immutable, creation must have been going on *just as it goes on now* throughout an infinite past. But no believing Jew, Christian, or Muslim can accept this. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are built around divine interventions in the course of history, acts of God which constitute watershed events after which the whole world is changed. The Aristotelian view entails that no new will can arise in God and so he cannot possibly step in and act in history. There are no miracles, if by miracles we mean direct interventions by God in our world, and God does not even know particulars in their particularity, for that would mean that his knowledge would change with changing events. Avicenna and Averroes accepted both of these consequences.¹⁵

Reacting to Avicenna's assertions regarding the cosmology that reason demanded, Algazali rejected both the necessity of creation and the immutability of God. God existed for a "time-like" past infinity before deciding to make the world. (Algazali understands time as a function of physical change, and so, although God does undergo changes of thought and will, he is incorporeal and so is "above" time as we experience it.)¹⁶ His choice to create was a radically free act. In response to the old question of why God would choose one moment to create rather than another, Algazali responds that choosing between identical options for no reason at all is the paradigmatic instance of free choice, and is the sort of choice that must be ascribed to God if we are not to fall into irreligious Aristotelianism.¹⁷

Thus at least one way of understanding divine necessity arrived in Christian Europe packaged in with related ideas which cannot be accepted by an orthodox Christian. If the doctrines of divine necessity and immutability mean that the world as it is now is the way the world must be and must always have been, with no great miracles that change the course of history, then there can be neither Incarnation nor even a personal and providential God. Anselm would be the first to reject such a view.

¹⁵ Oliver Leaman, *A Brief Introduction to Islamic Philosophy* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 1999) pp. 37-39 and *Averroes and His Philosophy*, revised edition, (Padstow, Cornwall: Curzon Press, 1998) pp.71-76; Bary Kogan, "Some Reflections on the Problem of Future Contingency in Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes," in *Divine Omniscience and Omnipotence in Medieval Philosophy*, ed. Tamar Rudavsky (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1985) pp.95-101.

¹⁶ Algazali's text is quoted in Averroes' *Tahafut al-Tahafut (The Incoherence of the Incoherence)* trans. Simon Van den Bergh (London: Messrs. Luzac and Co., 1954) p.38.

¹⁷ *ibid.* p.21.

But Anselm's system is immune to this problem. He accepts that God is immutable and that God could not fail to do the best, which is creating our world. This does not conflict with God's knowing and acting upon a changing world, as long as one adopts the right theory of time. Avicenna and Averroes were what might today be called "presentists." They believe that the present moment is absolute. It is all there is. Past and future are non-existent. God exists in the same present moment as temporal creatures. But he is not himself temporal since, as Aristotle has it, time is a function of change. God's "past" is gone and his "future" is not yet, but since he is absolutely immutable, he transcends time, and past and future do not have the application to his life that they do to ours. Combining presentism with divine necessity and immutability entails that at each moment God does the best and at each moment his activity is what it is at every other moment. Therefore the world has always been as it is now and will always be essentially the same.

Anselm adopts what is today known as "four-dimensionalism." (He is following Augustine, though he seems to embrace the view more whole-heartedly than his predecessor.) The present does not have any absolute and privileged ontological status. All temporal moments exist equally and what we call "past", "present" and "future" are relative to the temporal observer. God, not suffering the limitations of temporality, can perceive all time as "present", that is simultaneously "there" for him. Thus God, in his eternal "present", can know what happens in all of time, and act in all of time, and produce different effects at different times, without himself changing at all.¹⁸ So for Anselm, saying that God inevitably creates our world does not entail the unacceptable consequences which thirteenth century Christians would have associated with the idea of divine necessity.

There is a more telling criticism. Perhaps the very concept of a "best world" is just incoherent. If it is impossible that there be a best world, then God's wisdom would not recognize such a creation, and God's will could not possibly make it. The argument for this position goes like this: God expresses his goodness in creation. But God is infinite. All created things fall infinitely short of the divine and therefore the very concept of a best world is incoherent. And so we must attribute to God freedom of indifference to choose among all the ways of expressing his goodness, including not creating at all, since a best effect of his perfect act is impossible.¹⁹

It is important to note that this argument for divine freedom of indifference is not based on protecting some positive and desirable attribute of God. As I have put it, it does not contradict Anselm's premise that God would inevitably do the best, were there a best to do. When Aquinas is arguing against the occasionalists who say that God does not, and really could not, create secondary causes, he writes that their view, "would imply a lack of power in the Creator; for it is due to the power of the cause, that it bestows active power on its effect."²⁰ The same argument can be made about a best creation. Arguing that God cannot produce a best reflection of himself limits the power and goodness of God unless a best world is genuinely logically impossible. (*Pace*

¹⁸ Augustine had said similar things in various places, including in his famous meditation on the nature of time in Book 11 of the *Confessions*, but not with the analytic clarity found in Anselm. See especially Anselm's *De concordia praescientiae et praedestinationis et gratiae dei cum libero arbitrio* I, 5.

¹⁹ Aquinas says something very like this in ST I, Q.25, art. 5 and 6.

²⁰ ST I, Q.105, art.5, ad 2.

Descartes, God does not transcend logic for then we could not think or talk about him at all.) Is a best world logically impossible?

Any creature is finite and radically dependent on God. God's being and goodness is infinite and of a different order from the being of the creature. Nonetheless creation is a reflection of God. Anselm and Aquinas agree that some creatures are better reflections of God than others. The infinite distance between us and God does not negate the fact that the human creature is a closer reflection of the divine than is the insect or the dust. Why couldn't God produce a creation which provided, in its finite and dependent order, the most adequate reflection of the divine. True, it would be infinitely distant from the perfection of God, but still it couldn't be better. The Neoplatonic tradition held that the goodness of the created universe consisted in the plethora of creatures of different kinds and degrees of goodness. It invoked the principle of plenitude to argue that all possible kinds of beings must be instantiated in the world as that would make it the best. Perhaps this would make for a universe, infinite in time and space, with an infinite number of creatures and kinds of creatures. Such a universe is humanly unimaginable, but I do not see a logical contradiction or even a metaphysical impossibility. God could make it, and it seems a fair candidate for a best world.

If there is something contradictory about this infinite creation, then why not make the move which Anselm did in fact make. There is a "perfect number" of creatures and kinds of creatures. I find the notion of a "perfect number" of creatures somewhat strange, but there's nothing odd at all about "just the right number" relative to this or that situation. Why not "just the right number" relative to the universe as a whole? In any case, the idea has an impeccable platonic heritage. Augustine identifies numbers with Truth and hence with God, and waxes mystical about the significance of the numbers through which our world is made. Though the idea of a perfect number of creatures constituting the best creation may be strange, it is not obviously contradictory. But then we had better not say that we know God could not bring it about. Anselm and Aquinas agree that God necessarily does the best action. If it is possible that that best action result in a best effect, it is difficult to see the advantage of insisting that God could do less than the best. It is especially difficult to defend the value of saying that God has freedom of indifference and so could do less than the best for no reason at all.