

God, Creator of His Own Necessity: The Logic of Divine Action in Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo*

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In discussions of Anselm's Cur Deus Homo, the necessity of God's act of Incarnation is commonly traced either to the divine nature, to the divine will, or to some combination of the two. In contrast with the shared, theistic "possibilism" of these essentialist and voluntarist readings of Anselmian necessity, according to which God's possibilities for action are defined prior to and independently of what God afterwards does, I argue that Cur Deus Homo is best interpreted as pointing in a somewhat different, more "actualist" direction for the source of the necessity of the Incarnation. For Anselm, it is neither the divine nature nor the divine will taken in the abstract, but God's ad extra action of creation itself that principally defines and determines what God both can and must do with respect to that creation. In this way, far from God having to choose, create, act, or save from an existing array or domain of already defined possibilities or necessities, Anselm instead implies a model in which God is the sovereign creator of his own possibilities and necessities.

In discussions of Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo*, it is common for scholars to trace the necessity of God's act of Incarnation to one of two principal theological sources. On the one hand is what we might call the "essentialist" interpretation, according to which, for Anselm, it is God's *ad intra*, eternal, and immutable being, nature, or essence that is the primary explanation for the *ad extra* necessity of his becoming incarnate for the sake of saving a sinful human race.¹ In brief, it is who or what God essentially is that determines and explains all that God must do. On the other hand, and without necessarily denying an important role played by the divine nature in determining at least the *range* of God's possibilities, other interpreters of Anselm have nevertheless stressed the importance of a further, distinct operation of divine will or choice as the principal cause for why God saved men in the way that he did and not by some other means instead.² On this "voluntarist"

¹ John McIntyre, in his classic study, *St. Anselm and His Critics*, states well the "essentialist" interpretation of Anselm when he writes "that God knows no necessity except that imposed upon Him by His own nature and attributes," and of moral notions more generally, he says they are not "willed to be what they are, as it were, arbitrarily by Him. On the contrary, they are co-eternal with Him, existing integrally to His very Being." John McIntyre, *St. Anselm and His Critics: A Re-Interpretation of the Cur Deus Homo* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1954), 117 and 100. See also *ibid.*, 119 and 192-3. More recently, David Brown has made much the same point when he describes Anselm in *Cur Deus Homo* as "explor[ing] his faith in a God, the internal logic of whose nature, he believed, entailed His never failing to act beautifully and well." David Brown, "Anselm on Atonement," in Brian Davies and Brian Leftow, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Anselm* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 290, emphasis added. Likewise, Dániel Deme comments how for Anselm "it is impossible that any external necessity could influence or form the being of God, because the being of God itself is what creates all valid necessities." Dániel Deme, *The Christology of Anselm of Canterbury* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 97, emphasis original. For Deme's somewhat different and, as I shall argue, more precise understanding of Anselmian necessity, see below.

² Richard Campbell represents this "voluntarist" interpretation of Anselm well when he says, for example, that the latter "consistently argu[es] that the only necessity which can be ascribed to God is the necessity of his doing whatever he wills to do (a *de dicto* necessity)," such that "there are no *de re* necessities in God." Richard Campbell, "The Nature of Theological Necessity," in Paul Gilbert, Helmut Karl Kohlenberger, and Elmar Salmann, eds., *Cur Deus Homo: Atti del Congresso anselmiano internazionale* (Rome: Centro studi S. Anselmo, 1999), 429 and 432. Consistent with this is Jasper Hopkins claim that Anselm "concede[s] God's power to save the human race by means other than

understanding of Anselm, by comparison, the necessity of the Incarnation is at most an hypothetical, conditional, or consequent necessity, one contingent upon a prior act of divine choice among *other* defined or definable options that God might have implemented had he so desired.

Their differences notwithstanding, what both the essentialist and voluntarist readings of Anselm have in common is their shared assumption that at least the *possibility*, if not the actual necessity, of the Incarnation was something defined and determined for God prior to or at least independent of his act or intention of creation. Uniting these two accounts, in other words, is the same “possibilist” premise that God’s possibilities and necessities with respect to creation are things that are given *for* God, whether by his nature or by some other source, such that even if God has a choice among a range of possibilities, God himself exercise no creative control or agency over what those possibilities are.³ In contrast with this shared perspective, the argument of this article is that *Cur Deus Homo* may be best understood as pointing in a distinctly different direction for the source of the necessity of the Incarnation: not simply to God’s nature, understood as determining his possibilities and necessities prior to and even independently of whether or what he actually makes; nor even God’s will, according to which he is believed to have merely chosen *this* mode of redemption over all the other, putatively possible ways he might have saved humankind instead; but rather to God’s actual action or intention of creation itself as the defining and determining source of all those possibilities and necessities which exist for him with respect to his creation. On this “actualist” account of divine necessity, by comparison, it is what God has actually done and made his creation to be that determines everything *else* God both can and must do on account of his creation.⁴ Far from God having to choose, create, act, or save *from* an existing

incarnation were He so to will.” Jasper Hopkins, *A Companion to the Study of St. Anselm* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1972), 190. Brian Leftow has likewise allowed that, for Anselm, God’s “perfect wisdom could craft and omnipotence execute a plan of salvation not involving an Incarnation,” with the consequence that “the Incarnation is necessary only relative to other, contingent divine decisions. . . .” Brian Leftow, “Anselm on the Cost of Salvation,” *Medieval Philosophy and Theology*, 6 (1997): 77 and 80, emphasis original. (For Leftow’s own, somewhat different and more nuanced reading of Anselmian necessity, which approximates the one on offer in this article, see below.) Other scholars, it should be noted, have articulated something of a hybrid of these essentialist and voluntarist readings, as when William Courtenay, for example, writes that, for Anselm, “[t]he only thing that binds or forces God to act in a particular way, the only kind of necessity that determines divine action, is the necessity that results from God’s promise to act, a promise enforced by *the consistency of God’s nature and will*. . . .” William J. Courtenay, “Necessity and Freedom in Anselm’s Conception of God,” *Annalecta Anselmiana* 4, no. 2 (1975): 55, emphasis added. See also Courtenay, *Capacity and Volition: A History of the Distinction of Absolute and Ordained Power* (Bergamo : Lubrina, 1990), 55. For an example of McIntyre likewise tracing the necessity of the Incarnation to both God’s will and his nature, see McIntyre, *St. Anselm and His Critics*, 203.

³ My use of the terms *possibilism* and *actualism*, it should be noted, differs from how these words are used in much contemporary analytical modal metaphysics. For other examples of how I am using these terms, see David Burrell, “Creation and ‘Actualism’: The Dialectical Dimension of Philosophical Theology,” *Medieval Philosophy & Theology* 4 (1994): 25–41; Harm Goris, *Free Creatures of an Eternal God: Thomas Aquinas on God’s Infallible Foreknowledge and Irresistible Will* (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 1996), 87 and 270–3; Conor Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism* (London: Routledge, 2002), 26–30; and John Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order: The Representation of Being and the Representation of the People* (Hoboken, NY: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 108ff.

⁴ For a related, theistic actualist reading of divine possibility in Anselm’s *Monologion*, see Jonathan S. McIntosh, “Speaking of Possibilities: The Theistic Actualism of Anselm’s Divine *Locutio*,” *Modern Theology* 33, no. 2: 213–234. My use of the terms *possibilism* and *actualism* in this article, it should be noted, differs from how these same terms are used in contemporary analytic philosophy and modal metaphysics, and follows instead the usage of other modern theologians and philosophers of religion.

array or domain of already defined possibilities or necessities, Anselm instead implies a model in which God is revealed to be the sovereign creator of his own possibilities and necessities.

The question at the heart of *Cur Deus Homo*, and posed by Anselm's interlocutor, student, and friend, Boso, asks why, of all the possible ways God supposedly might have saved the human race, he chose to do it by means of the Incarnation (1.5). As Richard Southern observes, reflected in Boso's question is the implicit voluntarism of "the traditional Christian view" prior to that time, and which included Augustine himself, namely "that God could have chosen other methods [of salvation], but he chose [the Incarnation] because he willed it."⁵ According to the patristic and early medieval soteriological tradition prior to Anselm, as Boso here represents it, there were other possible ways in which God might, at least theoretically, have saved the human race, thus raising the question as to why he chose to accomplish it by means of Christ's Incarnation and Atonement in particular. One historic explanation of the Incarnation, however, that Boso is eager to rule out from the start is the so-called ransom theory of the atonement (1.6-7), and through it, any other similar explanation that would attempt to locate the ultimate cause, occasion, or necessity of God's saving activity in a source other than or outside of God himself. As Anselm himself expresses the general principle behind Boso's critique of the ransom theory, "When God does some thing, then even though we do not see why He wills to do it, His will ought to suffice us as a reason. For the will of God is never unreasonable" (1.8).⁶

While Anselm here clearly locates the explanation for the Incarnation in God's will, as the argument unfolds over the course of *Cur Deus Homo*, it also becomes increasingly clear that his is no ordinary or unqualified form of theological voluntarism. One of the first indications that this is the case is when he commences his argument proper for the Incarnation in 1.10 by stipulating several presuppositions of the present inquiry, presuppositions whose significance lies in their limiting or defining the context in which God is understood to have exercised his saving will. The first presupposition is that man was created for the ultimate purpose of possessing a happiness that he does not in fact attain to in this life; second, that no one ever attains this happiness unless his sins are somehow, in some way, forgiven; and third, that everyone in this life is in fact guilty of sin. From these premises Anselm draws his first conclusion, namely that "in order for man to attain happiness, the remission of his sins is required." God made man to be happy, in other words, but

⁵ Richard Southern, *Saint Anselm: A Portrait in a Landscape* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 201. On Augustine's allowing the possibility of other means of salvation besides the Incarnation, see Dunstan Robidoux, "Necessity in St. Anselm's Notion of Method in Theology," in Robidoux, ed., *A Man Born Out of Due Time: New Perspectives on St. Anselm of Canterbury* (New York: Lantern Books, 2013), 120, citing Augustine, *On the Trinity* 13.4.13, *Contra Faustum* 29.4, and *De agone Christiano* 11.12. See also Simo Knuuttila, "Anselm on Modality," in Davies and Leftow, eds., 114. As Robidoux further notes, Augustine's pluralism with respect to the possible modes of salvation was revived and perpetuated by Peter Lombard in his *Book of Sentences* and "in a context which avoids mentioning St. Anselm's thesis that speaks about the necessity of the means chosen and the absence of other reasonable, rational means that could have been used to effect man's salvation." Robidoux, "Necessity in St. Anselm's Notion of Method in Theology," 121.

⁶ All translations of Anselm are from Jasper Hopkins and Herbert Richardson, *Complete Philosophical and Theological Treatises of Anselm of Canterbury* (Minneapolis, MN: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 2000). All Latin quotations are from the critical edition of Anselm's *Opera Omnia*, edited by F. S. Schmitt (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1946).

the presence of sin as the privation of man's moral nature and action means that, so long as sin is present, man *ipso facto* cannot possess his God-ordained end, such that if man is to be set back on his original path toward happiness, the sin which has thus far thwarted his pursuit must be dealt with. Thus, the first data point in Anselm's whole case for the necessity of the Incarnation is not God's nature in the abstract, nor a mere dictate of divine will considered in isolation from everything else that God has willed, but a careful analysis and consideration of what it is that God has already actually done, and in particular, what he himself has made man *to be*. It is an understanding of God's *prior* action, in short, that explains any *subsequent* course of action God must take if he is to restore man to what God himself has made man to be. What God has made actual determines what he is able to make possible.

The next episode of such actualist thinking comes a chapter later when Anselm introduces his concept of *debt* to explain the honor of a submissive and just will that man was also created to render unto God (1.11). In response to those critics who view Anselm's concept of debt as evidence of the influence of medieval feudalism on his theology of the Atonement, Richard Campbell has pointed out that a much more proximate and plausible source of Anselm's notion of debt is his own earlier dialogue *On Truth*, in which he argues that what a thing "ought" (*debet*) to do is a function of the purpose it was "made" (*facta est*) to fulfill. As Campbell puts it, Anselmian debt is in fact "fundamentally metaphysical rather than sociological in character," implicating as it does "a thoroughgoing immanent teleology of created natures, in which all creatures have proper functions to perform, and when they do so, they do what they ought. . . . The natures of things have been created in such a way that what they ought to do is naturally given; their natures define the actions they have it in them to perform."⁷ Because the natures of things, moreover, are themselves the consequence of God's own creative action, it follows that it is God's own prior, creative action that is responsible for defining any *later* action God might perform with respect to his creatures. If so, then at the heart of Anselm's concept of debt, a concept that is itself at the heart of Anselm's whole case for the necessity of the Incarnation, is the metaphysical notion that it is what God has actually and creatively intended things to be that determines what they ought, and hence what is possible for them, to be, and hence, as we shall see, what is *necessary* for God if he is to restore things to what he himself had made them to be.

Even after this preliminary account of debt, sin, and hence the necessary because divinely established conditions for their satisfaction, Boso confesses that he still sees no reason why an act of fiat forgiveness on God's part might not be possible, as he declares that "God is so free that He is subject to no law and to no one else's judgment. . . . Moreover, nothing except what He wills is right or fitting" (1.12). For Boso, plainly, God does not will something because it is right or fitting; rather, something is right or fitting simply because God wills it. Playing Socrates to Boso's Euthyphro, Anselm replies that to an extent what Boso says about God's "freedom, will, and kindness is true. Yet we ought to explicate these notions so in accordance with reason that we do

⁷ Richard Campbell, "The Conceptual Roots of Anselm's Soteriology," in D.E. Luscombe and G.R. Evans, eds., *Anselm: Aosta, Bec, and Canterbury* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996) and 258 and 260. For an alternate account tracing Anselm's notion of debt both to the Apostle Paul and to the Lord's Prayer, see Deme, *The Christology of Anselm of Canterbury*, 99 and 102, respectively.

not seem to oppose His dignity. For there is freedom only with respect to what is advantageous or what is fitting” (*Libertas enim non est nisi ad hoc quod expedit aut quod decet*). God’s will, in other words, is indeed completely unfettered by anything outside of it, yet it remains the case that the only possibilities available to God, and hence possible in any sense at all, are those which have *already* been determined to be fitting or advantageous for God to do, and this as measured by what we already know of God’s “dignified” (*dignitas*) and “advantageous” (*expedit*) being and action. What God has actually done determines what is possible, including what is necessary, for God to do. Here we may compare Anselm’s account of God’s own freedom with his general account of freedom in his earlier dialogue *On Freedom of Choice*. There Anselm had critiqued Augustine’s possibilist definition of creaturely free will as involving the abstract ability to sin or not to sin, defining it instead in terms of its created, divinely intended, and determinate nature as existing *for* the sake of something else, namely rectitude of will for its own sake. In analogous fashion, Anselm here characterizes God’s own liberty as involving not a divine will indifferently ranging over a set of already defined possibilities, any one of which might prove “fitting” if for no other reason than that God chooses it. Instead, God’s freedom, like our own and of which it is the model, is a self-directed freedom that is always and everywhere ordered towards (because, as we shall see more fully later, creative and constitutive of) the fitting.

In his continued modification of Boso’s divine-command theory of fittingness, Anselm further clarifies that “the statement that what God wills is just and what He does not will is not just” should not be interpreted “to mean that if God were to will any kind of unfittingness, it would be *just* simply because He willed it. . . . Therefore, ‘If God wills such-and-such, then it is just’ can be said truly only of those things which it is not unfitting for God to will.” Here, once more, we see that the reason that what God wills is by definition just is that the *only* possibilities God has open to him in the first place are those possibilities that God’s own prior action has already determined as fitting for him to do. In short, the possible just *is* the fitting and the fitting is the possible, for what God is able to do must, of course, accord with everything else God has already done. As Anselm goes on to apply the above considerations, “Therefore, if it is unfitting that God do something unjustly or inordinately, then it does not pertain to His freedom, or kindness, or willingness that He forgive—without punishing him—a sinner who does not repay to Him what he has stolen.” Again, if something does not pertain to God’s freedom or willingness, then it does not and cannot pertain to his possibility. Thus, over against Boso’s conjecture of a satisfaction-less atonement, Anselm’s position is that insofar as we know God to have made men with the intent and purpose that they should live and will justly and to be happy, it is this prior divine action and intent that is principally responsible for framing the meaning and possibility of any subsequent divine act of forgiveness in the event that men should fail in the purpose for which God made them. What God has done must determine for us what is fitting, and hence what is possible and/or necessary, for him to do.

From here Anselm goes on to further ground his account of the impossibility of God forgiving sin apart from a prior satisfaction of that sin through a consideration of: first, the general order and beauty of the universe that God has made (1.15); second, God’s purpose for his rational beings taken collectively, including the angels (1.16-18); and third, his purpose for human beings

in particular (1.22). In his final and most pointed case for the necessity of satisfaction of sin, Anselm argues from the nature of human happiness itself. “A man,” he says, “who does not pay to God what he owes is unjust” (1.24). To be unjust, however, is nothing other than to be lacking in justice, whereas human happiness, by contrast, is a condition or “state of sufficiency in which nothing needed is lacking,” meaning that happiness “befits only him in whom justice is so pure that there is no injustice in him.” For this reason, “he who does not pay to God what he owes will not be able to be happy.” It is because *God* is the one who made us for justice, then, that not even God, on pain of violating or undoing his own prior action and intention, can make us happy without also making us to be just. What God has done determines what God must or can do. To suppose or hypothesize otherwise—that God could make us happy without us being just, by forgiving us our sins without demanding satisfaction—is in fact a failure to suppose anything meaningful or intelligible at all, for it is to suppose that God can intend and not intend one and the same end at one and the same time, a contradiction. In Daniel Deme’s words, it would make God “go against the rules inherent in his own order.”⁸ Or as Anselm states the dilemma that, for him, must face any satisfaction-less theory of atonement, “as it is impossible for God to be at odds with Himself, so it is impossible for Him to be merciful in this way” (1.24).

Having argued in book one of *Cur Deus Homo* for the necessity of satisfaction for sin if it is to be forgiven, in book two Anselm turns to further argue not only for the possibility but the *necessity* of such forgiveness if God’s original purpose for and action of creating humanity is to be fulfilled. Anselm’s declaration that it would be unfitting for God not to accomplish his own goal for humanity elicits from Boso once more the objection at the heart of *Cur Deus Homo*, namely that this “necessity of avoiding unfittingness seems to ‘constrain’ God (*cogi deus*), so to speak, to procure man’s salvation” (2.5). In response, and in one of his most suggestive illustrations of how God’s necessity is entirely of his own making, Anselm likens the latter to a man who freely takes a vow to enter the monastic life. *After* and not before the vow is made, he is obliged to abide by all the requirements of that vow; nevertheless, his obligation and obedience are not on that account contrary to, but are merely the extension or continuation of that freedom exercised in taking the vow in the first place. Indeed, we might say that, for the monk, the initial taking of the vow and the later keeping of the vow are not really two different actions so much as they are two different *moments* within one and the same action that is the will’s diachronic drama of preserving and persisting in justice over time. In Anselm’s own words, such an individual, therefore, “must not be said to live a monastic life out of necessity but must be said to live it by reason of *the same freedom (eadem libertate)* by which he vowed it” (2.5). In like manner, Anselm says turning now to God, if the latter “does for man the good work which He began, then even though it is not fitting for Him to leave unfinished the good work He has undertaken, we ought to attribute *the entire good work (totum bonum)* to grace; for He began this work for our sake and not for His own, since He Himself needs nothing” (2.5).⁹ For the divine monk as much, then, as for the human, the act of

⁸ Deme, *The Christology of Anselm of Canterbury*, 46.

⁹ Deme captures well Anselm’s parallel here between the diachronic dramas of both our humanly and God’s divinely necessitated freedom: “As Adam could have persevered in freedom only in battling to choose it ever newly, so does God act when he chooses to remain God by being faithful to himself and to his creature in becoming a man. The reality of the universe—its order and beauty, as well as the necessity of man’s salvation—is understandable only in the light

vow-keeping is determined by, because in reality it is identical with, the earlier act of vow-taking, for God's work of finishing his creation through the satisfaction of human sin comprises one and the same, integral "entire good" that he began when he brought creation into being in the first place.

Anselm's monk metaphor is also significant, incidentally, in that it indicates a respect in which the commonplace charge that Anselm's atonement theology is overly indebted to medieval social and political realities turns out in fact to be far more true than it knows, though not in a way that his critics typically appreciate. For far from being a temperamental, feudal lord who imperiously demands satisfaction for every debt owed to him, what Anselm makes quite clear is his view of God as a zealous monk who devotedly, albeit freely, adheres to his own vow of creation-even-if-unto-redemption.¹⁰ On Anselm's model of the divine monasticism, in other words, God never demands an obedience or satisfaction from his created subjects that he has not first and principally demanded of himself as a veritable vassal to the terms of his own prior creative action. To the extent, then, that in the Incarnation God becomes man so that he might enable man to pay his debts to God, it is only so that man might thereby become *more* like the God who always pays his debts and always keeps his vows. In any event, and to reiterate the point Anselm makes in the passage quoted above, this necessity that God creates for himself through his own prior action, precisely because it is created and so in that sense is a gift, might be more profitably and accurately expressed as an act of divine "grace" than strictly one of divine "necessity." Alternatively, we might say that, like everything else which we speak about God, the necessity which we predicate of him is not an univocal but an *analogical* necessity, inasmuch as it is a necessity that God himself has made *to be* necessary for himself.¹¹ For when God, understood as the divine monk, saves man, he does so clearly not under the dictates of an externally imposed, heteronomous necessity, but as part of his auto-response to his own monastic commitment to his ancient and gracious purpose that he should finish what he started.¹²

of this eternal *arbitrium*. God chooses to remain God in Christ. In this free choice man's original freedom is revealed as the image of God's freedom.... Thus Anselm's position is that man's original freedom is the likeness of God's perfect freedom in which he has to, and wants to, reconfirm himself in his deity." Deme, *The Christology of Anselm of Canterbury*, 112.

¹⁰ Deme, for this reason, is able to refer to "God's freely chosen servitude" and his being a "slave to his own grace." Deme, *The Christology of Anselm of Canterbury*, 28 and 97. As David Whidden has noted in his article demonstrating that the influences on such Anselmian notions as *obedience*, *honor*, and *order* were more monastic and specifically Benedictine than feudal, "God is modeled after an abbot" who, "unlike a secular lord" must "serve as a living example for those members of the monastery" where "obedience starts with the abbot obeying, rather than the abbot ordering others to obey." David Whidden, "The Alleged Feudalism of *Cur Deus Homo* and the Benedictine Concepts of Obedience, Honor, and Order," *Nova et Vetera*, 9, no. 4 (2011): 1072-73. See also Deme, *The Christology of Anselm of Canterbury*, 192. Curiously, Whidden doesn't mention the present passage in 2.5, even though it is the one explicit comparison Anselm makes in *Cur Deus Homo* between God and a monk.

¹¹ On Anselm's doctrine of analogy, see McIntosh, "Speaking of Possibilities," 231-34.

¹² This point has been made in a number of striking ways by scholars. Eileen Sweeney, for example, cites Marilyn McCord Adams's characterization of God's "divine determination to make something of us," and in her own words comments on how "it is impossible for God to give up on his creation." Eileen Sweeney, *Anselm of Canterbury and the Desire for the Word* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2012), 288 and 289. Similar to this is Hopkins's description of God's onus of salvation in these words: "Although having forsaken God, Adam remained unforsaken by God." Hopkins, *A Companion to the Study of St. Anselm*, 187.

Of course, at this point it bears mentioning that the very distinction between an agent “starting” a project and his “finishing” it applies, properly speaking, only within our limited, time-bound point of view, having, again, an at most analogical relevance to an eternal God who is the creator of time itself. What God does at a later moment of time, after all, while really distinct from what he does at an earlier moment as viewed from the side of his creaturely effects, is in fact one and the same action when seen from the vantage point of God’s eternal and unified causality.¹³ Deme makes this point well in a passage worth quoting at length: “when we speak about a chronological scheme [with respect to God’s actions] here, we must also be aware of the fact that our starting point must necessarily lie outside any temporally graspable event or reality, in God’s eternal present. . . . The inevitable conclusion is, then, that God, already in his act of creation, freely binds himself to carry his own plan to its intended final end, which also means that in creation he freely binds himself to the accomplishment of the future act in which he will save man from the bondage of sin. *The grace of creation becomes the mercy of salvation.* The necessity, which will later compel Christ to be ‘obedient unto death’ is the gracious necessity deriving from God’s free will in creation. There is indeed a necessity to redeem fallen mankind and so to restore the damaged honour of God, but this necessity *as necessity* is not primarily created by the fall itself. . . . *The act of creation is in itself a sign of a concrete and definite commitment.*”¹⁴ The theological significance of a man or monk keeping his promise, accordingly—or, more generally, any time he perseveres through freedom in his will for justice—is that in doing so he merely approximates *in time* the kind of absolute identity that exists between the “before” of God’s act of creation and the “after” of all that this divine initiative turns out later (from our intra-temporal point of view) to entail. God’s “prior” actions necessitate his “later” actions for the simple reason that, in his eternity, they are not two distinct but one and the same action. Put differently, the very temporal distinction or separation between God’s prior and later actions is *itself* an effect of God’s otherwise supremely unified and undifferentiated creative action.

As important as this understanding of the utter unity of God’s *ad extra* action(s) may be, it is precisely this point that I think has been insufficiently appreciated and applied especially by the voluntarist interpretation of Anselm, in which the necessity of the Incarnation is explained primarily in terms of a prior act of divine will or choice considered in the abstract. To suggest, after all, that God chose *this* means of salvation over all the other putatively available means of salvation he might have chosen instead, is to imply at some level a real distinction and dissociability, even for God, between his earlier acts of creation and his later acts of redemption, such that God might have conceivably willed the one without (and granted his allowance of human sin) necessarily also having willed the other. In contrast with the voluntarist reading of Anselm,

¹³ Leftow draws this same conclusion from the premise of divine simplicity: “for Anselm nothing in God is distinct from anything else in God (save the Persons of the Trinity). Thus for Anselm, God’s first act of will (electing the conditions making [the Incarnation and the Atonement] a ‘necessary’ means of salvation) is identical with God’s second act of will (choosing to effect [the Incarnation and the Atonement]). If this is so, neither can necessitate the other. *A fortiori*, a state of affairs the first act wills cannot necessitate the second act. For any such state of affairs causally depends on and presupposes the existence of God’s first act of will. And if God is simple, God’s second act of will = God’s first.” Leftow, “Anselm on the Necessity of the Incarnation,” 171.

¹⁴ Deme, *The Christology of Anselm of Canterbury*, 39, 42-3, emphasis added.

what an understanding of the ultimate unity of God's *ad extra* actions leads us to appreciate is the respect in which the Incarnation is not something God simply elected as one outcome among a possible many, but in a very real sense just simply *is* his "earlier" action of creation only now continued or further unfolded at a later point in time. On Anselm's model of the divine monasticism, once more, the "vow-keeping" that is God's work of redemption is not a separate or separable act from, but is merely the extension over time of God's original "vow-taking" that is his work of creation. The necessity of the Incarnation, therefore, lies—again, at least for us time-bound creatures—in our discerning the Incarnation's inchoate presence or virtual containment within what God is already known to have done. It is a matter of seeing God's later, salvific activity, in other words, as a kind of conclusion logically and metaphysically entailed within, and hence unfolded by God and inferable by us from the "premise" of God's original, creative initiative. For God to "choose" to create the world at all, accordingly, just *is* for God also to "choose" his becoming Incarnate to save humanity in the event that it should fall, for properly or at least comprehensively understood, there simply is no possibility of the one without the other. On this model of God's necessity residing in God's action, to speak of there being *other* "possible" ways in which God might have saved the *same* world is to speak of what must be for God a praxeological, and hence logical, contradiction.

If so, then the necessity of the Incarnation is less an instance of a merely hypothetical or conditional necessity, one contingent upon an act of divine *choice* among a set of already available because uncreated options, and more a matter of absolute necessity following upon what Eileen Sweeney aptly refers to as the "logic of divine *action*."¹⁵ On this understanding of things, to be clear, God still might not have created at all, or given his will to create, he needn't have created *this* world with *this* logic and necessity of salvation. To say that God might have done otherwise, after all, it is not necessary to postulate that there were therefore other, determinate "ways" or possibilities which he might have chosen or realized *instead*. For if, as I have argued on Anselm's behalf elsewhere, God is the creator of his own possibilities, then all that is necessary for God to do "otherwise" is for him to have the unanalyzable (because simple) creative power to act in such a way that something *different* was created, even if that difference is one that is only measurable relative to *this* world, a world that, on the very hypothesis under question, would not have existed to be compared to.¹⁶ Granted, however, God's having made the kind of world he did make, it follows for Anselm that, as a necessary consequence and, indeed, identity of what God himself has already done, in the event of their fall, God must not only save his rational creatures, but he must save them in the manner in which he did. Deme once again expresses well the resulting, actualist as opposed to merely voluntarist approach of Anselm to God's *ad extra* necessity when he writes that it is in his creative speaking that God "determines the outcome of his own struggle in his

¹⁵ Sweeney, *Anselm of Canterbury*, 286-7, emphasis added. Contra Campbell, then, but in terms of the same scholastic categories used by him, the necessity of the Incarnation is not merely a divine *de dicto* necessity of what God has declared would happen in the event of human sin, but granted the event of human sin, the Incarnation follows rather as a *de re* necessity of God's own prior action of creation.

¹⁶ See McIntosh, "Speaking of Possibilities." For a related account, see James Ross, "God, Creator of Kinds and Possibilities: *Resquiescant universalia ante res*," in *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment*, ed. Robert Audi and Wainwright (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986): 315-34.

incarnated Word, and also the struggle of his creature. The necessity of what has been said in this Word at the creation, and what is eternally valid, will become the necessity that will bind God to man, and man to God. God speaks, creates, orders, condemns, saves and blesses in one Word.”¹⁷ For Anselm, in sum, God’s freedom is his necessity, for it is nothing less than the divinely monastic freedom whereby God is shown to be liberated unto a perfect consistency and integrity of action—what Dunstan Robidoux refers to as “the actuality of God’s steadfastness”¹⁸—in which what God initially creates determines not only what is possible, but also what is necessary for him to do later, for God’s initial, necessitating act of creation is in fact one and the same with his later, necessitated act of redemption.

Having likened God to a divine monk, a few chapters later Anselm provides yet another cogent metaphor for thinking about the nature of the necessity of the Incarnation. In the course of his explanation of how Christ was able to say something false without on that account being able to sin, Anselm makes the observation that “[a]ll ability depends upon willing. For when I say ‘I am able to speak or to walk,’ the proviso ‘if I will to’ is understood (*subauditur*)” (2.10). On Anselm’s analysis, when we speak of someone being able to perform a free, voluntary action, the individual’s actual willingness to perform that action, even if not explicitly stated, is nevertheless logically presupposed or taken for granted within the action in question. In Anselm’s choice of words, the willingness of the agent is something that can be “sub-audited” within—literally “heard under”—the hypothesized ability in question.¹⁹ In a similar fashion, I would suggest here, it is just such an act of “hearing under” that Anselm would have us understand all our theological speculations in regards to God’s own power or ability: to appropriately discern whether God is able (or not) to do something, it is necessary that we first identify, and so not carelessly abstract from, those relevant conditions which, even if not *explicitly* stated within, may nevertheless be entailed by, and are hence to be “heard under,” the particular, postulated ability in question. To view *Cur Deus Homo* as a whole in these terms, Anselm’s entire argument for the necessity of the Incarnation—that is to say, God’s *inability* not to save humankind through the God-man—might be likewise expressed as simply an extended analysis of precisely those relevant “provisos” logically and metaphysically entailed within God’s original act and intention of creation. For the one who listens closely, Anselm seems to be saying, what can be distinctly “heard under” God’s purpose for creation is nothing less than the quiet but audible whisper of God’s intention and activity (again, if man should fall) of joining his nature to our own for our redemption. What is possible for God to do, in short, is simply the *subauditum*—the “under-heard”—of what he has already actually done.

¹⁷ Deme, *The Christology of Anselm of Canterbury*, 124. As Deme writes immediately before this, “The creation of the world has not happened through a speaking that would order every single thing to come to being separately, or as one could possibly read the creation of the world in six days. God creates man and the universe in one single Word, his only word.”

¹⁸ Robidoux, “Necessity in St. Anselm’s Notion of Method in Theology,” 133.

¹⁹ For a somewhat different, though complementary understanding of the notion of *subauditur* in Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo*, see M. Burcht Pranger, “The Poetics of *Cur Deus Homo*,” in Gilbert, Kohlenberger, and Salmann, eds., 442 and 444.

This brings us at last to the philosophical and theological heart and culmination of *Cur Deus Homo*, in which Anselm explains once and for all that it is God's own will that is the cause and creator of God's own *ad extra* necessity. "Indeed, all necessity and impossibility," Anselm declares in his most definitive statement yet, "are subject to His will; but His will is not subject to any necessity or to any impossibility. For a thing is necessary or impossible only because He wills it to be so. . ." (*Nihil enim est necessarium aut impossibile, nisi quia ipse ita vult*—2.17). In identifying God's will as that which is responsible for making a thing to be impossible or necessary, Anselm might be taken to be contradicting my earlier claim (on 2.5) that it is *not* God's will or choice but his *action* that determines his necessity. For that matter, he may also seem to have reversed here his own earlier critique, back in 1.12, of Boso's divine-command theory of God's modalities and his counter-claim that God's will is free "only with respect to what is advantageous or what is fitting." How, after all, can God only will what is fitting or beneficial (as per his claim in 1.12), and yet *also* have his will be responsible for determining what is necessary (as per his claim here in 2.17)? When interpreted in a theistic actualist light—that God does not create *from* but is the creator *of* his own possibilities—however, the apparent conflict between these two statements readily disappears. For starters, in his assertion that all necessity (as well as impossibility) are subject to God's will, Anselm says nothing in fact to suggest that those things God has made to be necessary had any kind of existence or determinate reality or possibility prior to or independent of the operation of his creative will or action, such that, in voluntarist fashion, he might just as well have chosen or made these same things *not* to be necessary had he so wished. God's will simply does not "make" things to be necessary or impossible in that sense. If, however, by God's will we do not understand Anselm to mean, at least in the first instance, a power of divine *choice*—whereby he selects among an existing array of already defined possibilities some things to be fitting, beneficial, or necessary and others not—but interpret him to mean, more fundamentally still, a power of free invention whereby he imagines or defines into being even those "choices" he does have, then there is no contradiction or inconsistency whatever between Anselm saying, on the one hand, that God wills only what is advantageous or fitting, and, on the other hand, that it is God's will that determines what is necessary or fitting in the first place.²⁰ For

²⁰ Thus, I think Sandra Visser and Thomas Williams are right to point out, in their attempt at reconciling Anselm's above two claims, that he clearly rejects the kind of proto-Cartesian view of divine modality according to which God could have made things that are presently impossible (such as 2 and 2 equaling 5) or logically contradictory to have been possible or logically consistent instead. Sandra Visser and Thomas Williams, *Anselm* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 167-9. At the same time, I think Visser and Williams err when they say that for Anselm "what is fitting is not determined by any free choice of the divine will" (*ibid.*, 168), if what they mean is that God's will is not responsible for constituting the nature of necessity in any sense; for as Anselm's meaning here in 2.17 would seem to lead us to understand, God's creative willing and action are indeed responsible for calling things forth, *in toto* and *ex nihilo*, in the very same divine act and intention by which he *also* makes them to be fitting and necessary. What Anselm does rule out, I think, is an understanding of God's will, in possibilistic fashion, as ranging over and selecting among already defined possibilities. Related to Visser and Williams's denial here that God's will plays any role in constituting the necessity of his own *ad extra* actions is Katherin Rogers's Neoplatonic and necessitarian (and proto-Leibnizian) interpretation of *Cur Deus Homo* as "argu[ing] that God must necessarily do the best" and that "it is best that man should be saved by God's incarnation, death, and resurrection." Rogers, *The Neoplatonic Metaphysics and Epistemology of Anselm of Canterbury* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1997), 66. On the contrary, Anselm never argues that God could only have done the "best" among a host of other theoretical alternatives that might have been performed instead; rather, he argues that what God has done was "fitting" as a way of showing that it was "necessary"

on this actualist understanding of things, God freely fashions his own *ad extra* possibilities, including what is fitting and necessary, and then, like the divine monk that he is, only ever “chooses” to act in a manner consistent with those possibilities and necessities that he himself freely fashioned.

Corroborating this interpretation, and in what is perhaps his most actualist statement in *Cur Deus Homo* thus far, Anselm goes on to say of God that “since He does (*facit*) all the things He wills and only the things He wills: just as no necessity or impossibility precedes (*praecedat*) His willing or not willing, so no necessity or impossibility precedes His doing or not doing, although He immutably wills and does many things” (2.17). Again, God’s necessity and impossibility, at least with respect to his creation, are not limits that, as per the essentialist reading of Anselm, “precede” or exist *prior* to the action of his creative will, determining for him all that is possible (or not) for him to do. At the same time, as has also been maintained, neither do God’s “necessities,” in voluntarist manner, precede God’s will in such a way that he could have chosen *different* things to be necessary than the ones he did choose, different things that, at least from the point of view of our present world, would not have been fitting, just, or beneficial for him to choose. In contrast with both of these interpretations, Anselm is best understood as implying a model in which the necessity of what God does is *concurrent* with, being created by, or at least *con-created* with, what God actually does. To adapt a comment Deme makes with respect to the unity of Christ’s action and will that has equal application to the case of God in general, “action and will are integrated by the statement that [God’s] action *is* his will. . . .”²¹

It is something like this actualist reading of *Cur Deus Homo*, finally, that has been generally indicated, in various ways, by a number of Anselm’s more perceptive readers. Robidoux, for example, captures well Anselm’s view of God as the truthmaker of his own necessities this way: “since nothing outside God causes anything in God, God’s actions are to be explained by a willing and doing in God that is totally internal and totally self-sufficient. . . . [T]he nature of God’s willing for St. Anselm is such that everything which is done by God *ad extra* is done with necessity. God’s unalterable will, *the actuality of this will, explains everything*. . . . The actuality of an event excludes the possibility that it is not actual at the time when it is happening. *From actuality comes necessity*. In St. Anselm’s own words: ‘the existence of an actuality makes it a necessary fact.’”²² Similarly, Brian Leftow, despite his voluntarist interpretation of Anselm elsewhere, in an important footnote nevertheless credits Anselm’s God with being the creator rather than the mere chooser of his necessities when he writes: “By determining what is impossible, God determines what is possible. . . . So for Anselm, *all possible states of affairs are possible due only to God’s creative act*. If so, one would think, *there are such things as possible alternatives to God’s action only subsequent to its taking place*. Can it be true that God can do other than He does, *as He acts*, if the possibility of alternative actions exists only logically *after* He acts? Only if the truth of this

and therefore the only “possible” way of doing things, because it is the only avenue of action that God willed and so made to be possible.

²¹ Deme, *The Christology of Anselm of Canterbury*, 193, emphasis added.

²² Robidoux, “Necessity in St. Anselm’s Notion of Method in Theology,” 132-3, citing *Cur Deus Homo* 2.18, emphasis added.

claim does not involve the existence of possible states of affairs such that alternate actions of God would realize some of them.”²³ John R. Baker puts matters more succinctly still in his statement that, for Anselm, “no necessity constrains the will of God, for *it is the divine will that creates the conditions of necessity itself*.”²⁴ To the extent that Anselm’s account of the necessity of the Incarnation might be described as broadly “voluntarist,” then, it is a voluntarism of a uniquely actualist stamp, inasmuch as, to cite Deme one last time, “[i]t is absolutely clear from Anselm’s works that Jesus Christ is not only the best possible, but also the only thinkable, solution to the given problem. This Christological absolutism (*Quod ex necessitate per Christum salvetur homo*) is undeniably the key aspect of Anselm’s soteriology.”²⁵

In conclusion, then, between the two commonly opposed poles of theological essentialism and theological voluntarism, both of which imply that God’s *ad extra* actions of creation and redemption take place against a backdrop of already defined possibilities or necessities, I have argued that Anselm may be seen carefully navigating a distinct, third possibility. For Anselm, God’s *action*, far from being an expression or realization of possibilities or necessities that are already defined for him, whether by his nature or not, is rather what is responsible for bringing into being *ex nihilo*, and so defining and constituting for the very first time, all that is fitting, necessary, and possible for God to do, in its very fittingness, necessity, and possibility. In short, it is what God has done and continues to do, what he has willed and continues to will, that determines what is necessary—and possible—for him to do and to will. In particular, we have seen in this study of Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo* that the necessity of God becoming a man in order to save man is, on the one hand, a true necessity, being the inexorable outworking of his own prior action, including his permissive action of allowing sin to enter the world and so to disrupt his immutable purpose for creating the world in the first place. On the other hand, we have seen that this necessity is nevertheless entirely of God’s own making—not, as a number of readers have supposed, by his “choosing” and then “committing” himself to this world and its possibility of redemption from all

²³ Leftow, “Anselm on the Necessity of the Incarnation,” 172-3n30, emphasis added. The viewpoint Leftow attributes to Anselm here is significant, as it anticipates one of the central claims of Leftow’s recent book *God and Necessity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), namely that even necessary truths about creation are things that God “thinks up” and hence is creatively responsible for. For an example of Leftow’s own voluntarist reading of Anselm, by contrast, see above. Visser and Williams, incidentally, have likewise recognized that in Anselm’s theory of at least *creaturely* freedom, free action is not defined by, and so does not take place against a backdrop of already existing states of possible affairs, but is instead the kind of thing that (paradoxically) is responsible for creating its own possible alternatives precisely in and through its exercise or activity. Visser and Williams, *Anselm*, 164-5. Paralleling this account of creaturely freedom is their actualist interpretation of Anselm’s theory of antecedent necessity in all created causes, according to which “the truthmakers for all such modal judgments are concrete particulars and their powers, not abstract objects like possible worlds or states of affairs. For this reason, Anselm holds that any meaningful talk about possibility and necessity in this domain will be either expressed as, or reducible to, ascriptions of powers to particular individuals.” *Ibid.*, 155. Unfortunately, Visser and Williams do not consistently apply their understanding of Anselm’s theories of creaturely freedom and antecedent necessity to God’s own freedom and necessity, with the result that they are somewhat ambiguous and ambivalent as to the question of whether, for Anselm, God is in fact free to act in a manner otherwise than he does, and if he can, whether any alternative possibilities to his actions are possibilities that precede and hence are uncreated by God’s own action, or whether they are themselves the result of God’s creative activity. See *ibid.*, 130 and 221-2.

²⁴ John R. Baker, “Must the God-Man Die?” in Gilbert, Kohlenberger, and Salmann, eds., 617, emphasis added.

²⁵ Deme, *The Christology of Anselm of Canterbury*, 92. See also *ibid.*, 98.

the alternatives he might have implemented instead, but rather by his own, self-defining action in which he made this world to be everything that it is, including its own proper and intrinsic possibility (and given the fall, necessity) of redemption. It is for this reason, we might add in closing, that Anselm also finds himself arguing for the necessity of the Incarnation, as is well known, by arguing principally for its *fittingness*, not because of any contingency or uncertainty in the event itself, but because if God is the creator of his own necessity, then there is and can be no other human measure of God's "later" actions except their comportment and, indeed, ultimate identity with his own "prior" determining action.