# God's Impossible Options

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According to Michael Almeida, reflections on free will and possibility can be used to show that the existence of an Anselmian God is compatible with the existence of evil. These arguments depend on the assumption that an agent can be free with respect to an action only if it is possible that that agent performs that action. Although this principle enjoys some intuitive support, I argue that Anselmianism undermines these intuitions by introducing *impossible options*. If Anselmianism is true, I argue, then both God and creatures may be free to do the impossible.

In a number of publications,[1] Michael Almeida has argued that the conjunction of Anselmian theism with the possibility of creaturely free will entails that possibly God actualizes a world containing moral evil. The argument can be reconstructed as follows:

1. Necessarily, whatever world is actual has been actualized by God.

2. Possibly, some creatures possess morally significant freedom.

3. Necessarily, if some creatures possess morally significant freedom, then possibly some creatures commit moral wrongs.[2]

4. Therefore, possibly God actualizes a world at which some creatures commit moral wrongs.

Given standard assumptions about modal logic and possible worlds, the argument is valid.[3] According to Almeida, this argument provides the

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[1]The argument is clearest and most explicit in Almeida, "Bringing About Perfect Worlds." Also see Almeida, *Freedom, God, and Worlds*, ch. 5; Almeida, "Compatibilism and the Free Will Defense," Almeida, "On Necessary Gratuitous Evils."

[2]To avoid ambiguity, this sentence can be formulated in symbols as follows: $\Box(MSF \rightarrow \Diamond WRONG)$, where "MSF" is read as "some creatures possess morally significant freedom" and "WRONG" is read as "some creatures commit moral wrongs."

[3]**Proof:** by contraposition, 3 is equivalent to $\Box(\neg\Diamond WRONG \rightarrow \neg MSF)$. By the distribution axiom, this entails $\Box\neg\Diamond WRONG \rightarrow \Box\neg MSF$. But by the definition of "$\Diamond$" 2 is equivalent to $\neg\Box\neg MSF$. Hence, by *modus tollens*, we have $\neg\Box\neg\Diamond WRONG$, i.e., by the definition of "$\Diamond$," $\Diamond\Diamond WRONG$. Either S4 or S5 allows the simplification of this sentence to $\Diamond WRONG$, i.e., there is a possible world at which some creatures commit moral wrongs. However, by premise 1, any possible world is possibly actualized by God. Therefore, possibly, God actualizes a world at which some creatures commit moral wrongs.

Anselmian theist with a defense against the logical problem of evil which does not rely on controversial assumptions about free will:[4] the premises (Almeida claims) are mutually compatible and jointly entail that possibly God coexists with evil. Almeida also suggests that this line of argument solves the problem of divine freedom, by showing that God has alternative possibilities.[5]

The Anselmian theist is, by definition, committed to premise 1. Morally significant freedom is freedom with respect to at least some actions such that either doing them is morally wrong or refraining from doing them is morally wrong. Since we ordinarily take ourselves *actually* to possess such freedom, premise 2 is extremely plausible. Further, Almeida points out, even philosophers who take freedom to be compatible with causal determination (and/or divine determination) generally take freedom to be incompatible with *metaphysical necessitation*.[6] After all, no one can be free to draw a round square or to create water that contains no hydrogen. Accordingly, premise 3 is also extremely plausible, even on compatibilist views.

Almeida's argument is valid and Anselmian theists have good reason to accept each of its premises. One might think that this is all there is to being a good argument. Yet, having admitted all this, I propose to show that this is *not* a good argument—at least not for Almeida's purposes. This is because the Anselmian premise 1 undermines the intuitions that support premise 3.

The plan of this paper is as follows. In section 1, I argue that the Anselmian is committed to the claim that *among God's options are some impossibilities*. In section 2, I argue that this does not imply the incoherent claim that *possibly God does the impossible*. In section 3, I argue that, if God has impossible options, then it is possible that creatures have impossible options. Further, if the presence of impossible options for doing evil is sufficient for God to have morally significant freedom, it ought to be sufficient for us as well, contrary to Almeida's premise 3. I conclude, in section 4, by raising what I call "the Anselmian problem of evil": if Anselmianism is true then it appears that *this* world should be among God's impossible options, and not among the possible ones. Almeida's strategy does nothing to dispel this appearance.

## 1. Anselmianism and Impossible Options

Anselmianism is the view that, necessarily, a maximally great being (God) exists, and, necessarily, whatever world is actual is actualized by God.[7] Actualization is an explanatory relation: to say that a world is actualized

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[4]Almeida, "Compatibilism and the Free Will Defense."

[5]Almeida, *Freedom, God, and Worlds*, §7.0; Almeida, "Bringing About Perfect Worlds," 208–209.

[6]See, e.g., Leibniz, *Theodicy*, §§34–35, 43–46; Lewis, "Are We Free to Break the Laws?"; Vihvelin, *Causes, Laws, and Free Will*.

[7]This is a stipulative definition, not a claim about the historical Anselm. I take it this is roughly the way Almeida uses the term "Anselmianism" as well.

by God is to say (in part) that it is because of God's choice that this world, rather than some other world, is actual.

Anselmians hold a variety of views about how precisely God's creative decision works. However, all Anselmians agree that the explanatory order in all possible worlds begins with God. Proponents of strong providence hold that God selects one precise world to be actual. Anselmians who reject strong providence hold that God's creative choice fixes some range of worlds as *candidates* for actuality, with creaturely free choices (and perhaps other indeterministic events) being needed to determine which of those candidates is actual. What we mean in saying that necessarily whatever world is actual is actualized by God is just that God plays this foundational explanatory role.[8]

No matter what world was actual, according to the Anselmian, it would have been actual *because of* God's choice. However, there are some consistently describable states of affairs such that, necessarily, a maximally great being does not actualize a world containing them. It follows that some consistently describable states of affairs are impossible because, and only because, necessarily God does not choose to actualize a world containing them. It is in this sense that the Anselmian God is the "delimiter of possibilities."[9]

Note that this line of thought does not depend on strong providence. Even open theists will generally admit that there are some states of affairs—for instance, *an innocent person being condemned to hell*[10]—such that

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[8]Thus, throughout this paper, I use "actualize" to mean roughly what Plantinga—and Almeida following him—calls "weak actualization" (Plantinga, *Nature of Necessity*, 172–173; Almeida, *Freedom, God, and Worlds*, 56–57; Almeida, "Unrestricted Actualization," 213–214). However, I find Plantinga's way of distinguishing between strong and weak actualization problematic. According to Plantinga (and Almeida) an agent strongly actualizes those states of affairs she *causes* to be actual, and (merely) weakly actualizes those she actualizes without causing. I have elsewhere argued that God should be understood as the *ground*, rather than the cause, of the universe ("Foundational Grounding"; "Counterpossible Dependence"). Hence, on Plantinga's definitions, my view would be one in which God does not strongly actualize *anything*. Insofar as the distinction between strong and weak actualization is supposed to be doing philosophical work regarding free will and the problem of evil, this seems like the wrong result.

[9]Morris, *Anselmian Explorations*, 47–48. Linda Zagzebski, *The Dilemma of Freedom and Foreknowledge*, 111–113 takes this observation to motivate the rejection of S4 (which would invalidate Almeida's argument). However, once we have admitted that there are consistently describable states of affairs such that, necessarily, God chooses contrary to them, I do not see why we should not admit that God's choosing contrary to them is necessarily necessary, as required by S4.

[10]Condemning the innocent is used by Leibniz ("Observations on the Book Concerning 'the Origin of Evil,'" §21) as an example of something obviously inconsistent with the divine nature. The example also appears in Pruss, "Divine Creative Freedom," §V.4. I take no position, in the present paper, on the controversial question of whether condemning unrepentant sinners to hell is consistent with the divine nature. On this question, see Adams, "Hell and the God of Justice"; Talbott, "The Doctrine of Everlasting Punishment"; Kvanvig, *The Problem of Hell*; Sider, "Hell and Vagueness"; Hershenov, "The Fairness of Hell." The question of whether it is consistent with Anselmianism that there should ever be any sinners in the first place will be discussed in §4, below.

a necessarily existent and essentially perfectly good God would necessarily ensure that they do not become actual.

This much is widely accepted by Anselmian theists.[11] However, it has a consequence that Anselmians have not frequently emphasized or made explicit. Say that a state of affairs is among an agent's options iff: (a) in choosing what to do, the agent takes reasons for and/or against that state of affairs into account,[12] and (b) whether the state of affairs becomes actual depends explanatorily on the agent's choice.[13] (I will also sometimes speak of an *action* being among an agent's options. The definition is precisely analogous.)

To say that a state of affairs depends explanatorily on an agent's choice is to say that it is *because of* the agent's choice that the state of affairs is either actual or not. For instance, supposing I raise my hand, clause (b) is satisfied if my raising my hand is explained by my choosing to raise my hand. Supposing I do not raise my hand, clause (b) is satisfied if my not raising my hand is explained by my not choosing to raise my hand.[14]

I assume that having an action among one's options, in the sense defined, is necessary, though perhaps insufficient, for being free with respect to that action.[15] The relevance of options to freedom will be discussed in more detail in section 3, below. Our present question is, which states of affairs are among God's options?

Regardless of one's particular views about providence and free will, it follows from the basic Anselmian assumption that every possible state of affairs satisfies clause (b) with respect to God. Even if (as the denier of strong providence holds) God only selects a family of candidate worlds, rather than one precise world, still every actual contingent state of affairs is actual because of God's choice. For instance, even if God did not determine me to write this paper, it is partly because of God's creative choice that the state of affairs *my writing this paper* is actual: God chose that the universe should exist, that it should have the laws it does, etc., having *at least* the knowledge that it *might* lead to my writing this paper. Further, God certainly knew how to *prevent* my writing this paper if God so chose. Regardless of whether the Anselmian endorses strong providence, it is a core commitment of Anselmianism that every possible state of affairs

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[11]See, e.g., Garcia, "A Response to the Modal Problem of Evil"; Talbott, "On the Divine Nature and the Nature of Divine Freedom"; Tidman, "The Epistemology of Evil Possibilities"; Kraay, "Theism and Modal Collapse"; Pruss, "Divine Creative Freedom," 231–235; Byerly, "The All-Powerful, Perfectly Good, and Free God." However, a few broadly Anselmian philosophers have attempted to avoid this result by denying that (the individual who is) God is essentially morally perfect. See, e.g., Pike, "Omnipotence and God's Ability to Sin"; Manis, "Could God Do Something Evil?"; Howard-Snyder, "Divine Freedom."

[12]Reasons may be taken into account without being *explicitly* considered. See Pearce, "Are We Free to Break the Laws of Providence?" 160.

[13]This notion of "having an option" is borrowed from Pearce, "Are We Free to Break the Laws of Providence?" 160.

[14]Pearce, "Are We Free to Break the Laws of Providence?" 161.

[15]For further discussion of this concept of "having an option" and its relation to human freedom, see Pearce, "Are We Free to Break the Laws of Providence?"

depends explanatorily on God, since God provides the ultimate explanation of why things are so and not otherwise.

Further, from the fact that the Anselmian God is the delimiter of possibilities, in the sense explained above, it follows that at least some *im*possible states of affairs depend on God's choice in the way required by clause (b). The innocent do not suffer in hell because God chooses to ensure that they do not. It is impossible that the innocent suffer in hell because *necessarily* God chooses to ensure that they do not. Hence, at least some impossible states of affairs satisfy clause (b) with respect to God.

The Anselmian is committed to the claim that certain states of affairs are impossible precisely because God necessarily chooses against them. God's necessarily choosing against them is explained by the reasons God has against them. Thus, God takes these reasons into account in creating. It follows that these impossible states of affairs will satisfy clause (a). These, however, are the very same impossible states of affairs—such as *the innocent suffering in hell*—which, I argued above, satisfy clause (b). Hence, at least some impossible states of affairs are among God's options.

## 2. Options and Possibilities

It may be thought that the result of the previous section is incoherent, and that we must therefore either show how the Anselsmian can avoid it or else abandon Anselmian theism. There are two *prima facie* plausible principles, either of which would suffice to generate this conclusion:

1. If a state of affairs is among an agent's options, then possibly that agent brings about that state of affairs.

2. If a state of affairs is among an agent's options, then possibly that agent chooses to bring about that state of affairs.

In this section, I argue that the Anselmian has good reason to reject both of these principles.

Principle 1 looks quite plausible in certain cases. For instance, drawing a round square is not among my options since it is not possible that I draw a round square. But if this principle is accepted in full generality, the position outlined above is incoherent: for any state of affairs $s$, if $s$ is among God's options then possibly God actualizes $s$. But, necessarily, if God actualizes $s$, then $s$ is actual. *Possibly p* and *necessarily if p then q* together imply *possibly q*.[16] Therefore, *possibly s* is actual. Therefore, God does not have impossible options.

However, the plausibility of principle 1 extends only to those cases where the intrinsic impossibility of the option explains why the agent does

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[16]This inference rule is symbolized: $\Diamond p, \Box (p \to q) \vdash \Diamond q$. So far as I know, the validity of this rule, involving a necessitated material conditional, is uncontested. It is implied by every version of the possible worlds model theory: if some $p$-world is possible, and every $p$-world is a $q$-world, then some $q$-world is possible. This should not be confused with the "Strangeness of Impossibility Condition," a contested principle involving subjunctive conditionals. See note 41 in the Appendix, below.

not possibly bring it about.[17] This will be intuitive in human cases involving nomological possibility. Running 90 miles in an hour is not among my options because (given how my body is constituted) it is nomologically impossible that I do so. But consider another case. Suppose I know that a certain cup contains concentrated bleach. It may be that, given the current state of my mind/brain it is nomologically impossible that I intentionally drink the contents of the cup, but this is not because of any nomological impossibility in the action itself. Rather, it is because I see overwhelming reason against the action, and my psychological constitution is not such as to allow me to choose against such overwhelming reasons (at least without some strong irrational temptation on the other side). We've described the action in question as an intentional, and hence chosen, action. In order for the reasons against it to serve as an explanation of its (nomological) impossibility (in the described circumstances), those reasons must be *weighed* by an agent (me), the outcome of this weighing must depend on those reasons, and this outcome must (nomologically) guarantee that the action is not chosen. Hence this nomologically impossible action must be among my options. (Before you accuse me of begging questions in the free will debate, remember: my notion of having an option is stipulative, I haven't said anything about whether I am *able to* drink the bleach, and I haven't yet said anything about whether I'm *free to* drink the bleach. The point is simply that my not drinking the bleach is explained by the reasons I have for not doing so.)

The nomological impossibility of a given action would not prevent God from performing it. If God refrains from breaking the laws of nature, it is because God chooses to refrain. As a result, God's refraining from breaking the laws of nature is always like my refraining from drinking bleach, and never like my refraining from running 90 miles in an hour. In short, the impossible options to which, I have argued, the Anselmian is committed are extrinsic impossibilities, i.e., states of affairs in their own nature possible but necessarily not actualized by God and therefore necessarily non-actual.[18] However, principle 1 is plausible only as applied to intrinsic impossibilities.

Similar considerations apply to principle 2. In ordinary cases it is plausible to suppose that an action is not among my options unless it is possible for me to choose it. However, this again depends on the *reason* for the impossibility. Suppose I have a phobia of flying. Suppose further that I believe about myself that if I decide to get on an airplane I will be in a state of severe emotional agitation for the entirety of the flight, but nevertheless I will get on the plane. I therefore weigh the unpleasantness of this experience against the importance of arriving quickly at my destination.

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[17]On intrinsic impossibility, see Garcia, "A Response to the Modal Problem of Evil," 383–385.

[18]But for an argument that the Anselmian should endorse a stronger view, on which even logical contradictions are among God's options, see the Appendix below.

The conclusion of my deliberation is that I *should* take the flight. Suppose I even successfully choose to buy the ticket. Nevertheless, it may be that, when I actually arrive at the airport, I find it impossible to choose to walk down the jetway and get on the plane. It is at least conceivable that the state of my mind/brain might be such that this is a genuine nomological impossibility. This kind of "volitional disability," as Gary Watson[19] calls it, might actually take away my options. That is, it might either prevent me from actually taking the reasons for and against the choice into account, or it might prevent the outcome from depending on my choice.

But consider an alternative case. Suppose that instead of a phobia I have a strong commitment to reducing my carbon footprint, and suppose there is a much more environmentally friendly option that will be only a little worse than flying with respect to time, expense, and hassle. In such a case it might be nomologically necessary, given my psychological state (including my values and my knowledge of these facts), that unless something interferes with my deliberation the outcome will be that I choose not to fly. In such a case, the explanation of my necessarily not flying is found within my process of deliberation. Thus, the explanation of why I necessarily do not fly actually requires that flying be among my options.

The Anselmian God necessarily values things in proportion to their goodness, necessarily knows all the facts, and could not err or be disrupted in weighing options. As a result, there will be states of affairs that, necessarily, God does not choose. This does not prevent these states of affairs from being among God's options, in the sense defined.

### 3. Might We Have Impossible Options?

As indicated above, I assume that having an action among one's options is necessary, though perhaps insufficient, for being free with respect to that action. We have seen that, for us, the nomological necessity (given certain background conditions) of choosing against a certain action need not remove it from the menu of options. Further, we have seen that, for God, even metaphysical necessity need not remove an action from the menu of options. I now argue that, given Anselmianism, it is quite plausible that ordinary creatures like us could have metaphysically impossible options. Because an action's being among one's options may not be sufficient for being free with respect to that action, this does not immediately refute Almeida's premise 3. However, it does undermine many of the intuitions that motivate that premise. This is sufficient to render Almeida's argument ineffective for its intended purpose.

### 3.1 Prevented Options

For the moment, let us restrict our attention to those Anselmians who endorse theories of providence stronger than open theism. Call these

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[19]*Agency and Answerability*, ch. 4.

philosophers *providential Anselmians.* The extent to which my argument applies to open theists will be addressed in section 3.4, below.

I have previously argued that providential Anselmianism gives rise to what I call *prevented options*: actions that are genuinely among an agent's options although God has decided to ensure that the agent does not choose them. I have further argued that these theories are committed to the claim that we may be free to perform actions that are among our prevented options.[20] Without repeating the details of that argument, an example will suffice to give the general idea. Suppose (to adapt a toy example from Hunt[21]) that there is a game show in which the contestant chooses one of three doors and receives the prize behind it. Suppose further that God wants to ensure that Sue does not choose Door #1 or Door #2, but God wants to leave Sue's free will intact. If theological compatibilism is true,[22] God can just decree that Sue will choose Door #3, and this (according to the compatibilist) need not interfere with Sue's free will. If Molinism is true,[23] then God knows whether it is true that *if Sue were a contestant, she would choose Door #3*, and God can ensure that Sue will not be a contestant unless this conditional is true. If the simple foreknowledge theory of providence is true,[24] then God can employ foreknowledge of *which door the contestant will choose* and ensure that Sue is the contestant if, but only if, the contestant will choose Door #3. In both the Molinist and the simple foreknowledge case (and possibly, depending on the details, in the compatibilist case), it is true that *if Sue had not been going to choose Door #3, she would not have been the contestant*. Nevertheless, these theories are committed to the claim that the other doors are among Sue's options and, indeed, that she is free to choose them.[25]

I call Sue's condition in these cases *finkish backtracking*.[26] In the literature on dispositions and abilities, a disposition or ability is *finkish* if it would

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[20]Pearce, "Are We Free to Break the Laws of Providence?"

[21]Hunt, "Prescience and Providence," 437.

[22]Theological compatibilism (as that term is used in discussions of divine providence) is the view that creatures may be free even if God determines their choices. For defense of this view, see McCann, *Creation and the Sovereignty of God*.

[23]Molinism is the view that God makes providential use of knowledge of contingent but pre-volitional counterfactuals of creaturely freedom. For defense of this view see Flint, *Divine Providence*.

[24]By "the simple foreknowledge theory of providence," I mean the conjunction of the following three theses: (a) God makes providential use of simple knowledge of the actual future; (b) God does not make providential use of simple knowledge of counterfactuals of creaturely freedom; and (c) this allows God greater providential control than God would have without using simple knowledge of the actual future. By "simple knowledge" I mean knowledge not inferred from anything else. For defense of this view see Hunt, "Divine Providence and Simple Foreknowledge"; Hunt, "Prescience and Providence." Insofar as this is a theory of providence, it is not an account of what knowledge God *has* but rather an account of what knowledge God *uses* providentially. If God has additional knowledge that is "screened off" from providential use, this is not relevant here.

[25]For a detailed defense of the claims made in this paragraph, see Pearce, "Are We Free to Break the Laws of Providence?"

[26]Pearce, "Are We Free to Break the Laws of Providence?" 163–164.

be lost if the conditions for its exercise occurred.[27] Finkish backtracking occurs when an ability or disposition is such that if it had been going to be exercised it never would have been possessed in the first place. Prevented options generally involve finkish backtracking, and theories of providence stronger than open theism give rise to them.

### 3.2 From Prevented Options to Impossible Options

There are some outcomes that are so bad that, necessarily, the Anselmian God prevents them. There are consistently describable states of affairs that involve such outcomes being brought about by the free actions of creatures, and there are consistently describable states of affairs that involve creatures freely deciding *not* to bring about such outcomes. Any version of Anselmianism is committed to the claim that the former states of affairs, though consistent, are metaphysically impossible. However, if prevented options are possible, then the latter states of affairs should be possible. For instance, it is consistent with Anselmianism to suppose that God should allow some creature to choose whether the innocent should suffer in hell, provided God ensures that that creature will choose not to condemn the innocent.[28]

Suppose that God delegates to some creature (call him "Charon") this task of judgment, and suppose someone offers Charon a bribe to condemn an innocent person. Charon, let us suppose, rejects the bribe because he correctly recognizes the moral value of just judgment and sees that upholding this value is inconsistent with accepting the bribe. In this case, does Charon have the option of accepting the bribe and condemning the innocent?

In order for Charon to have this option, two conditions would need to be satisfied: (a) in making his choice, Charon must take reasons for and/or against the action into account, and (b) whether Charon performs the action must depend explanatorily on his choice.

Because Charon acts for a reason in rejecting the bribe, condition (a) is clearly satisfied. Condition (b), however, is much more complex. Since God has entrusted Charon with the task of judgment, we would expect the

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[27]See Martin, "Dispositions and Conditionals"; Lewis, "Finkish Dispositions"; Vihvelin, *Causes, Laws, and Free Will*, §6.3.

[28]Tom Flint's Molinist defenses of the Incarnation (Flint, "'A Death He Freely Accepted'") and of Papal infallibility (Flint, *Divine Providence*, ch. 8) both exhibit precisely the same structure as the case I am envisioning here: free will is retained although it would be inconsistent with God's character to place that individual in that circumstance if that individual had been going to choose badly. Flint explicitly endorses (and attributes to Molina) the view "that there is no possible world in which an assumed human nature [i.e., one in which God is incarnate] sins" ("A Death He Freely Accepted," 8–9). Similarly, Flint assumes that, because of God's essential perfect goodness, "Filbert's [or anyone else's] election to the papacy *entails* [i.e., metaphysically necessitates] that he *doesn't* freely reject God's guidance and proclaim heresy" (*Divine Providence*, 188), an assumption that leads to certain technical problems which Flint discusses at some length.

conditional *if Charon condemned an innocent person, that person would suffer in hell* to be true, so that the dependency required by condition (b) exists. However, the following backtracking conditional also appears to be true: *if Charon had been going to condemn the innocent, God would not have entrusted judgment to Charon*. Charon is, in other words, subject to finkish backtracking.

Providential Anselmians are committed to the claim that these two conditionals are consistent, and that a being in such a situation—for instance, Sue from the previous subsection—may be free. Charon's situation differs from Sue's in just one way: Charon's prevented option is *necessarily* prevented. Does this prevent Charon from satisfying condition (b)?

The answer is no. In the story described the outcome depends causally, and hence explanatorily, on Charon's choice.

The causal dependence is obvious. Within the structure of the created world, Charon has the power to cause or causally prevent damnation, and Charon exercises this power to prevent the damnation of the innocent. Since causes explain their effects, it follows that it is because of Charon's choice that the innocent are not condemned.[29]

Given that it is metaphysically impossible that the innocent suffer in hell, some may find it odd to suppose that, in the world described, the innocent do not suffer in hell *because* Charon does not condemn them. However, the structure here is less exotic than it might first appear. Sara Bernstein argues that it is not uncommon for impossible omissions to figure into causal explanations, even in the actual world. Bernstein gives the following examples:[30]

(a)  If the mathematician had not failed to prove that 2 + 2 = 5, children's math textbooks would not have remained the same.
(b)  If the mathematician had not failed to prove that 2 + 2 = 5, she would not have failed to get a raise.
(c)  If the mathematician had not failed to prove that 2 + 2 = 5, her mentor would not have remained unimpressed.

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It is important to Flint's approach that there are possible worlds at which a number of rather similar things happen. For instance, there are possible worlds at which Christ's Human Nature is not assumed and is therefore an ordinary human being and sins. There are possible worlds at which Filbert is not pope and proclaims heresy (perhaps even in circumstances that would count as speaking *ex cathedra* if he were pope). And there are possible worlds at which God overrides Pope Filbert's free will to prevent him from proclaiming heresy. But the same can be said about my Charon case, discussed below. For instance, there are possible worlds at which Charon, after accepting a bribe, says to an innocent person "I condemn you!" while *falsely believing* that this will result in that person being condemned.

[29]Someone might worry that, since God's providential plan provides the ultimate explanation of why the innocent do not suffer in hell, Charon's choice does not provide a genuine explanation. However, the providential Anselmian must deny that this kind of providential explanation preempts ordinary creaturely explanation, or else she will not be able to maintain that created causes in general explain their effects. This denial is not implausible, since God's providential plan provides a very different kind of explanation than the creaturely cause. See Pearce, "Foundational Grounding and the Argument from Contingency," 255–256; Pearce, "Are We Free to Break the Laws of Providence?" 163–166.

[30]Bernstein, "Omission Impossible," 2583–2584.

In fact, another example of this phenomenon is of considerable real-world importance. It is widely believed to be impossible to construct an efficient algorithm for factoring the product of two large prime numbers.[31] This unproven mathematical conjecture is at the root of all modern cryptography, including the technology used to protect online financial transactions. Thus: *it is because no one has constructed an efficient algorithm for factoring the product of two large prime numbers that online banking is reasonably secure.* Further, this explanatory claim supports counterpossible conditionals: *if computer hackers had not failed to construct an efficient algorithm for factoring the product of two large primes, online banking would be laughably insecure.*

One thing *is* exotic about Charon's case (and God's): Charon does not perform the impossible action because, and only because, he chooses not to. This is not the primary or only reason why people have not proved that 2 + 2 = 5 or constructed an efficient algorithm for factoring the product of two large primes. Nevertheless, the idea that a person's omitting to do the impossible could explain features of a possible world (or even the actual world) is not one we should balk at.

I conclude, then, that necessarily prevented options may nonetheless be options (in the sense defined). Necessarily prevented options, however, are impossible options.

### 3.3 Free Will Without Alternative Metaphysical Possibilities?

The providential Anselmian is committed to the claim that creatures, as well as God, may have impossible options. However, if having an action among one's options is only necessary, and not sufficient, for being free with respect to that action, then this does not automatically undermine Almeida's premise 3. What is needed is not the claim that condemning the innocent is among Charon's options, but rather the claim that Charon is free to condemn the innocent. Can this gap be bridged?

The key here is that Charon's situation turns out not to be so different from (what the providential Anselmian takes to be) ordinary exercises of providence. If God is able to prevent Sue from choosing Door #1 or Door #2 while leaving Sue free, then there is no obvious reason why God should not be able to prevent Charon from condemning the innocent while leaving him free.

The point is this: it's not enough to point out that alternative possibilities are lacking. It matters *why* alternative possibilities are lacking. God's range of options, and God's freedom, are not diminished by the fact that God necessarily chooses against certain options. This theological view undermines, or at least casts doubt on, the general intuition about alternative possibilities that motivates premise 3 of Almeida's argument: it *is* possible (at least in the case of God) that an agent may be free to do something which it is impossible that she do. Additionally, whatever form of

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[31]By an efficient algorithm we mean, more precisely, one that can be executed in polynomial time.

(direct or indirect) control God might exercise over creaturely free choices, the fact that some of God's choices in the exercise of this control are necessary does not seem to provide any new threat to free will. Charon lacks alternative possibilities in precisely the same way and for precisely the same reason as Sue, but the providential Anselmian is committed to the claim that Sue may be free.

Almeida's premise 3 was meant to be motivated by the intuition that free will requires alternative possibilities. However, the providential Anselmian has good reason to hold that, in at least some cases, God can ensure that we do not choose certain options without making us unfree with respect to those options. This means that the providential Anselmian has already rejected the motivating intuition about alternative possibilities. The absence of alternative possibilities alone does not remove freedom; it matters *why* the possibilities are lacking.

Some providential Anselmians may simply insist, as a matter of brute intuition, that free will requires at least alternative metaphysical possibilities, and morally significant freedom requires some of these alternative metaphysical possibilities to involve wrongdoing. Alternatively, some clever providential Anselmian may propose a different way of distinguishing Charon's case from Sue's and from God's, that would explain why Charon's impossible options are insufficient for free will. I am not prepared to offer a decisive refutation of these views. My present point is that premise 1 of Almeida's argument (divine necessity) undermines the standard sources of intuitive support for premise 3 (the requirement of alternative possibilities). As a result, Almeida's argument does more to highlight the apparent inconsistency in Anselmianism than to resolve it.

### 3.4 Open Theism and Impossible Options?

Open theism is the view that God lacks (certain) knowledge of future contingents. Typically, open theism is motivated by the idea that God's knowledge would render these future events *non*-contingent, and hence take away creaturely free will.[32] I have just argued that *providential* Anselmianism undermines Almeida's premise (3). What, though, if the Anselmian is an open theist?[33]

My argument for the claim that God has impossible options is fully consistent with open theism. However, my argument from the claim that God has impossible options to the claim that *we* may have impossible options depends on the assumption that God can, at least sometimes, prevent us from making certain choices without taking away our options. Further, my argument that we may be free with respect to certain impossible actions depended on the providential Anselmian's commitment to

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[32]Hasker, *God, Time, and Knowledge*; Hasker, "The Foreknowledge Conundrum"; Rissler, "Open Theism," §3.

[33]In fact, an anonymous referee suggests that some readers may regard the results of this paper so far as an argument in favor of open theism!

the claim that this kind of providential control is consistent with human freedom. Open theists generally reject these views.

What does this mean for my argument? In the first place, note that one of the key selling points of Almeida's response to the problem of evil was that it was not supposed to rely on any controversial assumptions about free will. However, if the possibility of impossible options undermines the argument, then it turns out that the argument *does* depend on controversial assumptions about free will. Indeed, it will turn out, in this case, that Almeida's free will defense relies on a much stronger view of human free will (and a correspondingly weaker view of divine providence) than Plantinga's Molinist defense.

In the second place, the argument from the claim that God may be free to perform impossible actions to the claim that we may be free to perform impossible actions is in fact *more* plausible on (most versions of) open theism than on many competing conceptions of God.

Open theists often promote their view as a *biblicist* and *personalist* conception of God. That is, (most versions of) open theism take God to be a *person* in something very much like the way humans are persons. This is supposed to be an advantage because it allows for a more straightforward reading of various biblical narratives about God and it allows for a personal relationship with God in a straightforwardly literal sense.[34] God is, in other words, far more similar to us on (most) open theist views than on the classical philosophical theology of someone like Aquinas.

Open theists often regard free will as a central component of personhood. Further, open theists often emphasize that their view allows God to *respond freely* to our prayers.[35] But I have argued that Anselmians—even those who are open theists—must hold that the options among which God freely chooses include some impossibilities. If divine and human freedom are as similar as open theists suggest, then it seems difficult for the open theist to rule out the possibility that the options among which we freely choose may sometimes include impossibilities.

Admittedly this argument is merely suggestive. The open theist obviously does not think that God is *exactly* like us. Further, open theism does not have the same mechanism for the generation of creaturely impossible options that exists in stronger views of providence. Thus, we can say that, while stronger views of providence are committed to the claim that we can have impossible options and this is consistent with freedom, open theism merely *suggests* that this *might* be the case. However, we may still say— even on open theism—that Almeida's Anselmian premise (1) *casts doubt on* his premise (3), the alternative possibilities requirement for freedom. The strength of this doubt will be directly proportional to the strength of one's theory of providence.

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[34]See Pinnock, et al. *The Openness of God*; Rissler, "Open Theism."
[35]Basinger, "Practical Implications;" Rissler, "Open Theism," §4.

*4. The Anselmian Problem of Evil*

The ramifications of these observations for Anselmian discussions of the problem of evil are severe. The central commitment of Anselmianism, expressed in premise 1 above, is an *explanatory* claim: this world is actual because God chose that it be actual. Further, every possible world is such that, had it been actual, it would have been actual because of God's choice. This seems to imply that the non-actuality of other worlds can be explained in the same way: they are non-actual because God did not choose them and actuality is conferred only by divine choice. Among those options God did not choose, there are some that God *necessarily* did not choose because of the decisive reasons against them.

This, however, is precisely the problem: the actual world has numerous features that we would expect to count as decisive reasons against actualizing it. For instance, the presence of even a single genocide appears to be a decisive reason against actualizing a world. In this world there were several of these in the 20th century alone. On Anselmianism, if God has decisive reason against actualizing this world, then this world is not so much as possible. Yet, somehow, this world is actual.

Almeida's response to this is as follows. God is able to actualize a world at which creatures freely refrain from genocide. Yet no one freely refrains from genocide unless it is possible that that person commits genocide, and it is not possible that a person commit genocide unless it is possible that God actualizes a world at which that person commits genocide.[36] As we have seen, though, there are reasons internal to Anselmianism for finding this argument's assumptions about freedom and possibility dubious.

The moral of the story is that the problem of evil for the Anselmian is harder than Almeida takes it to be. The reason for this lies in the distinctive explanatory structure of Anselmianism, which takes divine choice to be the root explanation of why things are as they are and takes this explanatory structure to apply at every possible world. Anselmianism is, in Timothy O'Connor's phrase,[37] a thesis about the necessary shape of contingency. As a result of this commitment, it is insufficient for the Anselmian to argue that this world is among God's options.[38] The charge to which the Anselmian must reply is the charge that choosing this world is inconsistent with the character that would be possessed by a maximally great being. To this allegation, Almeida has offered no reply at all.[39]

*Appendix: Does God have Logically Impossible Options?*

In sections 1 and 2, I argued that the Anselmian is committed to the claim that among God's options are some impossibilities. However, this does not (incoherently) imply that these impossibilities are possible. In this

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[36]Almeida, "Compatibilism and the Free Will Defense," 63–67.

[37]O'Connor, *Theism and Ultimate Explanation*.

[38]In fact, in the Appendix below, I argue that even contradictions are among God's options.

[39]I thank Scott Hill and two anonymous referees for helpful comments on a previous draft.

appendix, I present a quick argument for the claim that even logical contradictions are among God's options.

An adequate analysis of divine omnipotence should hold that, necessarily, God's will is perfectly efficacious.[40] In order for this view to be logically consistent, it must be held that it is impossible that God will logical contradictions.[41] However, it seems inappropriate, from the perspective of Anselmian perfect being theology, to imagine logic as an unwanted constraint on God's activity—to imagine, for instance, that God *wishes* that there were round squares, but God just can't bring Godself to make any. It seems better, from an Anselmian perspective, to hold that God values or endorses the laws of logic in such a way as to regard the fact that a state of affairs contains a contradiction as a decisive reason against bringing about that state of affairs.[42] One way of expressing this view is to say that, from God's perspective absolutely nothing—not even a round square—is *intrinsically* impossible. God, on this view, is the delimiter of possibilities in such a strong sense that all impossibilities are ultimately explained by the ways God's character shapes God's willing. If the Anselmian holds this view, then she will be committed to claiming that *all* impossibilities are in fact among God's options.

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[40]Pearce and Pruss, "Understanding Omnipotence," 405–409; Adams, "A New Paradox of Omnipotence"; Pearce, "Counterpossible Dependence and the Efficacy of the Divine Will"; Byerly, "The All-Powerful, Perfectly Good, and Free God," 23.

[41]Pearce and Pruss, "Understanding Omnipotence," 410; Pearce, "Counterpossible Dependence and the Efficacy of the Divine Will," 7–8, 12. The argument for this claim depends on a principle of counterfactual reasoning that Daniel Nolan ("Impossible Worlds," 550–551) has called the "Strangeness of Impossibility Condition." Different authors give this rule in either of two closely related formulations: $\Diamond p, p \, \Box\!\!\rightarrow q \vdash \Diamond q$ or $\Diamond p, \Box q \vdash p \, \Box\!\!\rightarrow q$. On a "closest world" approach to counterfactuals, either formulation is equivalent to the claim that every possible world is closer to the actual world than any impossible world.

Either formulation clearly validates the inference in the text. Suppose that $\Diamond$(God wills that $2 + 2 = 5$) and ((God wills that $2 + 2 = 5$) $\Box\!\!\rightarrow 2 + 2 = 5$). By the first formulation it follows, absurdly, that $\Diamond(2 + 2 = 5)$. Similarly, suppose that $\Diamond$(God wills that $2 + 2 = 5$) and $\Box \neg(2 + 2 = 5)$. Then, by the second formulation, (God wills that $2 + 2 = 5$) $\Box\!\!\rightarrow \neg(2 + 2 = 5)$. Thus, given the Strangeness of Impossibility Condition (on either formulation), the supposition that $\Diamond$(God wills that $2 + 2 = 5$) is incompatible with the supposition that God possesses perfect efficacy of will in the sense defined in Pearce and Pruss, "Understanding Omnipotence," 410.

Recently, some philosophers have questioned or rejected the Strangeness of Impossibility Condition (e.g., Nolan, "The Extent of Metaphysical Necessity," 330; Bernstein, "Omission Impossible," 2581–2582; Kocurek, "On the Substitution of Identicals in Counterfactual Reasoning"). However, the principle is either an axiom or a theorem in many accounts of subjunctive conditionals, including those that allow for non-trivial counterpossibles. See, e.g., Mares, "Who's Afraid of Impossible Worlds?" 521–522; Berto et al., "Williamson on Counterpossibles," 697. The Strangeness of Impossibility Condition also plays a crucial role in Marc Lange's theory of modality, serving to differentiate the various species of necessity (Lange, *Laws and Lawmakers*).

[42]Pearce and Pruss, "Understanding Omnipotence," 410–412; Pearce, "Counterpossible Dependence and the Efficacy of the Divine Will," 12.

Note that this view does not imply a radical Cartesian voluntarism on which God arbitrarily invents the laws of logic.[43] Indeed, the emphasis on God's *reasons* places it firmly in the (Leibnizian/Thomistic) intellectualist camp.[44] The claim is that, necessarily and prior to God's creative decision, God knows the laws of logic and values them in a way that guarantees that God creates in accord with them. Thus, although this view implies the non-trivial truth of the counterpossible conditional, *if God were irrational there might be true contradictions*,[45] it does not see the laws of logic as stemming from a divine decree. Rather, these laws are a result of the way God's intellect and character shape God's willing.[46]

An alternative Anselmian view would hold that the divine understanding is so constituted as never even to consider intrinsically impossible states of affairs, so that these are excluded entirely from the weighing of reasons. Perhaps some Anselmians will want to say that considering whether it would be good or bad if there were round squares implies some intellectual confusion or other form of imperfection.

It seems to me that this is a mistake. Philosophers engaged in debate over whether the Anselmian God exists are up to our ears in non-trivial counterpossible conditionals. If these are genuine propositions with truth values, they should be within the scope of divine omniscience. Thus, God knows *how things would be if impossibilities were actual*. This will include knowledge of how things would be with respect to value if impossibilities were actual, and—at least for a perfectly good, perfectly rational, and omnipotent being—the (dis)value of a state of affairs just is a reason for or against it. Therefore, God considers reasons for and against even intrinsic impossibilities, and intrinsic impossibilities are among God's options.

This argument depends on two key assumptions: that God's knowledge can be understood in propositional terms, and that subjunctive conditionals (including counterpossibles) express propositions with objective truth values. Although these are both common assumptions in recent analytic philosophy, both have been challenged.[47] Nevertheless, this line

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[43]On Descartes's voluntarism, see Descartes, *Meditations*, 294; Frankfurt, "The Logic of Omnipotence"; Curley, "Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths"; Bennett, "Descartes's Theory of Modality."

[44]On Leibniz's account of the dependence of the modal facts on God, see Adams, *Leibniz*, ch. 7; Newlands, "Leibniz and the Ground of Possibility."

[45]See Pearce, "Counterpossible Dependence and the Efficacy of the Divine Will," 8.

[46]Further note that this view is fully consistent with the standard modal system S5. God's impossible options are necessarily impossible, since the explanation for their impossibility is to be found in a necessary feature of God's character, and this necessity (like all necessities, according to S4 and the strictly stronger S5) is a necessary necessity.

[47]For non-propositional conceptions of divine knowledge, see Alston, "Does God Have Beliefs?"; Hasker, *God, Time, and Knowledge*, 59–62; Burrell, *Freedom and Creation*. For "epistemicizing" accounts of subjunctive conditionals, which deny that they have objective truth values, see Edgington, "Counterfactuals"; Brogaard and Salerno, "Remarks on Counterpossibles"; Vetter, "Counterpossibles (Not Only) for Dispositionalists," §4; Kocurek, "On the Substitution of Identicals in Counterfactual Reasoning," §7.

of argument shows that a collection of assumptions endorsed by many contemporary Anselmians leads to an even stronger conclusion than the one I defended in sections 1 and 2 above: even logically impossible states of affairs, such as *a round square's existence*, are among God's options. Contrary to first appearances, this conclusion, radical though it may be, does not imply Cartesian voluntarism and does not require a revisionary modal logic.

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