ANSELM ON THE BEAUTY OF THE INCARNATION

Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo* (CDH) discusses a number of objections to the Christian claim that God became incarnate and atoned for human sin. One is this: if God is omnipotent and wise and offers humanity salvation, God does not become incarnate or atone for human sin. For if God is omnipotent, God can offer humanity salvation without doing either. If God can do so, then if He is wise, He would not have become incarnate or atoned. For it would not be wise to suffer so many unseemly things for no reason. . . if for no reason a human were to do with great labor something which that person could have done easily, nobody would judge that person to be wise.¹

This paper examines Anselm’s reply to this argument. Doing so sheds light on the nature of Anselm’s overall argument in CDH and on issues in philosophical theology.

The argument explicated

For an omnipotent God, no possible means can be harder than any other: the divine nature “cannot labor in what it wills to do.”² So the omnipotence-wisdom argument’s talk of God’s “labor” or “ease” of action can seem at best anthropomorphic. But it would be hasty to reject the argument because of this. For talk of labor and ease can be a way to talk about efficiency: an inefficient plan can be laborious even if the one executing it finds no strain in it. Let “C [Christian]-salvation” abbreviate “salvation by means of an Incarnation and Atonement.” Then Anselm’s objection might really run along these lines:

Efficiency is a virtue the wise respect. God is perfectly wise. So *ceteris paribus*, God will maximize the efficiency of His plan of salvation. C-salvation is less than maximally efficient. So more efficient salvation-plans are possible. God is omnipotent. All possible salvation-plans are available options for an omnipotent, perfectly wise agent. So plans of salvation more efficient than C-salvation are available options for God. So as God is perfectly wise, God would not elect C-salvation.

Let “P” abbreviate “God offers humankind salvation in a way more efficient than C-salvation.” Then one way to formalize this reading of Anselm’s argument runs thus:

1. God is perfectly wise.  
   (premise)
2. God is omnipotent.  
   (premise)
3. If God is perfectly wise, God acts as efficiently as He can.

4. If God is omnipotent, then (∧ P ⊃ God can effect it that P).

5. ∨ P.

6. If God can effect it that P, then if God becomes incarnate or atones, God does not act as efficiently as He can.

7. ∨ P ⊃ God can effect it that P.

8. God can effect it that P.

9. If God becomes incarnate or atones, God does not act as efficiently as He can.

10. God acts as efficiently as He can.

11. God does not become incarnate or atone.

As this Efficiency Argument (EA) is valid, the question Christians face is what to make of its premises.

The argument supported

(1) is a primary religious claim, non-negotiable for Christians. The claim that God is a perfect being also seems to entail (1). (2) has the same backing. (4) follows from the claim that an omnipotent being can actualize any logically possible state of affairs. One must qualify or supplement this claim to get a viable account of omnipotence. But the qualifications do not affect (4). So (4) retains most of that claim's initial plausibility.

The conjunction of (1) and (2) supports (5). For it surely seems that perfect wisdom could craft and omnipotence execute a plan of salvation not involving an Incarnation. Anselm, for instance, takes it as at least initially a live option

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1 I refer to Cur Deus Homo first by book and chapter, then by the volume, page and line numbers of the Schmitt edition (F. S. Schmitt, S. Anselmi Opera Omnia (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons, vols. I–III 1946, IV–V 1951)). Thus this quotation is from CDH I, 6, S II, p. 54, II. 5, 14–16. Translations are mine save as noted.


4 For P does not involve states of affairs of sorts God’s power over which we must qualify. See again, e.g. Flint and Freddoso, “Maximal Power.”

5 CDH I, 1, S II, p. 48, II. 2–5.


7 So, e.g. Swinburne, Existence, appendix.

8 Of course, the apparent inefficiency of evolution is not the only problem it raises. The course of evolution involved a good deal of animal pain. Thus it raises imposing forms of the problem of evil. See, e.g. William Rowe, “The Problem of Evil and Some Varities of Atheism,” American Philosophical Quarterly 16 (1979), pp. 335–341.
that God save humanity through some agent other than Himself or by simply forgiving us, without the payment of an atoning sacrifice. So (5) will seem true if we can suggest ways in which C-salvation is less than ideally efficient or alternate salvation-plans which would seem more efficient. But that does not seem hard to do. C-salvation involves the suffering and death of God the Son. It procures a certain range of benefits for humanity. If God procured comparable benefits for humanity without becoming incarnate, e.g. by simply forgiving human sin without exacting an atoning sacrifice, He would procure comparable benefits at a smaller cost. Cost/benefit calculations measure efficiency. Again, in C-salvation, God by becoming incarnate takes on a radically new mode of being. This is an extra, unneeded step if God can procure comparable benefits without becoming incarnate. Counting extra steps measures efficiency. So one can indeed make a case that C-salvation is less than efficient, and (5) thus seems plausible.

(6) is a conceptual truth. Thus EA’s fortunes seem to ride on (3). But (3) also has an interest beyond EA.

The argument generalized

Western theists often hold that

12. the goods God sought to achieve by creating include the existence of life, the existence of rational persons, and loving human relationships with God.

For instance, only if they hold (12) can theists use recent scientific evidence of the universe’s “fine-tuning” as evidence for God’s existence: evidence that the universe is “fine-tuned for life” is evidence of divine action only on the assumption that if there is a God, He has an interest in bringing about life, rational persons, etc. But theists do not affirm (12) only for apologetic reasons. (12) is plausible for any theology which finds some truth in the early chapters of Genesis.

Now God brought about the life-friendly universe we inhabit through billions of years of stellar evolution following the Big Bang. God surely could have done this in some more direct, efficient way. Further, if the theory of evolution is true, God brought about the existence of rational persons only by billions of years of other species’ suffering and struggle. God surely could have created us in some more direct, efficient way. So if (3) is true, not only is the course of Christian salvation-history a prima facie difficulty for the claim that God offers us C-salvation, but the course of stellar and evolutionary history are difficulties for the claim that God is involved in the origin and development of
the physical universe and of rational life.

Let us now consider (3).

Efficiency and elegance

(3) presumes that efficiency is a virtue for God. One can question this. For God certainly cannot have all the reasons to value efficiency that we have. Efficiency involves doing more with less effort, less resources or fewer steps. If effort or resources are costs, then efficiency involves finding a better cost/benefit balance. Efficiency is a virtue for humans, then, because we can pay only limited costs. We have limited resources available to fulfill our various plans, and so a plan which calls on less of these leaves us better equipped to pursue our other goals. God does not have our limitations.

As Creator, how much time there is is up to God. God can always have as much time as He wants. So time is not a cost for God. God cannot be short of time (unless for some reason He chooses to be — but why would a perfectly wise God choose this?). So God need not save time. He is never in danger of not having enough time to achieve His goals if He does not economize. Further, as God is omnipotent, He can do instantaneously whatever He chooses to do, if He wishes. If God wants to produce human beings, He can do so instantaneously, by creating them ex nihilo. So again, no particular period could be too short for God to accomplish any task — at least, tasks not essentially involving particular periods of time. If God defines His task as producing humans via three million years’ evolution, then of course, He needs three million years to do this, or at least three million years for the process to be complete. (God could do this instantaneously too, in a sense, for if He so chose, He could make His whole causal contribution all at once, then sit back and let events unfold.) Even if God so defines His task as to need three million years, He still cannot be short of time unless He has other overriding purposes which require Him to limit Creation to under three million years’ duration. But a perfectly wise God surely would never have such conflicting purposes.

Thus time cannot be a cost for God. Again, an omnipotent God cannot be short of strength. So minimizing effort is not a value for Him: effort cannot be a divine cost. Nor can a Creator ex nihilo be short of materials. For He needs no materials at all to create, and if He wants materials for any other project, He can create ex nihilo whatever He needs. Thus possible shortage is no reason for God to economize: materials are not a cost for God. Thus God does not have our sort of need to count costs. God does not have this sort of reason to value efficiency.

*Of course, efficiency is not the only sort of beauty. Some find beauty in Baroque or rococo constructions.

^A greatest compossible, because for all we can say here, perhaps there can be ties, or perhaps cases where sets of compossible rational perfections ABC each are greater than any such sets other than ABC, but A, B and C are incommensurable — i.e. cannot be ranked against each other at all.
Still, efficiency involves doing more with less, or in fewer steps, or more quickly, whether or not the “excess” has a cost. And doing things this way is valuable just because it is beautiful — what is done efficiently is done elegantly. Elegance, a form of beauty, is one value a rational agent ought to respect, even if omnipotent. So one can expect an ideally rational agent to value elegance, and (3) is true, if at all, only if read as

3a. if God is perfectly wise, God acts as elegantly as He can.

Now elegance might not be enough to make a human action-plan efficient. But if EA really trades on elegance, being elegant suffices to make an action-plan efficient in the sense appropriate to God. This raises a doubt about our case for (5). Perhaps it is not cost/benefit efficient to save humankind by suffering and dying if other means are possible. But if C-salvation is peculiarly elegant, perhaps it can count as an efficient divine plan of action.

Still, (3a), not (5), is our present focus. And (3a) is not beyond question. There are many rational virtues, e.g. acting elegantly, being prudent and being moral (if moral principles have the right sort of rational warrant). Perfect wisdom might involve all these virtues. That is, it could be (for instance) that for every rational virtue F, a perfectly wise person is perfectly F. But perhaps nothing can be perfect in all of these rational virtues. For being perfect with respect to a virtue entails following the maxims of that virtue perfectly, and sometimes, perfectly following one virtue’s maxims clashes with perfectly following another’s: for instance, morally required actions can be inefficient.

If nothing can be perfect with respect to all rational virtues, being perfectly wise consists in having a greatest compossible set of rational virtues — roughly, a set of virtues FGH had to degrees n, n1, n2, such that no other such set of virtues in degrees makes an agent more perfectly rational. The relative value or importance of each virtue matters in filling out the set. If being moral is in some sense more important or valuable than being elegant and one cannot be both perfectly moral and perfectly elegant, then genuinely perfect wisdom will include perfect morality rather than perfect elegance: even if both are perfections, perfect morality seems a more valuable perfection. If elegance can conflict with other virtues which can trump it, then even if we feel sure that a perfectly wise agent will be to some degree elegant, we cannot be sure that a perfectly wise agent’s plans will be perfectly elegant. The most we can be sure of is that

3b. if God is perfectly wise, God acts as elegantly as is compatible with His purposes and the rest of His rational virtues.

(3b) leaves it an open possibility that God’s inelegant dealings with Creation and evolution may be compatible with perfect wisdom. If we substitute (3b) for (3)

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in EA, then for EA to go through, we must replace (6) with

6a. If God can effect it that P, then if God becomes incarnate or atones,
   God does not act as elegantly as is compatible with His purposes
   and the rest of His rational virtues.

(6a) is no conceptual truth. We cannot assess (6a) without knowing a lot about
God's purposes and virtues. So we might not be in a position to accept or reject
(6a) — in which case EA fails. Still, let us give EA the benefit of the doubt, and
explore how Anselm replies to it.

Does necessity explain God's plan?

Book One of CDH climaxes by arguing that
humanity can be saved either by Christ, or in some other way, or in no
way. . . it is false that human salvation can occur in no way or in some
other way. (So) it is necessary that it occur by means of Christ.11
CDH, then, seems to claim that only C-salvation can reconcile us to God — that
necessarily, if we are saved, God saves us this way. If it does make this claim,
CDH might seem to undermine EA. If only one means to an end is possible, an
agent cannot choose a means less elegant than is possible. So perhaps CDH
means to show in this way that God cannot be inefficient in choosing His means
of salvation or irrational in choosing to suffer. But actually, CDH does not
support this response to EA.

For CDH, the "proper" sense of necessity involves constraint: what is done
by necessity, "properly" speaking, is done under compulsion or external
constraint, or in virtue of some genuine inability.12 As Anselm sees it, if God is
omnipotent, He does nothing by compulsion and has no real inabilities.13 So for
Anselm, an omnipotent being does nothing by necessity, strictly or "properly"
speaking.14 To Anselm, then, if God must become incarnate if He is to save us,
this cannot mean that He is unable to do otherwise or that some external

11CDH I, 25, S II, p. 95, ll. 12–4.
12CDH II, 5, S II, p. 100, ll. 24–6; see also
   CDH II, 10, S II, p. 108, ll. 5–6. Thus
   Anselm's theory of modality differs quite a bit
   from today's alethic theories. For discussion
   of this (including Anselm's technical senses of
   "proper" and "improper"), see Eileen Se-
   rence, "Anselm's Modal Conceptions," in
   Simo Knuutilla, ed., Reforging the Great
   Chain of Being (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1980),
   pp. 117–162.
13For compulsion, CDH I, 10, S II, p. 66, ll.
   6–13; for the point about inability, CDH II,
   17, passim. Anselm distinguishes between
genueine and merely apparent inabilities. For
instance, we can say that God is unable to lie,
but according to Anselm this form of words
does not specify a genuine divine inability.
   Rather, it is a roundabout, "improper" way to
   say that God has an insuperably strong will to
tell the truth (see also Proslogion 7).
14Thus for Anselm, the incarnation was a
   necessary means for God only in an "im-
   proper" sense (CDH II, 17, S II, p. 122, l. 25
   — p. 124, l. 2).
15CDH II, 17, S II, p. 122, ll. 26–8, p. 123,
   ll. 1–2.
16CDH II, 17, S II, p. 123, ll. 3–8. Note,
   incidentally, that it could be both that God's
   will is the source of this and other metaphysi-
   cal necessities and that God wills these by
   nature. So Anselm need not say that God's
   nature permits the past not to have been fixed.

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condition limits His options. Rather, for Anselm, if it is the case that necessarily, if God saves humanity, He C-saves humanity, this necessity stems from God’s own nature and/or wholly unconstrained choice. It is strictly self-imposed. So if we appealed to this necessity to explain why God offers C-salvation, we would just raise the question of why God imposed this necessity on Himself. Until we had an answer to that, an appeal to C-salvation’s necessity would yield no answer to EA.

Further, according to Anselm, all necessity and impossibility are subject to God’s will. His will is not subject to any necessity or impossibility. For a thing is necessary or impossible only because He wills it to be so... no necessity or impossibility precedes His willing or not willing. Anselm makes it plain that the “necessities” he has in view include what we would call metaphysical necessities, for he gives as an example a metaphysically necessary fact, that what is past cannot be changed. Anselm’s theory of God and necessity raises complex, fascinating issues which we cannot explore here. For present purposes, we need just note that if (as Anselm claims) all necessity stems from God’s nature or will, an appeal to necessity cannot block EA.

For suppose that a free choice of God made C-salvation necessary. Then saying that God offers C-salvation because He must would just raise the question of whether His choice to make C-salvation necessary was wise. EA would then stand as an undefeated reason to claim that it was not — whence one could infer (via God’s perfect wisdom) that God did not in fact choose to offer C-salvation. So if necessities stem from God’s free choice, an appeal to necessity would be an ineffective answer to EA. Suppose on the other hand that God offered C-salvation by a necessity of His nature — either a necessity that He save us and save us in this way, or a conditional necessity, that if He chooses to save us, He saves us in this way. Then were it not wise to offer C-salvation, it would follow that God’s nature “forces” God to do something less than perfectly wise. If so, God would be imperfectly wise by nature. But God is perfectly wise. So it were not wise to offer C-salvation, one would have to infer that God does not in fact offer C-salvation — and again, EA would be an undefeated reason to claim that offering C-salvation would not be wise. So whether the necessity of C-saving us rather than saving us some other way stemmed from God’s nature or God’s will (or both), EA would be unblunted.

Divine efficiency

Anselm does not appeal to necessity to explain God’s choice of C-
salvation. Instead, he tries to make a case for C-salvation's efficiency. As we have seen, efficiency for God amounts to elegance. One way to act elegantly is to procure as many benefits as possible with a single course of action. Anselm details a variety of incidental benefits of C-salvation:

— it offers us mercy while still respecting intuitions about fairness, e.g. that it is prima facie unfair to count sinful humans equal to sinless angels if humanity has not "made up for" the moral stain of sin.  
— it offers us mercy while respecting the moral intuition that prima facie, sin ought to be either punished or paid for.  
— it offers us mercy while respecting the moral intuition that prima facie, sin ought to be proportional to the crime.  
— it offers us mercy while respecting the moral intuition that prima facie, God is not fair to Himself if He settles for less.  
— it honors humanity by making us subordinate only to God.  
— it honors humanity by making us equal to angels.  
— it honors humanity by having us defeat the Devil in direct combat.  
— it honors humanity by letting us champion God's cause.  
— it honors God in letting humanity make recompense for sin.  
— it lets God display His power in a supremely unlikely miracle.  
— it supremely displays God's love for humanity.  
— the patterns of fittingness in salvation-history reveal God's wisdom.  
— the beauties of salvation-history reveal God's goodness.  

One might add still more, with some imagination, e.g. that in saving us by an atoning death, God displays the full magnitude of the evil of sin, the full gravity of the freedom He gave us, and the full importance of human choice. To rebut the charge that God becomes incarnate and atones "for no reason," Anselm need only show some reason for God to do these things. His list surely does that. Further, the longer the list, the better Anselm's case for the elegance

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19 One point worth noting: Anselm insists that necessities' having a divine source does not render them contingent necessities. See CDH I, 12.
20 CDH I, 12, S II, p. 69.
21 CDH I, 12, S II, p. 69; I, 15, S II, pp. 73–4.
22 CDH I, 13, S II, p. 71.
23 CDH I, 5, S II, p. 52, l. 22.
24 CDH I, 5, S II, p. 52, l. 22; see also I, 19, S II, p. 84, ll. 19–21.
25 CDH I, 22, S II, p. 90, ll. 9–10, 18–19.
26 CDH I, 22, S II, p. 90, ll. 9–10, 17–19.
27 CDH I, 22, S II, p. 90, ll. 17–19.
28 CDH I, 3, S II, p. 50, l. 31 — p. 51, l. 13. See also CDH II, 16, S II, p. 117, ll. 6–7, 11–12.
30 CDH I, 3, S II, p. 51, ll. 3–12.
31 Ibid.
32 I owe this thought to Stephen Dumont.
33 This reading of Anselm's argument is compatible with the claim that some of this list's members are far more important than others, in themselves or to Anselm.
34 CDH I, 4, S II, p. 52, ll. 5–6.
37 CDH II, 11, S II, p. 111, ll. 8–9, 12–14.
38 CDH I, 10, S II, p. 67, ll. 2–6. (See also I, 16, S II, p. 75, ll. 1–3.)
39 CDH I, 3, S II, p. 51, ll. 11–2.
of God’s plan — and so for its wisdom. This is so a fortiori the more important Anselm can make his list’s various members seem.35

Again, the longer Anselm’s list of goods achieved at one stroke in God’s plan of C-salvation, and the better his case for their importance, the stronger Anselm’s case that other plans of salvation would not achieve as much good. Anselm need not actually detail alternate plans of salvation and compare benefits point by point to make this case. For the greater the benefits of C-salvation, the more plausible it is that other salvific plans could not do as well. Finally, the longer Anselm’s list and the more valuable its various members, the better Anselm’s case against (6a). For the longer and more weighty the list, the greater the apparent elegance of C-salvation, and so the less credible the claim that in C-saving us God does not act as elegantly as is compatible with His purposes and the rest of His rational virtues.

Fittingness

There is also another line of reasoning in CDH, which (I now suggest) tries to undercut EA, but not via considerations of necessity. Anselm repeatedly brings in “fitnesses” (convenientiae)36 as reasons for various features of C-salvation.37 At one point, Anselm begins “let us consider. . . whether this view is rationally fitting” [rationabiliter conveniat]38 and then continues

If humanity sinned through pleasure, is it not fitting that humanity make satisfaction through distress? . . . And is it not fitting that humanity, which so stole itself from God in sinning that it cannot more remove itself, so give itself to God in satisfying that it cannot more greatly give itself?39

Here Anselm’s “fitnesses” are a set of poetic parallels which are reasons for God to offer humanity C-salvations. Anselm equates being fitting and being reasonable in another passage:

let us in God’s case accept no unfittingness, even the smallest, and reject no reason, even the smallest, if no greater reason contradicts [repugnat] it. For just as in God’s case impossibility follows from an unfittingness, however small, so in God’s case a reason, however small, is accompanied by necessity if a greater does not defeat it.38

Anselm is claiming that C-salvation’s “poetic justice” is a rational merit, one which can legitimately attract a rational agent. Anselm’s “fittingness” is an aesthetic or quasi-aesthetic value C-salvation realizes — “fitting” things, “carefully considered display a certain unspeakable beauty.”39 “Poetic justice” is not only just, but also beautiful. Perhaps due to his Augustinian heritage,

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Anselm realizes that a state of affairs' beauty is reason to bring it about. Sometimes Anselmian “fittingness” also seems a matter of moral appropriate-ness. But the very concept of poetic justice suggests that being morally appropriate can also be a way to be beautiful. Thus all the “incidental benefits” listed earlier, including the satisfaction of prima facie moral intuitions, can qualify as dimensions of C-salvation’s fittingness.

Though Anselm does not emphasize it, the second quoted passage is a response to Boso’s earlier questioning of CDH’s first set of “fittingness” reasons. Boso, speaking for “unbelievers,” scoffs at these:

All of these things are beautiful and as it were pictures. But if there is not something solid on which they rest, they do not seem to unbelievers to show sufficiently why we ought to believe that God was willing to undergo these things. . . these fittingnesses are as it were painting on a cloud. So first we must show the truth’s rational solidity, i.e., the necessity which proves that God should or could be humbled to undergo those things.

Anselm’s reply explains why these “cloud-pictures” might indeed be reason enough for God to choose C-salvation. CDH’s claim that all necessity rests on God’s nature or will voids any attempt to explain God’s choice via “necessary reasons” in the sense of considerations which might necessitate God’s choice. Anselm’s reply shows a different sense in which God could have “necessary reasons” to opt for C-salvation. As all-wise, God is maximally sensitive to good reasons of whatever sort. So a course of action for which God has the weightiest non-necessitating reasons ipso facto becomes a course of action which God necessarily adopts. Reasons of fittingness might be part of a cumulative case for C-salvation which eventually adds up to a “necessitating” reason for God. Yet for Anselm, this “necessity” lies not in some sort of external constraint, but in God’s own wisdom. To say that God necessarily does what is wisest, to Anselm, means that God is so perfectly wise that He does not even possibly fail freely to respond to rational considerations.

If this is so, Anselm’s arguments that C-salvation is “fitting” are more

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40See, e.g., CDH I, 18, S II, p. 79, ll. 19–24.
41CDH I, 4, S II, p. 51, ll. 16–18, 21, p. 52, ll. 2–5.
42This seems a reasonable extension of one part of Anselm’s reading of the claim that God necessarily tells the truth at CDH II, 17. That freedom can be compatible with the impossibility of doing otherwise will seem controversial to some. For extended discussion, see John Fischer, ed., Moral Responsibility (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986), and its sequel, John Fischer and Mark Ravizza, eds., Perspectives on Moral Responsibility (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993), particularly the latter’s papers by Eleonore Stump.
43CDH II, 21, S II, p. 132. It is not clear to me whether Anselm concludes that fallen angels cannot be saved, or infers only that if fallen angels can be saved, it must be done in some other way.
basic to his case for the rationality of C-salvation than his arguments that the C-
salvation route is "necessary" for human salvation. For God's choice of C-
salvation is "necessary" only because and in the sense that it is maximally
fitting. Its fittingness helps to explain such necessity as it has. The rest of the
explanation lies in God's nature and God's choices.

As we have seen, for Anselm, all necessity has its roots in God's will or
nature, and so if there are "necessary reasons" for Him to take the C-salvation
route, this just raises the question of why God imposes this necessity on
Himself. I now show that Anselm thinks this question largely unanswerable,
and that only CDH's "fittingness" arguments provide such answer as human-
kind can give it.

**God's choices**

God has chosen to create Adamic humans. CDH argues that only C-
salvation can reconcile an Adamic human to God. But a universe with other
sorts of creatures is certainly within God's power. Other sorts of creatures might
well be bound by other species-specific moral norms. Humans ought to refrain
from adultery. But it cannot be the case that an amoeba ought to refrain from
adultery, at least if "ought" implies "can." For one can refrain only from an act
one can perform, and amoebas cannot commit adultery. Perhaps if there were
rational amoebas who reproduced as we do, it would be wrong if they
committed adultery. But that such amoebas would be prohibited from commit-
ting adultery does not entail that the sort of amoebas that actually exist ought to
refrain from adultery.

Thus had God created a different order of creatures, God might have
created a different _moral_ order as well. For a different sort of creature and
within an alternate moral order, C-salvation might not have been necessary or
even a fitting means of redemption. This sort of thought is not far from Anselm's
mind. CDH closes with a brief argument that God cannot save fallen angels via
either Christ's actual sacrifice or an Incarnation in an angel.\(^3\)

Thus when we ask what reasons God had to C-save humanity, there are
actually _two_ sets of divine reasons to consider. One set consists of God's reasons
to create the sort of universe and creature for whom C-salvation would be fitting
or necessary. The other consists of God's reasons to actually offer C-salvation,
given this first choice and the ensuing Fall. Anselm in fact recognizes that there
are at least two sets of reasons for God's becoming incarnate. Anselm states that
the doctrines of the Incarnation and Atonement have

- a rationale above human intellect. . . no matter what one can say about
  this, deeper reasons for these things will still remain hidden.\(^4\)

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In reply, Boso later asks Anselm,

do... as much as you can. For you will be more persuasive that deeper
reasons lie hidden in this matter if you show that you see some rationale
in it than if, by saying nothing, you show that you discern none at all. 45

So Anselm holds that there are at least two levels of reason for God’s
decision to offer C-salvation, one which he hopes to explicate and a deeper level
which he is sure he cannot reveal. One way to understand the two levels of ratio
Anselm sees in God’s choice to offer C-salvation is this: the deeper, inaccessible
reasons are the reasons for God’s choice of a universe and moral order in which
C-salvation would be fitting and “necessary.” The more accessible reasons are
those for God’s choice, given the universe and moral order He first chose,
actually to offer C-salvation.

God’s two sets of reasons must be of systematically different kinds, and
Anselm has good grounds to think that one kind of divine reason is humanly
incomprehensible. Within the order God has established, one can find reasons
for God to opt for C-salvation in supposed moral facts, e.g. that

S. satisfaction ought to be proportional to the measure of the sin, 46
or in “fitnesses” we also know, e.g. that it would be unfitting to pay for a major
sin with a minor penalty, or in necessities we know, e.g. that necessarily, no sin is
paid-for unless its price is proportional to its gravity. These are the sorts of reason
CDH presents. But God’s reason to establish these moral or other facts and
necessities cannot be of this kind, since it is these facts’ source. That is, if God’s
will is the ground of the supposed moral truth (S), that (S) is true cannot be God’s
reason to will that (S) be true, as (S) is not true prior to God’s willing that (S) be
true. 47 For Anselm, if God’s will is not by itself the ground of (S), then (S) is true
due to God’s very nature as supreme truth. 48 If this is why (S) is true, it is not clear
whether we can say that God had a reason to establish (S). But if we can say this,
then not (S) but God’s nature is His reason to establish (S).

God’s reason to establish the created and moral order which exists can lie

46The priority here is logical or causal, not temporal. Nor can God’s reason for willing (S)
be that if He willed it, (S) would have the valuable property of truth, since any claim
incompatible with (S) would equally have this property if God so willed. Rather, God’s rea­
son must be some other attractive trait that (S)’s being true would have or involve were it
actual.
47De Veritate, 10. Of course, (S) could be founded on both God’s nature and God’s will,
e.g. if God wills (S) by nature.
48See e.g. Proslogion 14–15.
49On some views of the relation between

God and necessity, the second deeper source
for God’s reasons collapses into the first. For
instance, it could be that God’s nature deter­
mines what He will see as beautiful. Further,
on some medieval views of God and necessity,
necessary truths exist only because God
grasps and understands His nature — the truth
that 2 + 2 = 4, for instance, first exists in God’s
understanding of His nature. If there are nec­
essary moral truths and God affirms them due
to grasping His own nature, perhaps the
beauty or other value God finds in His nature is
what leads Him to affirm them.
50ST Ia 19, 5.
only in two sources. One is God’s nature, which either grounds this order directly (as just suggested) or does so by explaining features of God’s willing (e.g. what sorts of order attract Him “by nature”). Anselm thinks that we cannot grasp God’s nature.49 If we cannot, then we can never fully grasp God’s deeper reasons to choose C-salvation, i.e. His reasons to establish a moral order within which C-salvation is “necessary.” God’s second source of reasons to establish the present created and moral order is whatever intrinsic beauty or other value attracts God to this order.50 We have access to this beauty or other value only by considering the relations of fittingness which obtain within the created order — and even then only if the fittingness or beauty we see from within this order is somehow systematically correlated with a fitness or beauty God would see from beyond it.

Aquinas expresses the difference between these two perspectives:

in God, to will an end is not the cause of His willing the means, yet He wills the ordering of the means to the end. Therefore He wills this to be a means to that, but does not will this on account of that.51 We see the Incarnation as a means to an end, our salvation, and can appreciate how fitting a means it is to that end. By contrast, God’s first, deepest willing about C-salvation was to will a created moral order in which this-is-a-means-to-that, i.e. in which given sin, the Incarnation and Atonement are fit means to salvation. In this willing, He did not will (conditional on sin) the Incarnation in order to save, or salvation in order to become incarnate, but He willed an order in which C-salvation is fitting. Just what about this order attracted His wisdom is beyond our ken. We can only hope that C-salvation’s fitness to the human condition — the fitness we can see — somehow mirrors this. So Anselm’s “considerations of fitness” may well represent (what he sees as) our best approach to grasping what might have led God to establish a moral order within which C-salvation is fitting. If they do, these “considerations” may answer a more basic question about the Incarnation’s rationale than do Anselm’s arguments for its necessity.

As we have seen, Anselm is clear that God’s first choice will include electing all those conditions which might make His second choice “necessary,” even what we would call metaphysical necessities. So if the Incarnation is in any sense necessary given the order God has chosen, it is nonetheless wholly free, for God alone determines all conditions which “necessitate” His choice. Further, God’s aboriginal willing of the moral order cannot be intrinsically necessary at all. This is certainly true if moral truths are contingent. If they are

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necessary, then God wills them in willing all necessities. But the willing which establishes necessities cannot itself be necessary, intrinsically. All we can say of it is that it just does happen, in response to the fittingness God sees. Only fittingness, not necessity, can at all explain it.

**Does “fittingness” trump efficiency?**

Thus Anselm’s case for the “necessity” of the Incarnation throws us back again to God’s nature and aboriginal choices, and only Anselm’s “fittingness” arguments provide any humanly-apprehensible rationale for the latter. Anselm’s “fittingness” arguments are also (I suggest) his deeper response to EA. One level of Anselm’s response to EA, I have argued, is a case that the Incarnation is elegant. But Anselm may also want to question whether a perfectly rational God “must” choose a plan which maximizes elegance. For if a perfectly rational God need not, then showing that C-salvation has great benefits and can rationally appeal to a perfectly rational God on further grounds suffices to show that such a God could rationally elect C-salvation.

Suppose that it can be rational to choose among morally adequate, reasonably elegant courses of action with good cost/benefit balances based on aesthetic preference — i.e., on an appreciation of one plan’s peculiar beauties. Then if God chooses on this basis, His choice of a plan of providential action can be rational if the plan chosen gives God most reason to choose it, but not only if the plan gives God the most moral or efficiency reason. “Fittingness” and beauty are aesthetic values which could be a legitimate rational basis for choosing a salvation plan. In fact, for a God choosing among possible Creations and providential plans which are at least adequate in moral, elegance and cost-benefit terms, aesthetic reasons might be the only sort of reason available.

This would be so, for instance, were God’s choice to be among a set of possible worlds W such that each member of W is overall better than any non-member of W, but W’s members are of incommensurable worth. To see that

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52It might count as necessary extrinsically, as God’s existence might. That is, if we (anachronistically) view God’s establishing necessities as His creating a framework of possible worlds, it might be that once God creates these, He exists in each one of them, since in each world it is true of that world that it derives its existence from God. But such necessity is extrinsic, not intrinsic: it derives from God’s relation to other entities, rather than being an attribute God would have if God alone existed.

53But perhaps not only if.

54This last claim assumes that God accounts for all facts of possibility. Anselm asserts explicitly only that God accounts for necessity and impossibility. But for all P, if P is necessary, then P is possible, and if P is impossible, then ¬P is possible. So Anselm is committed to taking God to account for at least some facts of possibility. It is not unreasonable to assume that he would trace them all to God — at least, such reasons as I can find to claim that God is the source of all necessity either are also or generate reasons to claim that God is the source of all possibility.

Note that if God’s willing establishes all possibility, God’s freedom cannot consist in an ability to have willed otherwise. For there are alternate possibilities only subsequent to this willing.
such sets of worlds are consistently conceivable, consider an arbitrarily simple case: suppose there are just three basic kinds of value, FGH, and these are incommensurable with one another. Then the members of W could be a trio of worlds ABC such that each has more of each type of value than any world not in W, A has 11 “units” of F and 4 each of G and H, B has 11 units of G and 4 each of F and H, and C has 11 units of H and 4 each of F and G. Now in this case, God would have more reason to create a member of W than to create any world not in W, but could not rank the members of W to determine a best. Were this so, it would not seem unreasonable for God to select among ABC on the basis of aesthetic preference. For one world’s beauty would be at least a genuine reason to choose it. One could not call a choice made on this basis wholly arbitrary and reasonless.

If one of FGH is aesthetic value, such a choice would involve valuing beauty more than the other two sorts of value — whatever the reason God might have for this. If aesthetic value neither is nor reduces to one of FGH, such a choice would introduce a fourth sort of value and (again) prize it more. The example presumes that it is morally permissible to value beauty more than moral value in this particular case. I think one can support this assumption, but I cannot go into this here.

Of course, one might charge that the particular aesthetic preferences God happens to have are arbitrary or irrational. But it is one thing to say that God’s character contains some ultimate brute facts of preference, and quite another to say that His choices are arbitrary. A choice can be non-arbitrary relative to the chooser’s character or preferences, whether or not these are ultimately arbitrary in some further sense. Might God be arbitrary to prize aesthetic value most? Again, if this preference has a basis in His character, His choice will be wholly rational and wise. For a choice is rational and wise if it is based appropriately on the given facts relevant to it. When God considers what order of necessities, sort of Creation and providential plan to select, the “givens” in light of which God has to choose are just His nature and character. Nothing else is in any sense prior to His choice. If this is so, God’s choice will be rational even if the divine preferences of which He takes account are in some sense ultimately arbitrary. Further, if our God is Anselmian, and is choosing inter alia what modal truths there shall be, it is not even clear what we can mean by calling facets of His character arbitrary. If God’s nature, character or will determine what modal truths there are, we cannot explicate the supposed arbitrariness of God’s character, nature or choice by saying that these might have been other than they are. For there are “might have been”s only subsequent to God’s determining this.54

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Still, suppose that we can make sense of saying that God’s character has some ultimately arbitrary elements — as for instance we might if we shy away from Anselm’s claim that God is the source of modal truth. Talk of arbitrariness in God’s character may be unsettling. But the only way to avoid allowing ultimately ungrounded preferences in God’s character is to insist that He necessarily and by nature has just the preferences He does. Is it really plausible to claim that in virtue of His very nature, God does not even possibly like vanilla ice cream a bit more than He does? In any event, EA invokes God’s power and rationality, not the whole of His character. Appeal to the rest of God’s character can legitimately help reconcile God’s power and rationality with His offering C-salvation. Again, if theists admit that God’s character contains some ultimately surd preferences, they are no worse off than atheists who allow surd facts about the material universe to be their explanatory ultimates. Further, God’s surds could still be fewer or less puzzling than the universe’s.

Anselm’s appeal to fittingness, then, might serve to undermine the claim the value of efficiency has on God’s choices. For if beauty can trump efficiency, it could be a rational virtue for a perfectly wise being to act inefficiently, if by doing so He created sufficient beauty. Moreover, as we have seen, EA has bite only by a sort of appeal to beauty, the beauty of elegant action-plans. So there is no ruling out responding to EA by appeal to another sort of beauty. There seems no reason at all that another sort of beauty could not trump elegance. If so, elegance need not always be a rational virtue for a perfectly wise agent: it could be a rational virtue, in fact, to favor another sort of beauty over elegance. So Anselm’s “fittingness” arguments give him grounds to reject (6a).

Thus it could be rational for God to choose a plan of salvation whose peculiar beauty attracts Him — whether or not some other plan might realize a greater amount of some other sort of value, or other sort of beauty. This sort of move provides a response to EA and its generalization. Thus again, Anselm’s “fittingness” arguments turn out to have a surprising importance. If it is rational for God to value beauty, it is rational for Him to seek an elegant plan of salvation — one which procures many goods at a single stroke. Anselm makes a case that He has done so. But it is also rational for God to opt for a salvation-plan whose peculiar beauties appeal to Him. The more Anselm piles up benefits the Incarnation and Atonement provide and details ways in which they are “fitting” or beautiful, the better his case that C-salvation befits a wise God, and the stronger his response to EA.\(^{55}\)

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