

Can Anselm Have Everything He Wants?

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This paper sets forth the evidence that Anselm held a number of theses about God, time, and freedom, and asks whether they form a consistent set. It appears that they do not, a point that is not merely of historical interest but of present-day philosophical interest, since many present-day philosophers of religion want all the things that Anselm wanted. There are, however, elements in Anselm's thought that he clearly thinks allow him to reconcile all the claims he has in play. I examine these elements to see how successful they are in establishing the consistency of Anselm's claims and conclude that Anselm lacks a sufficiently developed and explicit metaphysic for one to say that he manages to have everything he wants. I then ask whether there is a metaphysic of which we can avail ourselves in order to have everything that we want (supposing that we want what Anselm wants). I show that a metaphysic of grounding offers the best prospects for getting us all the way there, but only at a philosophical cost that Anselm will be unwilling to pay.

This paper falls into three parts. In the first part I set forth the evidence that Anselm held a number of theses about God, time, and freedom. Having set out Anselm's claims—these are

the “everything he wants” of my title—I then examine, in the second part of the paper, whether they form a consistent set—whether “Anselm can have” them all. It appears that he cannot, a point that is not merely of historical interest but of present-day philosophical interest, since many present-day philosophers of religion want all the things that Anselm wanted. There are, however, elements in Anselm’s thought that he clearly thinks allow him to have it all. I examine these elements to see how successful they are in reconciling the various claims that Anselm has in play.

The upshot of the second part is that Anselm lacks a sufficiently developed and explicit metaphysic for one to say that *he* manages to have everything he wants. So in the third part of the paper I ask whether there is a metaphysic of which *we* can avail ourselves in order to have everything that *we* want (supposing we want what Anselm wants). My answer will be that a metaphysic of grounding offers the best prospects for getting us all the way there, but that such a metaphysic establishes the consistency of Anselm’s claims at a cost that he will be unwilling to pay.

1. What Anselm Wants

First I present, as briefly as possible, the evidence that Anselm is explicitly committed to the following views:

- (1) presentism (which is to say, the view that all that exists *in time* is what exists *in the present*, so that neither the past nor the future is real);
- (2) divine eternity (the view that, as Boethius had put it, God enjoys the complete possession of illimitable life all at once, that there is no before or after, no past or future,

in God's life, but only an indivisible *now*);

(3) divine foreknowledge (the view that God has perfect and infallible knowledge of what *to us* is future—for to God nothing is future);

(4) divine aseity (the view that God does not owe his being what he is to anything outside himself—in the current context, most relevantly, that his foreknowledge of our actions is not caused by or otherwise dependent on those actions); and

(5) libertarianism (the thesis that human beings [and angels] have and exercise the capacity to perform actions that are not determined by antecedent causal conditions or anything else).

So far as I know, no one disputes that Anselm held divine eternity, divine foreknowledge, and libertarianism; so for my purposes in this paper it seems safe enough to dispense even with a quick proof-texting and take those attributions as well-founded. That leaves divine aseity and presentism.

1.1. Aseity

To begin with aseity: Katherin Rogers says repeatedly, and in a number of different works, that according to Anselm God's knowledge of (what to us are) future free actions is caused by those actions.¹ God knows what his creatures do because he sees the whole of time, and everything that is done in time, from his timeless, eternal vantage point. The attractiveness of

¹ See, most recently, Katherin A. Rogers, *Freedom and Self-Creation: Anselmian Libertarianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 111-12.

this account from a libertarian viewpoint is, I take it, pretty clear: it removes one obvious threat of causal determination (or other necessitation) by making God entirely a spectator rather than an agent in the actions of his creatures.

Rogers cites no text in favor of this attribution, however, for the very good reason that there is none. Anselm does explicitly consider the question whether God's knowledge depends on our actions, and he says it does not. His one and only discussion of this question occurs in his last completed work, *De concordia*. There he argues that "if God has his knowledge from things, it follows that things are prior to God's knowledge and thus are not from God" (DC 1.7).² But in fact "every quality and every action and whatever has any being is from God," and things "cannot be from God unless they are from his knowledge" (Ibid.). So divine aseity in this strong sense is after all among the things that Anselm wants.

1.2. Presentism

The last such thing to be considered, then, is presentism. To avoid any unclarity (since terminology varies somewhat from one author to another), I define presentism as the conjunction of the A-theory of time with the claim that, necessarily, it is always true that only temporally present objects exist.³ According to the A-theory, the properties of *being past*, *being present*, and *being future* are irreducible to such relations as *being earlier than*, *being simultaneous with*,

² Citations to Anselm's works are given using the following abbreviations: CDH, *Cur Deus Homo*; DC, *De concordia*; LF, Lambeth Fragments; M, *Monologion*; P, *Proslogion*. All translations are my own.

³ See Ned Markosian, Meghan Sullivan, and Nina Emery, "Time," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2016/entries/time/>>

and *being later than*. According to the A-theorist, therefore, space and time are fundamentally disanalogous. For there is no irreducible property of *being far away* or *being east*; there is only the relation of *being far away from* or *being to the east of*. Moreover, time passes or flows; space does not. The presentist adds to the A-theory the claim that only what is temporally present is real or exists. This claim is a natural but not inevitable extension of the disanalogy between space and time: things that are not *here* exist, just elsewhere; but things that are not *now* do not exist at all.⁴ I shall call this further claim “the presentist addition.”

That Anselm accepts both the A-theory and the presentist addition is clear from the three passages in which he offers an extended treatment of time and its relation to eternity:

Monologion 20–24, *Monologion* 28, and *De concordia* 1.5.5 form a single extended argument,

⁴ For a recent example of an A-theorist who rejects presentism, see Meghan Sullivan, “The Minimal A-Theory,” *Philosophical Studies* 158 (2012): 149–74.

⁵ There are also a few places in which Anselm treats these matters in passing, invariably in ways consistent with the more extended treatments I consider in the body of the paper. In *Proslogion* 20 and 22 Anselm contrasts God’s possession of his eternity all at once with the piecemeal existence of all other things: “whatever has a past that no longer exists and a future that does not yet exist: that thing does not exist in a strict and absolute sense. . . . And you are the one who exists in a strict and unqualified sense, because you have no past and no future but only a present” (P 22). In the Reply to Gaunilo 8 he contrasts something that “is always moving from the past through the present into the future” with God, who “in no way needs or is compelled to change or move.” In *De incarnatione Verbi* 15 Anselm describes the present time as “a simple point, that is, one that has no parts”; having no parts, it “is indivisible, as eternity is.” In *On the Fall of the Devil* 21 Anselm says that “God’s foreknowledge is not properly called foreknowledge. To him, everything is always present, so he does not have foreknowledge of what is future but simply knowledge of what is present.” In *De concordia* 2.2 he makes the same point about God’s predestination.

setting up an apparent dialectical impasse (“I feel the rumblings of a contradiction”) in chapters 20 and 21 to which he offers a solution in chapter 22 that is further developed in chapters 23 and 24. Anselm’s question is about God’s presence in or to time and place: it seems that we must say both that God exists in every place and time, for nothing at all can exist where or when God is not present (M 20), and that God exists in no place or time, because existence in a place or a time would introduce parts or plurality in God (M 21). The solution is that God is *present* as a whole and all at once to all places and times but *contained* or *confined* by none of them (M 22). It is better, in fact, to say that God exists everywhere than that he exists in every place (M 23), better to say that he exists always than that he exists at every time (M 24).

As this brief outline of the argument suggests, the focus in these chapters is on the relation of God to time (and place), not on the topology of time itself. Even so, Anselm says enough about the nature of time to make his commitment to the A-theory clear. He speaks of time as flowing: “if God’s life is produced by means of the flow of times, he has a past, present, and future along with those times” (M 21). He also describes the present as fleeting (*labile*): “Nor does God exist in the fleeting present that we undergo” (M 22), and “God has no past or future, or even a temporal—that is, a fleeting—present such as we undergo” (M 24). Furthermore, he affirms the presentist addition by denying that the past and the future are real: “Nor does the fact that God existed or exists or will exist mean that something of his eternity has vanished from the present time with the past, which no longer exists; or passes away with the present, which barely exists; or is yet to come with the future, which does not yet exist” (M 22).⁶

⁶ If Anselm were an eternalist, there would be no particular point in his saying that the *present* barely exists: all

times would have the same mode or degree of existence, so if the present barely exists, the past and the future also barely exist. Rather, the present barely exists, in that it's fleeting and durationless—but the past and future don't exist at all.

Anselm's commitment to the A-theory is evident not only in what he does say but also in what he does not say. For example, he takes it for granted in M 21 that there is nothing in time that is analogous to the way in which a plurality of distinct places are all equally real. He uses A-series language—"past," "present," "future"—without apology or qualification. Anselm is quite capable of—indeed, rather insistent on—regimenting ordinary language about time and eternity when it is philosophically imprecise (as when we speak of God using verbs in the past tense: DC 1.5). That he never insists on translating A-series language into B-series language surely indicates that he is satisfied with the philosophical acceptability, the metaphysical accuracy, of A-series language for the temporal order in a way that he cannot be satisfied with the use of temporal language for eternity.

In *Monologion* 28 Anselm defends the claim that God alone exists unqualifiedly, whereas creatures “nearly do not exist at all, and barely do exist.” This claim rests on the contrast between God's eternal mode of being and creatures' existence in time, and so Anselm resumes his discussion of time, treating it once again in a presentist way. He denies that past and future are real:

all things other [than God] exist changeably in some respect, so that at some time they were or will be something that they are not now, or they are now something that at some time they were not or will not be. What they once were no longer exists, and what they will be does not yet exist, and what they are in the fleeting, utterly brief, and barely-existing present barely exists. (M 28)

Anselm here expresses the view that only what creatures are in the “barely-existing present” is actually real; that is precisely how we differ from God, who “is whatever he is, once and for all,

all at once, and illimitably” (M 28). The argument assumes a real and irreducible difference between present times and past times. Only the present time and the things that exist in the present time exist. Past things used to exist, but exist no longer; future things will exist, but do not exist yet.

The irreducible difference between time and eternity is once again the focus in the third major Anselmian discussion of time in *De concordia* 1.5. Anselm writes:

For in eternity it is not the case that something was or will be, but only that it is; nonetheless—and without any inconsistency—in time something was or will be. And in just the same way, something that in eternity cannot be changed is proved, without any inconsistency, to be changeable in time until it exists, thanks to free will. Now although in eternity there is only a present, it is not a temporal present like ours, but an eternal present that encompasses all times. Just as every place, and those things that are in any place, are contained in the present time, so too every time, and those things that are at any time, are enclosed all at once in the eternal present. So even though the Apostle says that God “foreknew,” “predestined,” “called,” “justified,” and “glorified” his saints, none of these is earlier or later in God; rather, they are to be understood as existing all at once in the eternal present. For his eternity does have its “all at once,” which contains all those things that exist together in one place or one time, as well as all those that exist in diverse places or times. (DC 1.5)

It would be a mistake to read this passage⁷ as endorsing a B-theory of time, according to which

⁷ As Rogers does: see Katherin A. Rogers, *Anselm on Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 176-84.

past, present, and future are all equally real. Rather, Anselm is drawing a contrast between eternity and time. In *eternity* everything that exists at every time and in every place exists together or simultaneously, in a single all-encompassing now; in *time* the “now” encompasses only those things that exist in every place at that “now.” This suggests, though it does not entail, a privileged “now” of the presentist sort. Clearer still is this, from a bit later on:

a thing exists differently in time from how it exists in eternity, so that it is sometimes true that something does not exist in time that does exist in eternity, and that its existence is past in time but not past in eternity or future in time but not future in eternity. (Ibid.)

This is A-theory language—something’s existence is past in time—as contrasted with B-theory language.

2. Can Anselm Have It All?

So I’ve set forth what Anselm wants: presentism, divine eternity, divine foreknowledge, divine aseity, and libertarianism. On to Part Two: can he have all of it? Two apparent inconsistencies seem to leap out immediately. First, it is difficult to see how God can have complete foreknowledge if presentism is true: for on presentism there is no future for God to know. Even if there are some determinate facts about the future, given natural laws (as that the sun will rise at such-and-such a time tomorrow), there will be no such facts about future free acts, assuming (as Anselm does assume) that libertarianism is true. And divine eternity complicates the issue further, because God cannot learn anything (even about the past); for learning is a kind of change, and change requires a before and after. Second, it is hard to see how divine aseity and libertarianism can be reconciled. For if God is not merely a spectator but an

agent in human acts—and especially if divine foreknowledge derives from his agency—then it is hard to see how those acts can be up to us in the way that libertarians say they are. I shall look more carefully at both of these apparent contradictions and explore the resources that Anselm thinks he has for resolving them.

2.1. Presentism and foreknowledge

To begin with presentism and foreknowledge: Anselm frequently makes use of a kind of contextualism according to which the truth-value of statements (typically, but not exclusively, moral or modal statements) differs depending on the context in which we consider them. Furthermore, in certain cases there is no *privileged* context, no *all-things-considered* truth value, by comparison with which other contexts or other analyses of the truth of the statement are merely provisional or qualified. That is, the contextualism in such cases is ineliminable.

The passages quoted from *De concordia* 1.5 in §1.2 clearly rely on such contextualism in relating time to eternity. If one asks whether something exists, there are two contexts according to which the question can be answered: time and eternity. It can be the case that something exists in eternity but not in time. (The converse cannot hold: whatever exists in time also exists in eternity. But that is a consequence of the fact that God’s knowledge encompasses all things, not of one of these contexts being privileged.) And in such a case it is not the case that really, all-things-considered, or unqualifiedly the thing exists: it really does exist in eternity, and it really doesn’t exist in time, and there is no answer to the question whether it really does exist or not, full stop.

Or, to take up yet another version of the question in which the difference between the two

questions is clearer, let us ask whether Anselm's existence is past. The answer is that Anselm's existence is past in time, but present in eternity (for eternity has no past). The statement "Anselm's existence is past" is neither unqualifiedly true nor unqualifiedly false: his existence is past (really past) in time and present (really present) in eternity. There is no way to reduce the duality of contexts of evaluation into one, no way to settle what is really, all-things-considered, the case with respect to the pastness of Anselm's existence. It is really past in time, and really present in eternity, and so it is not all-things-considered either past or present.

It is by this kind of argumentation that Anselm would reject contemporary arguments that complete divine foreknowledge entails eternalism, according to which all times are equally real.⁸ On presentism (so the reasoning goes), what to us is future is not real; and how can God know what isn't real, what isn't there to be known? To this Anselm can reply—I say "can reply" rather than "does reply" because he never considers such arguments explicitly—that the future *is* real, in eternity; it is not real in time. Since God's knowledge depends on what is real in eternity, there is no reason he can't know what is future to us; the future is unreal in time, but not unreal all-things-considered.⁹

2.2. *Aseity and libertarianism*

⁸ For critical discussion of such arguments, see R. T. Mullins, *The End of the Timeless God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 127–55.

⁹ Paul Helm makes a similar argument for what he calls "two standpoints," taking his cue from Augustine's discussion of time in *Confessions* 11. Paul Helm, *Eternal God: A Study of God without Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 251–69.

In resolving the second apparent inconsistency, that between aseity and libertarianism, contextualism again plays a role, along with the privation theory of evil. Let's start with the privation theory. According to a venerable neo-Platonist tradition that entered the Christian tradition principally through Augustine, evil has no positive ontological status; it is merely a privation, a lack of goodness where goodness ought to be. And since goodness and being are coextensive, we can also say that evil is a lack of being where being ought to be. Now as I've argued elsewhere,¹⁰ Anselm clearly doubts that the privation theory can do all the work to which Augustine had tried to put it. But he does invoke it in *De concordia* 1.7 to show how God's knowledge of the free actions of creatures is consistent with divine aseity:

This question can be readily answered once we realize that the good that is justice is genuinely something, whereas the evil that is injustice lacks existence altogether. . . . For injustice is not a quality or an action or any being; it is merely the lack of justice that ought to be present. . . . Indeed, every quality and every action and whatever has any being is from God, from whom all justice and no injustice comes. So God brings about all things, whether they are brought about by a just or an unjust will—that is, both good and evil deeds. In the case of good deeds, he brings about both what they are and their being good, whereas in evil deeds he brings about what they are, but not their being evil. (DC 1.7)

¹⁰ See Thomas Williams, "Anselm's Quiet Radicalism," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 24 (2016): 3–22; and Thomas Williams, "Anselm," in Andrew Pinsent, ed., *The History of Evil. Volume 2: The History of Evil in the Medieval Age* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 121–34.

The idea is that God brings about everything that has being and goodness in every creature's action. He does not bring about the lack of goodness or being that characterizes unjust action; he does not bring about injustice, which isn't a thing. So God can know creaturely free actions by knowing what he does and does not bring about in each case. If he knows that he brings about the action along with conserving justice in the agent, he knows that he brings about an action and that the action is just; if he knows that he brings about the action but does not also preserve justice in the agent, he knows that he brings about an action and that the action is unjust, though God does not bring it about that the action is unjust. In either case, God knows what is done by a creature by knowing what he does in the creature's action; in the formulation we saw earlier, God does not have his knowledge from creatures, but rather creatures have their being from God's knowledge.

We'll come back in a bit to whether this is coherent (I think it isn't): the point at the moment is to show how Anselm *thinks* he can have it all. And to continue with that phase of the argument, let's look at the contextualist dimension. Anselm sees the problem as that of resolving the fixity of God's knowledge—and therefore the fixity of what God knows—with the fact that in a free action the agent has genuinely open possibilities. When I confront a situation in which I exercise the power of free choice, I can act this way or that; the situation can turn out either one way or another. But how can this be the case—how can there be genuine open options—when God's eternal knowledge of what I do is fixed in God's never-changing eternity?

Anselm appeals to his contextualism again here. The free actions of creatures, he says, are mutable in time but immutable in eternity: "something that in eternity cannot be changed is proved, without any inconsistency, to be changeable in time until it exists, thanks to free will"

(DC 1.5). It is clear that Anselm is not thinking of actions as temporally extended and therefore as possibly undergoing change. Rather, by saying that a free choice is *mutabile* in time, he means that it is, as we would say now, “open” before it happens; in eternity, however, the choice is *immutabile*, “fixed.” Here again there is no all-things-considered answer to the question “Are free choices genuinely open?” They are open in time and fixed in eternity, but there is no privileged frame of reference such that we can say they are either open or fixed all things considered.

This solution has more to be said for it than might first appear. That free actions are fixed in eternity is simply another way of saying that their cognitive presence to God is secure: he knows them in his all-encompassing, fixed, and immutable act of knowing. But *what* he knows is something temporal such that it could have turned out differently *in time*. And that feature of the act—its mutability-in-time—is actually part of what God knows immutably in eternity. There is no contradiction, precisely because there is no privileged context or frame of reference for answering the questions about foreknowledge that we want to ask.

2.3. *Are Anselm’s five theses coherent?*

So now we have the five theses Anselm wants and some additional premises and forms of argument, all also drawn from Anselm, that enable him to have them all—or at least to think he can have them all. Still, we can ask whether he has managed to defend the coherence of this set of theses. I shall first argue that Anselm’s attempt to combine divine aseity, foreknowledge, and libertarianism is incoherent. I then argue that in order to determine whether the contextualist move succeeds in reconciling presentism and divine foreknowledge, we need a more developed

metaphysic, which I seek to provide in §3.

I suggested earlier that Anselm's solution to the problem of God's knowledge and creaturely free choice is incoherent. The problem is this. Suppose for a moment that Anselm is right about the mechanism of divine foreknowledge: God foreknows actions because he is a partial co-cause of those actions along with the creaturely agent. In just actions, God not only brings about the action but also, by preserving justice in the agent, brings it about that the action is just; in unjust actions, God brings about the action but does not preserve justice in the agent. Moreover, the difference between a just and an unjust action is purely privative: the injustice of an unjust act is nothing. On this account, God knows whether an agent acts justly or unjustly by knowing what he himself does in the agent's action. Yet in either case, according to Anselm, the agent's act is free; it is the agent, not God, who is responsible. (Anselm is particularly concerned to deny that God is the "culprit and instigator in all evil deeds," which would mean that "he does not act justly in punishing the wicked" [DC 1.7].) It follows, then, that in any case of unjust action, there is something God could have done such that, if he had done it, the act would have been just: he could have cooperated with the preservation of justice in the agent. And if he had done so, the act would still have been free; for (according to Anselm) just acts, in which God brings about the justice of the act by cooperating with the preservation of justice in the agent, are free. This account of the mechanism of divine foreknowledge thus throws responsibility for unjust action back on to God: God knows that a creature acts unjustly by knowing that he omits to preserve justice in the creature. This omission is sufficient for the creature's act being unjust—otherwise, this mechanism could not serve as the means by which God foreknows creaturely actions—but the omission is entirely gratuitous, since God could have preserved justice in the

creature without undermining freedom and moral responsibility.¹¹

One might think that any attempt to ground God's knowledge of creaturely free choices in his knowledge of his own actions in or with the creatures' actions is going to fail—at least if success is defined as satisfying the libertarian. Libertarians should, it seems, actually *want* a spectator God, one who knows what creatures do *because* creatures do it; they should not see it as an objectionable derogation from divine prerogatives that he discovers, rather than determines, those actions that are supposed to be “up to” creatures rather than God. But Anselm does not see things this way, and many contemporary philosophers of religion who want to maintain some version of classical theism and resist open theism are with Anselm in this respect. In particular, it seems that a God who must discover what creatures do, particularly if those creatures are in presentist time, cannot be the timeless God of classical theism; for a timeless God cannot learn new things as time unfolds.

This argument suggests that if we are to find a way for Anselm and like-minded contemporary philosophers of religion to have everything they want, the key will be resolving the difficulties posed by the combination of presentism, divine eternity, and divine foreknowledge. Although the contextualist move has a certain *prima facie* plausibility (or so it seems to me), I can also see why one might regard it with suspicion. What sort of metaphysic would allow one to claim that the whole of time is knowable by God in a single all-encompassing glance when there is no such thing as the whole of time, but only the piecemeal

¹¹ In addition to this problem with divine justice, it is also not clear whether the account of divine foreknowledge Anselm gives at DC 1.7 is consistent with his usual way of thinking about the metaphysics of free choice.

existence of a series of durationless moments? Wouldn't God have to *learn* things as time goes by, in contradiction to his supposed eternity? At least on eternalism the whole of time is spread out before God to see all at once. On presentism there is no whole of time until, as the old hymn has it, the trumpet of the Lord shall sound and time shall be no more.

3. Grounding

A metaphysic of grounding of the sort that has come to prominence recently thanks to work by Kit Fine, Jonathan Schaffer, and Gideon Rosen might very well do the trick.¹² The approach to grounding that seems most likely to help Anselm is the one developed by Jonathan Schaffer in “On What Grounds What” and applied by Kenny Pearce in “Foundational Grounding and the Argument from Contingency.”¹³ Pearce argues that God is what he calls the

¹² Kit Fine, “The Question of Realism,” *Philosophers’ Imprint* 1 (2001): 1–30, “Some Puzzles of Ground,” *Notre Dame Journal of Formal Logic* 51 (2010): 97–118, “Guide to Ground,” in Fabrice Correia and Benjamin Schnieder, eds., *Metaphysical Grounding: Understanding the Structure of Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 37–80, and “The Pure Logic of Ground,” *Review of Symbolic Logic* 5 (2012): 1–25; Jonathan Schaffer, “On What Grounds What,” in Davis Chalmers, David Manley, and Ryan Wasserman, eds., *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 347–83; Gideon Rosen, “Metaphysical Dependence: Grounding and Reduction,” in Bob Hale and Aviv Hoffmann, eds., *Modality: Metaphysics, Logic, and Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 109–35. See Salim Berker, “The Unity of Grounding,” *Mind* 127 (2018): 729–777, for references, a brief history of the recent discussion, and the antecedents of grounding in earlier philosophers.

¹³ Jonathan Schaffer, “On What Grounds What,” in Chalmers et al., *Metametaphysics*, 347–83; Kenneth L. Pearce, “Foundational Grounding and the Argument from Contingency,” *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion* 8 (2017):

foundational ground of “the total sequence of causes and effects in the universe (‘History’ for short).”¹⁴ I propose a version of Pearce’s account of the relationship between God and History that seems congenial to Anselm and that would allow him to hold all five theses consistently. I then argue that such consistency comes at too great a price for Anselm to be willing to pay it.

3.1. A grounding account of Anselmian theism

Grounding, Pearce says, is “the relation, or genus of relations, that obtains between more fundamental and less fundamental entities and makes metaphysical explanations of the less fundamental entities (or the facts about them) in terms of the more fundamental entities possible.”¹⁵ Grounding in this sense is a primitive unanalyzable notion,¹⁶ so we cannot define it, but we can state its formal features and give various examples of it. It is irreflexive and asymmetric, unlike supervenience, which is reflexive and symmetric. As examples of grounding, Schaffer offers the relations between “(i) the entity and its singleton, (ii) the Swiss cheese and its holes, (iii) natural features and moral features, (iv) sparse properties and abundant properties, and (v) truthmakers and truths.”¹⁷ Pearce instances “the relation of an agent to her action . . . the relation of a statue to its material . . . and the relation whereby fictional objects depend on

245–68.

¹⁴ Pearce, “Foundational Grounding,” 245.

¹⁵ Pearce, “Foundational Grounding,” 249.

¹⁶ Schaffer “On What Grounds What,” 364.

¹⁷ Schaffer “On What Grounds What,” 375.

fictional narratives and dream objects depend on dreams.”¹⁸

Pearce appeals to these three relations in his account of the relationship between God and creation: “(1) God *performs* an act of will. (2) This act of will *constitutes* History. (3) History is the *narrative ground* of particular created things like you and me.”¹⁹ To flesh out the ways in which this metaphysic might help Anselm, think first about the relationship between fictional characters, the fictional narratives in which they appear, and the authors of those narratives. The existence and activity of Archdeacon Grantly, for example, is grounded in the thought of Anthony Trollope by way of a series of artefacts, the Barsetshire novels, that Trollope brought into existence. Archdeacon Grantly is sufficiently real—enjoys sufficiently robust existence—that we can say true things about him: it is true that Archdeacon Grantly is married to Warden Harding’s daughter, is brother-in-law to Dean Arabin, belongs to what is known, with an undue hint of depreciation, as the High and Dry party of the Church of England. As he goes around Barsetshire he performs what look for all the world like free actions: deliberately stoking the enmity between his own faction and “that woman” at the palace, ignoring his wife Susan’s advice, regretting ignoring his wife Susan’s advice, and so forth. And yet of course Archdeacon Grantly and his acts and adventures are foundationally grounded in Anthony Trollope’s thought; the Archdeacon does what he does, and says what he says, because—and only because—that’s the way Trollope told the story.

The relation between God and History will not be perfectly analogous to the relation

¹⁸ Pearce, “Foundational Grounding,” 250.

¹⁹ Pearce, “Foundational Grounding,” 250.

between Trollope and the Archdeacon. Trollope grounds his characters and their actions by bringing about artefacts: he causes the stories in which they live and move and have their being. God, however, brings about no artefact: his act of will does not cause, but rather constitutes, the created order. The acts by which Trollope brings about the artefacts that ground his characters are numerous, temporally extended (every morning without fail from five o'clock until time to dress), and not wholly under his control. God creates (so Anselm holds) by a single, timeless act of will that is entirely under his own control.²⁰

If Anselm can understand the relation between God and History in this way, the difficulty in resolving divine eternity with presentism seems to disappear. Why can't God tell all at once a story that, internally, unfolds in a presentist way? Human authors manage to ground time-scales entirely at odds with their lived experience: C. S. Lewis managed to crowd the whole history of Narnia into about forty years of fictional earth history and a mere ten years or so of actual composition. There seems to be no reason to suppose that a presentist creation could not be grounded in a single, all-encompassing, eternal thought.

²⁰ Pearce argues that the unimpedibility of God's will with respect to creation entails that History is constituted, rather than caused, by the divine will: for a will is impeded just in case the will's intended effect is something over and above its act (Pearce, "Foundational Grounding," 251, and Kenneth L. Pearce, "Counterpossible Dependence and the Efficacy of the Divine Will," *Faith and Philosophy* 34 [2017]: 3–16). This seems to me a mistake: that a will's intended effect is something over and above its act is perhaps a necessary condition for impededibility, but surely not a sufficient condition. But I shall not pursue that issue here, since History-as-divine-act has advantages for Anselm's view that History-as-divine-artefact lacks, and the intent here is to make the strongest case for Anselm's view that can be made using a metaphysic of grounding.

And indeed, the resolution of libertarianism with divine eternity and divine aseity may well be possible on this metaphysic. The creatures who are constituted by God's thought act freely because God thinks of them in a certain way—entertains ideas of them as free, as we say, in the libertarian sense. And so why not have free creatures whose free actions are constituted in a single, all-encompassing story told by an eternal God, and known by that same God in a single act of knowing that constitutes, rather than follows from, the reality of the things themselves? There seems to be nothing to prevent it.

3.2. Difficulties for this picture

So a metaphysic of grounding seems to offer Anselm a way to have everything he wants: presentism, divine eternity, divine foreknowledge, divine aseity, and libertarianism. But can he avail himself of this metaphysic without losing other things that are important to him? A first worry is that on this view creatures turn out not really to exist at all. What happens in a dream does not really happen; Archdeacon Grantly does not really live in Plumstead Episcopi, which indeed is not really a place. So if creatures are to God what dream events are to dreamers or fictional things are to their authors, then creatures do not really exist.

The friends of grounding have their response ready. Dream events and fictional characters do exist. Schaffer argues for what he calls “permissivism” about existence.²¹ (“Existence is easy,” to use the striking if perhaps misleading slogan.) The interesting metaphysical questions are not about existence, but rather about what is fundamental. To say that some x is grounded in some y is not to say that x does not exist, but to say that it is not

²¹ Schaffer, “On what Grounds What,” 78-81.

fundamental.

Now one might think that Anselm should welcome both the positive and the negative claim as applied to the issues that concern him: that is, both the claim that creatures really do exist and the claim that creatures are not fundamental (but rather God is). But this appearance evaporates on closer inspection. Precisely because “existence is easy,” it turns out that one is not saying anything terribly interesting when one says that something exists. Schaffer brings this out quite strikingly:

So I would suggest that the contemporary existence debates are trivial. While I obviously cannot speak to every contemporary existence debate here, perhaps it will suffice to speak to one . . . debate that may stand in as a best case for a metaphysical existence question, namely, the question of whether God exists. I think even this is a trivial *yes* (and I am an atheist). *The atheistic view is that God is a fictional character.*²²

Permissivism about existence means that “exists” in “this creature exists” need not mean anything more than it means in “God exists” as uttered by an atheist; so there is no reason for Anselm to find any comfort in being able to affirm that creatures exist.

It *need not* mean anything more, but it doesn’t follow that it *cannot* mean anything more. And perhaps the negative claim—that creatures are not fundamental, but rather God is—hints at a way in which creatures can be said to exist in a more robust way than dream events and fictional characters exist. As Pearce argues, “the grounding approach to ontology” allows that fundamentality comes in degrees, with grounded entities being less fundamental than the

²² Schaffer, “On What Grounds What,” 79–80, emphasis in original.

entities that ground them. Accordingly, since dreams are grounded in dreamers, the dreamers are more fundamental than the dreams. It is in this sense that dreamers and the objects in their waking environs are real but dream objects are not. My model does not undermine the dependence of dreams on dreamers; it merely posits that the dreamers, in turn, depend on God. Accordingly, the ordinary distinction between real objects and dream objects is in no way undermined, for the real objects are more fundamental than the dream objects, and this is what we mean in calling them “real.”²³

But if “realness” is a matter of fundamentality, and dream-objects are unreal because they are grounded in dreamers, then why aren’t dreamers in turn unreal because they are grounded in God? Or, coming from the other direction, why wouldn’t the Archdeacon turn out to be real because he grounds events that occur in his dreams? There seems to be no principled reason to draw the line between real and unreal at exactly the point where we want it.

Perhaps, however, the suggestion of a sharp dividing line between what is real and what is not is a red herring, and we should speak only in terms of fundamentality: God is more fundamental than created objects, which are in turn more fundamental than fictional characters, and so forth. Anselm’s language of one thing’s existing “more excellently” or “more greatly” (M 31) might suggest such degrees of fundamentality, as would his claim that God alone exists “in an unqualified sense and perfectly and absolutely, whereas all other things nearly do not exist at all, and barely do exist” (M 28). But in fact Anselm’s explicit reason for saying that created things barely exist is that they are in time (understood in a presentist way) and come from

²³ Pearce, “Foundational Grounding,” 254–55.

nothing. And by degrees of existence he expresses a hierarchy, not of grounding, but of perfection: “it is evident that a living substance exists more greatly than one that is not living, one that is capable of perception than one that is not capable of perception, and one that is rational than one that is not rational” (M 31).

The notion that God’s act of will *constitutes* History poses a further difficulty. What is constituted is nothing over and above what constitutes it.²⁴ But the created order *is* something over and above God, not merely *numerically* distinct from God (as a statue is numerically distinct from the material that constitutes it) but *metaphysically* distinct from God.²⁵ Or so at least Anselm thinks. Anselm takes care to distinguish creation-as-divine-utterance (which he identifies with the Word, the Second Person of the Trinity) from the concrete created order (M 31). He also consistently says that God “brought about” or “made” (*fecit*) created things, and the canonical sense of ‘bringing about’ for Anselm is straightforward efficient causality (LF).

One way to avoid both the philosophical and the exegetical difficulty is to understand creation not as divine act but as divine artefact: creation is something brought about by a divine act of will and so, like all other effects, something over and above its cause. But this move undermines the promise of the grounding metaphysic to reconcile all of Anselm’s desired conclusions. For suppose God brings about the whole of creation. Then it seems clear that there

²⁴ Pearce, “Counterpossible Dependence,” 9, and “Foundational Grounding,” 250.

²⁵ Pearce says that whereas a cause is both numerically and metaphysically distinct from its effect, “in cases of grounding the grounded entity is numerically but not metaphysically distinct from the grounding entity” (Pearce, “Counterpossible Dependence,” 9–10).

is no freedom, certainly as Anselm understands it.²⁶ Suppose instead that God brings about only some of the created order so as to leave room for indeterminacy. Then it seems clear that he lacks foreknowledge. If Trollope doesn't create the whole book, but leaves some bits for the characters themselves to work out, he can't know in advance how the story will go. He can find out when it's all done, of course, but Anselm's God is timelessly eternal and therefore can't find anything out.

Most crucially, however, neither creation-as-act nor creation-as-artefact can secure something that is of fundamental importance to Anselm. The purpose of human beings, he says, is to know and love God: "It is therefore clear that the rational creature ought to devote all its power and will to remembering and understanding and loving the supreme good, for which purpose it knows it has its very existence" (M 68). It is to restore the possibility of this fellowship with God that the Incarnate Word freely offered his life: "Does not this seem to be a sufficiently necessary reason that God ought to have done the things we say: that the human race—such a precious work of God—had utterly perished, and that it was not fitting that God's purpose for human beings should be completely annihilated, and that his purpose could not be brought to fulfillment unless the human race were liberated by its Creator himself?" (CDH 1.4). Now a dream object cannot love the dreamer, a dance cannot love the dancer, and Archdeacon Grantly cannot love Anthony Trollope.

So, however promising it is as a means of reconciling Anselm's commitment to

²⁶ For Anselm's account of freedom, see Sandra Visser and Thomas Williams, "Anselm's Account of Freedom," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 31 (2001): 221–44.

presentism, libertarianism, and divine aseity, foreknowledge, and eternity, a metaphysic of grounding ultimately fails to accommodate everything Anselm wants. The consistency of those five theses is bought at the price of making rational creatures the wrong sorts of things to fulfill the purposes for which God intended them, and that is too high a price for Anselm to be willing to pay.

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