Rogers’ Little Swerve:  
The Confessions of a Not-So-Open-Theist

Kevin M. Staley  
Saint Anselm College

Rogers is an eloquent defender of perfect being theology, a version of classical theism. She is an opponent of open-theism (in which God can change in certain respects, is not simple, and does know the future insofar as it is indeterminate). In Anselm on Freedom, Rogers argues for an understanding of human freedom that is compatible with God’s perfection. For Rogers, the moral significance of human choices requires that they be self-initiated or self-caused. As such, they are not “fully traceable back to further causes outside of the agent”—not even to God. She also denies that God knows the intentional states of agents, that is, what it is like to be in that state from the perspective of the subject of that state. To avoid implying that God does not cause and know some things or aspects of things, Rogers denies that choices are things or even thing-like states. Yet she also contends that our choices do make a difference to God. To avoid the implication that they make God different, she argues both that God must create a specific world (the best possible one) and for “eternalism”—the thesis the past, present, and future actually co-exist. Rogers’ account of human freedom, though logically consistent, raises serious issues regarding perfect being theology for anyone who holds that human choices are things to the extent that they are the intentional states of human beings, that God must know them as such, and that time is real.

A word on the origins of this commentary on Katherin Rogers’ book Anselm on Freedom: when Professor Brown asked me to participate in a discussion of Rogers’ work, I jumped at the chance and welcomed the opportunity to engage in philosophical debate with Professor Rogers, with whom I have sparred on several prior occasions. Rogers has in my mind emerged as a clear, consistent, and insightful philosophical voice in her own right and as an eloquent defender of classical theism, construed as perfect being theology, against the charges made against it by neo-classical or open-theism—a theism in which God can change in certain respects, is not simple, and does know the determinate details of what (at least to us) appears to be an indeterminate future. My commentary addresses issues arising from Rogers’ recent work, Anselm on Freedom, in light of her status as a perfect-being philosopher. My focus is upon the rather ambiguous ontological status of what might be described as the intentional states of human beings.

In Anselm on Freedom, the ontological status of choices (which I take to be intentional states) is unclear. Rogers clearly thinks that—whatever they are—choices are among the most significant features of God’s creation, and yet she also denies on occasion that they are things or even thing-like states. Rogerian choices are as enigmatic as Lucretius’ little serve. I think I understand some of the reasons behind this ambiguity. If the ontological status of choices becomes too robust, then, given what Rogers has to say on other matters, divine perfection may very well be compromised. The specter of open-theism looms just over the horizon. While I
share some of Rogers’ reservations in regard to open-theism, I am not as convinced as she that the challenge it presents can be easily answered. In fact, the perfect consistency with which she erects a philosophical bulwark against it leads me to fear that, should a single stone in its edifice fail, the entire fortress may be lost. To capture these themes in a title as best as I can, I re-entitled this reflection: “Rogers’ Little Swerve: The Confessions of a Not-So-Open-Theist.”

Sometimes to understand better a philosopher’s thinking, we attribute to him or her intentional states—including choices, desires, concerns, beliefs, and so forth. I think, for example, that Aquinas was enamored of Aristotelian philosophy because he desired to defend the integrity of the created order. But attributing such states to others is a dangerous for a very simple reason—we do not have direct access to other minds. Aquinas, for example, might simply have desired to advance his career by focusing on the cutting-edge philosophy of his day. So prudence would seem to require that one refrain from intentional attribution—at least until such time as the subject of the attribute is dead and no longer capable of refuting one’s claim by simply reporting the contents of his or her intentional states. Happily, I enjoy no such safety here since Kate will have the chance to respond; nevertheless, I will hazard a guess in regard to one of her intentional states.

A major, if not the major, concern that motivates Katherin Rogers’ recent book, Anselm on Freedom, is to formulate a definitive solution to the problems perennially posed by affirming that God is perfect and that human beings make morally significant free choices. The careful reader will not miss the sense of triumph with which Rogers declares somewhat late in the text that “Anselm’s solution saves freedom, foreknowledge, and traditional classical theism.”

Rogers’ understanding of traditional classical theism can be expressed in three fundamental principles: 1) as omnipotent, God is the cause of every thing; conversely, there is no thing that exists in any way at all that is not caused by God; 2) as omniscient, God knows immediately and non-propositionally all things in themselves—including all past, present, and future things; and 3) as simple and eternal, God never becomes different. Were God to become different in some respect and remain the same in another, He would not be absolutely simple.

Rogers’ robustly libertarian understanding of human freedom involves two fundamental claims: 1) libertarian agents’ choices are self-initiated or self-caused in that they are not “fully traceable back to further causes outside of the agent”—not even to God; and 2) the moral significance of self-initiated, human choices requires open alternatives from which an agent may choose such that—from a logical point of view—having chosen one thing, one could have chosen otherwise.

---

2 Rogers, AOF, 60.
3 Rogers, AOF, 77-78.
The challenge that a libertarian understanding of human freedom poses for traditional classical theism can be put into the form of a question: how can God be the cause of everything when human choices exist that are 1) caused by those agents and 2) not fully traceable to causes outside the agent, including God? Isn’t it the case that something exists, Jack’s choice to eat chocolate rather than broccoli, of which God is not the cause?

Anselm’s response to the potential mischief a libertarian notion of freedom can create for classical theism is, as Rogers’ espouses it, an elegant one. The key lies in Anselm’s analysis of the structure of human willing. Briefly, God creates the human will with two inclinations: a desire for benefit (commoditas) and a desire for justice. These inclinations need not conflict; neither is intrinsically evil; but they are hierarchically ordered in that to will rightly, one must will what one wills out of a desire for justice rather than benefit. In willing, therefore, human agents are faced with genuine alternatives. “By creating the agent with two sorts of inclinations which can come into conflict and present the will with options,” God bestows “upon the creature the ability to choose from itself and hence to be free and just.” Following one or another of these inclinations is not the result of either of them. Rather it is the result of a choice that originates within the human agent and that cannot be completely reduced to any cause extrinsic to the agent. Thus, Anselm says that, in the act of choice “the will . . . is its own efficient cause and effect, if such a thing can be said.” That the will is, in some fashion, the cause of itself is of great moment; for in choosing thus, creatures fashion themselves and share in some slight fashion with God’s independence from extrinsic causes, that is, “in created agency there is a trace of independence through which God has given the rational creature the ability to participate in His aseity.”

Yet, in this creaturely fashioning of themselves, Rogers contends that divine omnipotence has not been compromised. In her analysis of De Casu Diaboli, she argues the point as follows: “Should the agent remain just, then it simply follows the desire for justice implanted by God. . . . Should the agent sin, it follows to excess the desire for benefit implanted by God. . . . [But] the created agent adds nothing to the sum of all things when it sins. . . . [T]he ultimate choice is not some third element, a really existing ‘something’ above and beyond the desires. . . . Nothing with any ontological status is brought into being by the created agent.” In the human act of choice “one of the two God-given desires becomes the actual choice. The agent, the will as instrument, the motivating desires, and hence the desire which ‘wins out’ are all from God. There is no thing in the story which is not from God.”

---

4 Rogers, AOF, 86.  
6 Rogers, AOF, 59-60.  
7 Rogers, AOF, 118.  
8 Rogers, AOF, 118 (Rogers’ emphasis).
Rogers’ logic is impeccable. If God causes all things, and there is some aspect of human choices which originates with the creature and which cannot be traced back to God, then that aspect or feature is not a thing. One wonders, however, what it might be. Certainly it is not simply a nothing, since to speak of a choice as originating within or being self-initiated by an agent suggests that it “comes to be” in some sense. Moreover, since 1) God knows the choices that agents make and 2) since what is not (absolutely speaking) is unintelligible, creatures’ choices must have some sort of being, even if they are not things as such.

Perhaps God knows choices in the same fashion as He knows evil. In her book, Perfect Being Theology, Rogers’ has the following to say about God’s knowledge of evil: “On Anselm’s libertarian analysis, we have the option to throw away the good He has given us by choosing in opposition to His will. Now the will itself, and whatever there is in the choice that can be said to have any sort of ontological status must be kept in being by God and is known by Him. But the turning from the good originates in the will of the sinner, and the evil which is a loss or diminution of the good is the responsibility of the free creature, and is known by God only as a failure to adhere to the good.”

Again, I think Rogers is perfectly reasonable here. To say that God knows every thing and that God knows that some creature has chosen evil need not imply that evil is some thing. Yet presumably creatures make good choices too, which are also known by God. In the case of good choices, if not in the case of evil ones, it seems that there must be something there to be known—even if it isn’t a thing per se.

One is tempted to classify choices as a property or state of the agent, but this won’t do. For, argues Rogers, God is perfect and “it conflicts with perfect being theology to hold that the myriad properties which fall under the heading of ‘the states of things’ should not be caused and sustained in being by God.” So, since libertarian choices are free precisely to the extent that they are not caused by God, they also, to that extent, cannot be the states of some thing.

Rogers’ analysis of creaturely freedom and its relationship to God raises the following dilemma: Either choices are things or properties of things, or choices are not things or properties of things. If they are things or properties of things and creatures are solely responsible for them, then divine omnipotence is threatened. Something happens of which God is not the cause. If they are not things or the properties of things, then they are unintelligible. Divine omniscience is threatened.

Rogers may have a way out of this dilemma that does not entail a logical contradiction. If choices are ‘nothings’ of some sort and are, for that reason, per se unintelligible, then that God should not know them does not count against His omniscience—in the very same way in which

---

10 Rogers, PBT, 114.
God’s inability to create something which is logically impossible does not count against his omnipotence.

In *Perfect Being Theology*, we find Rogers making just this sort of argument. The question she poses is whether or not God knows what it is like to be a creature in some state. Suppose, for example, that Rogers is terrified at time \( t \); the question is: does God know what it is like to be Rogers terrified at time \( t \)? Several impediments stand in the way of claiming that He does. Rogers argues that He does not as follows: Being terrified at some particular time arises from the perspectival character of human knowledge, to which the present alone seems to be real. God’s knowledge, on the other hand, is radically non-perspectival with respect to time; God knows all that was, is, and will be in one, eternal act. Human knowledge is perspectival in other respects too. Rogers explains: “I cannot see things from a perspective which is not my perspective. For example, I can know what it is like to be female and I can know this *de se*, in the way a woman knows it. I have some grasp on what maleness is, and perhaps can enter imaginatively into ‘what it is like to be a male.’ But being not-male I cannot understand maleness the way a man does. It is not logically possible.”¹¹ To demand of an omniscient deity that He know what it is like to be me is, therefore, to demand the impossible. It is to demand of a non-perspectival mind that it know something perspectivally; but “even God cannot do the logically impossible, and so to ask that He know, not only all objects and states of affairs but also as other beings know them, is making impossible demands.”¹²

What then does God know about someone who is terrified? Kate provides us with the following: “On the traditional view God knows *that* ‘Rogers is terrified’, through keeping every sub-atomic particle of me in being. Whether or not God knows ‘what it is like’ to be terrified, He is omniscient in that He knows every *thing*.”¹³

Note the analogous situation in the case of humanly free choices. The desires for benefit and justice are given in the same way in which subatomic particles are given. Like particles, these desires enjoy an unambiguous ontological status. God knows these two desires for the same reason He knows sub-atomic particles: namely, He is their cause. And He knows human choices to the extent that He causes the desires for benefit and justice. But arising from these desires, in a fashion analogous to the ‘what it is like to be terrified’, is the creature’s opting to give priority to one or the other of these desires in the pursuit of some good. Rogers refers to this ‘opting’ as ‘the moment of preference.’ This moment is the locus of creaturely aseity, of self-initiated action for which ‘there is no antecedent cause or explanation’—not even God.¹⁴ Should one want to know the reason for preferring justice over benefit or vice versa, “there is no more to be said.” This is mysterious, but it is a mystery one ought to expect if created wills can genuinely exhibit “a primary, rather than secondary, agency.”¹⁵ In this matter, I think Rogers’ is perfectly

---

¹¹ Rogers, *PBT*, 89.
¹² Rogers, *PBT*, 89.
¹³ Rogers, *PBT*, 88 (Rogers’ emphasis).
¹⁴ Rogers, *AOF*, 104.
¹⁵ Rogers, *AOF*, 105.
correct. Not even God can know in terms of its antecedent, sufficient causes something that lacks antecedent, sufficient causes.

But the question still remains, does God know these moments of preference immediately in themselves? Rogers’ response seems to be “no”, since He is not their cause. Yet, since choices, like other intentional states, are not things, Rogers can argue that even though God does not know them, he still knows every thing.

I must confess, I find this scenario somewhat terrifying—for at least three reasons. First, from my point of view, some of the best things I have had to offer God are my own intentional states. For example, a few years ago, after I had been working most of the day doing yard work and as the sun began to set, I grabbed a cold beer and, having had a few sips, I saw the blooming flowers of a nearby yellow evening primrose—a plant usually dismissed as a weed. I was joyfully struck—in a way difficult to describe in words—with their tenuous beauty, and I offered this joy in gratitude to God. I hope He didn’t miss what it was like for me to feel that joy, without which my gratitude would make little sense. Secondly, I have made choices in my life sometimes in the belief that I was opting for justice over benefit. Now that in hindsight some of those choices seem fairly stupid, I suspect that ‘a whole lot of opting for benefit was going on.’ In short, I often become and have remained something of a mystery to myself; and I find some degree of comfort in the hope that God understands me better than I do. Finally, and this is perhaps most terrifying, these choices have made a difference in the world. Let me develop this last point a bit.

Though one might charge Rogers with ambiguity with respect to the ontological status of choices, her account of their moral and existential significance is not in the least ambiguous. Her commitment to the efficacy of human choice in shaping creation itself is evident throughout her text: “God has constructed the system so that the rational creature can, in however limited a way, mirror divine aseity by contributing to its own being. It is a dim reflection of its creator, but it is a true one in that, through free choice, it participates in its own creation.” Human choices make a difference to God. They affect what God does. Rogers insists, in the course of commenting on Anselm’s De Concordia 3.14, that God creates Bob-choosing-evil because Bob chooses evil. Bob does not choose evil because God creates him that way. Moreover, since God cannot know human choices on the grounds that He is their cause, human choices must affect God if God is to know them. In Rogers’ own words, “it is the fact that the agent actually chooses what he chooses that produces God’s knowledge of the choice.”

Rogers could not be less ambiguous; but one wonders whether creaturely choice can make such a difference to God without God’s becoming different. Two strategically placed stones shore up Rogers’ bulwark against the specter of neo-classical or open-theism. First, she adopts a tenseless or eternalist account of time according to which the past, present, and future

---

16 Rogers, AOF, 106.
17 Rogers, AOF, 174.
are equally real. Though, from my limited perspective, my future choices are yet to be made, from God’s perspective I have already made them. Thus, one need not worry about God having to deal with surprises and altering His own course of action in response. Secondly, God’s freedom does not require that He have alternatives. As perfect, God must create that which is best; and so no other world, save the best possible world, can be. Thus, God knows from all eternity all of my choices and there does not exist, even in timelessly logical space, counterfactual worlds in which God would be different. This allows Rogers to go so far as to deny the traditional distinction between God’s absolutely necessary predicates (e.g., omnipotence and simplicity) and God’s conditionally or actually necessary predicates (e.g., being the creator of Jane, the illegitimate daughter of John and Mary).18 “There are other imaginable worlds,” Rogers insists, “but the actual world, from God’s perspective in eternity, is the only really possible world. So it is not that free creatures pick and choose among equally possible worlds and hence ‘decide’ upon which God will create.”19 Creaturally choice does in some sense limit God, but “since the entire system in which created agents can have genuine causal power is the work of God, the ‘passivity’ is His own doing. God in some sense limits Himself, which is not a weakness or a limitation on divine omnipotence as such.”20 One cannot but admire the grandeur of philosophical vision with which Rogers presents us—a vision of a tenselessly existing universe in which creaturally choice contributes real contingency to God’s timeless and self-limiting act of creating the best of all possible worlds.

What is one to do, however, if one rejects eternalism, if, on the plain evidence of the senses, one insists that the future is not? What is one to do if one thinks that the notion of a best possible world is an incoherent one akin to the notion of the largest natural number? What if one considers intentional states to be real things or the real states of real things? Any of these claims threatens to collapse Rogers’ bulwark against classical theism or to force one to retreat from claiming either that creaturally choices possess aseity or that they make some real difference to God.

Rogers has, I believe, begun to develop the resources with which she might resolve ambiguities concerning the ontological status of creaturally choices. In Perfect Being Theology, she sketches out her position to which she refers as theological idealism, a theory in which God can be said to be the cause of human choices but in such a way as to preserve their aseity because God (as cause) and creaturally agents (as self-initiating causes) occupy different ontological levels. This difference in ontological levels, rather than the non-thing-like status of choices and other intentional states, might provide an account of how God could cause genuinely libertarian choices without contradiction. Yet Rogers has also offered fairly convincing arguments for the following conditional: if eternalism is false or if either there is no best possible world or God can create what is second best, then some version of open-theism must be the case. Since I do not think the future exists and since I do not think there can be a created world which is best, the

18 Rogers, PBT, 37.
19 Rogers, PBT, 36-37.
20 Rogers, AOF, 121.
very cogency of her argumentation would seem to leave me little choice other than to become an open, even though a not-so-open, theist.