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Theism and the Scope of Contingency

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According to classical theism, contingent beings find the ultimate explanation for their existence in a maximally perfect, necessary being who transcends the natural world and wills its acts in accordance with reasons. I contend that if this thesis is true, it is likely that contingent reality is vastly greater than what current scientific theory or even speculation fancies. After considering the implications of this contention for the extent of divine freedom, I go on to discuss its relevance to the problem of evil as an obstacle to rational theistic belief.

I. HOW MANY UNIVERSES WOULD PERFECTION REALIZE?

In classical philosophical as well as religious theology, God is a personal being perfect in every way: absolutely independent of everything, such that nothing exists apart from God's willing it to be so; unlimited in power and knowledge; perfectly blissful, lacking in nothing needed or desired; morally perfect. If such a being were to create, on what basis would He choose?

Since there is a universe, we know that God did not in fact opt not to create anything at all. But was it really an open possibility that He might have done so? There is a strong case to be made that a perfect being would create something or other, though it is open to Him to create any of a number of contingent orders. Norman Kretzmann

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makes this case within the context of Aquinas' theological system.¹ The central reason is that there is no plausible account of how an absolutely perfect God might have a *resistible* motivation—one consideration among other, competing considerations—for creating something rather than nothing. The most plausible understanding of God's being motivated to create at all (one which in places Aquinas himself comes very close to endorsing) is to see it as reflecting the fact that God's very being, which is goodness, necessarily diffuses itself. Perfect goodness will naturally communicate itself outwardly; God who is perfect goodness will naturally create, generating a dependent reality that imperfectly reflects that goodness.²

If one rejects this 'Dionysian Principle', however, it is difficult to envision a coherent scenario in which God eternally chooses not to create. Presumably, God's positively willing *not* to create requires His having some reason for not doing so. What kind of reason could that be? (Note that God could not Himself benefit from that choice.) One might suggest that rather than positively choosing not to create, God might have simply refrained from deciding one way or other. This is a familiar circumstance for human beings, who often have a motivation to uncover more relevant information, and sometimes stall in the hope that the choice will be 'taken from their hands'. But there can be no analogous factors in God.

Some Christian thinkers will resist our suggestion at this point by appealing to the doctrine of the Trinity, on which God the Father necessarily originates God the Son, and through or with the Son originates the Holy Spirit. The perfect, inter-penetrating relations of love between the divine persons would suffice as a response to any natural impetus to communicatively express God's perfect goodness.³ The reflection driving this response is suggestive, enough so that there is some force to an argument going back at least to Richard of St Victor's twelfth-century *De Trinitate* that if God exists, something like the Christian doctrine of Trinity is apt to be true.⁴ Nevertheless, it is equally plausible that a natural impetus towards

¹ See most recently his *Wilde Lectures* (1997).

² This picture is reflected in the fifth-century Neoplatonist, Pseudo-Dionysius. See *The Divine Names and Mystical Theology*, which influenced later medieval thinkers, including Aquinas, who wrote a commentary on it. For discussion of Aquinas' ambivalence regarding this principle, see Norman Kretzmann (1986).

³ Aquinas points to the this response in his *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum* (*Commentary on the Sentences*) I, d.2, q.1, a.4, s.c., but he does not repeat it in either of his two later major treatises, the *Summa Contra Gentiles* and the *Summa Theologiae*.

⁴ Three persons because perfect love requires not only mutual love between two persons of equal worth but also the sharing of the delight in the love received from the one with another. See Chapters 14–20 of Richard of St Victor (1979). For modern discussion, see Richard Swinburne (1994: 190–1).

inward expression of divine goodness would be matched by an impetus to outward sharing of goodness with non-divine creatures. And, in any case, the oddity in God's acting on an entirely resistible motivation to create at all is not alleviated by acceptance of intra-Trinitarian generation and love.

Perhaps it is inevitable, then, that a perfect God would create. But what? Let us assume (as perfect being theologians generally do) that there is an objective, degreed property of intrinsic goodness, such that every possible object is intrinsically good to some degree. We need not assume that this property generates a linear ordering in the sense that every object is comparable to every other, such that for every pair of objects *a*, *b*, the value of *a* is greater than, less than, or equal to the value of *b*. We assume only that objects are 'partially ordered' in the sense that every object belongs to one or another linear ordering of objects and has less goodness than God Himself. We thus replace the image of a linear 'great chain of being' with that of a branching structure whose branches reconnect only at their limit, which is God. And let us further suppose that whole systems of objects and their total histories—i.e., possible universes—are likewise partially ordered by their intrinsic goodness.

Now, if one or more of these creative options on each of the branches are of maximal overall value, it appears inevitable that God would choose one of them. It would be passing strange that God would opt for less than the best when creating the best involves no cost at all! It is implausible that a perfect being should have idiosyncratic preferences for certain kinds of universes, quite apart from their value.

But, on further reflection, it appears anyways unlikely that there is a finite upper bound on possible universes ordered by their intrinsic goodness, if for no other reason than that there is no finite limit to the number of good things one can have or to the space needed to comfortably house them. For every universe, there is a better, with no finite upper bound on the ranked series. Here, matters are *more* puzzling. It appears that no matter which option God might choose (a universe, whose value is, say, 10^{100} s.g.u., or standard goodness units), He must do so in the knowledge that there are options of arbitrarily greater value. Seems like an odd constraint for a perfect being to have to live with, doesn't it?

William Rowe sees here the makings of a serious dilemma for the theist.⁵ The central premise of the argument is that a perfectly good God necessarily would create the best world that He can. As he notes, if we accept this

⁵ Rowe first set out his argument in (1993). A more recent and thorough treatment is given in Rowe (2004).

thesis, we must either deny that God exists or heroically maintain that there is a best possible world (or equally good set of worlds) and that God has created it (or one of them).

One reply to the argument comes from Robert Adams (1972), who contends that there is no moral obligation to create the best and that a choice of less than the best can be adequately accounted for in terms of divine grace, a disposition to love independent of the value or merit of that which is loved. Rowe counters that perfect goodness is not a function simply of meeting one's obligations: it also reflects the disposition to achieve as much good as one can. God's being both perfectly good in this manner and also gracious in His attitudes towards imperfect creatures are not inconsistent; they merely entail that His creative choice would be motivated by something other than love alone. (And what is a more natural candidate motivation than a desire for the best?)

But what if (as I've already suggested) choosing the best is not an option? Perhaps for every world, there is a better one. If that is so (and Rowe concedes that it well might be), it seems one could hardly fault God for choosing some very good world or other. Rowe, however, demurs, on the basis of the following claim:

If an omniscient being creates a world when there is a better world that it could have created, then it is possible that there exists a being morally better than it. (112)

Clearly, a perfectly good being would reject worlds that are on balance bad. But where would He set the minimum? Rowe thinks it evident that, other things being equal, a being whose minimum standards are higher than another's is a better being. Imagine a good, omniscient, and omnipotent creative being faced with a series of increasingly good possible worlds whose value has no upper bound. Being good, it wants to create something, and something very good. Perhaps it has to resort in the end to some arbitrary procedure for settling upon a particular world, subject to the constraint imposed by its judgement about an acceptable minimum level of goodness, n . Now imagine another being just like the first but for whom the minimum acceptable value in a world is twice n . Rowe believes it is clear that this second being is better, in virtue of its higher standards (95). Some will reply that this result is absurd in the context of options with no upper limit of value, since whatever standard such a being sets, there will be an arbitrarily higher one it might have set. How can one be faulted for failing to achieve the best if doing so is impossible?⁶

⁶ See Daniel and Frances Howard-Snyder (1994).

However, we need to be careful here, says Rowe. We must distinguish three claims:

- (a) failing to do the best one can is a defect only if doing the best one can is possible for one to do;
- (b) failing to do better than one did is a defect only if doing better than one did is possible for one to do;
- (c) failing to do *better than one did* is a defect only if doing *the best one can* is possible for one to do.

While (a) and (b) are true, Rowe argues that (c) is not. Otherwise, we should have to suppose that a being that opted to create a world that was just *barely* good on balance might be wholly above reproach. However one judges Rowe's fundamental intuition, this buttressing argument is less than compelling. Might not one coherently suppose that goodness entails the creation of a world that is *very* good, on balance, while denying that degree of goodness in general is a function of the degree of goodness one is willing to settle for, given that one is inevitably going to have to settle for something sub-optimal?

One should not be quick to dismiss out of hand Rowe's thesis that facts about the structure of possibility space have direct implications concerning the possibility of an infinitely perfect being. We cannot take it as axiomatic that the notion of an absolutely perfect being is a coherent one. Although some challenges to this notion's coherence are purely internal ones, others concern the very possibility of certain omni-attributes, given seeming facts about the structure of facts over which the attributes range (e.g., there are challenges to omniscience from the structure of knowable facts). And since it is less than evident whether or not there is a best possible world, one who is committed to the possible existence of a perfect being may infer that there is, after all, a best possible world.

What, then, are we to make of the issue Rowe presses? One needn't agree with Rowe that moral *goodness* necessarily tracks one's minimum standard for result acceptability in order to find unsatisfactory, or at least highly peculiar, the picture of God arbitrarily selecting one very good option, at the price of rejecting an infinity of alternatives which are of surpassingly greater value.⁷ It suggests an inevitable frustration of what, goodness aside,

⁷ In a recent lecture, Dean Zimmerman persuasively criticizes Rowe's claim that an omniscient and omnipotent who creates a world less good than one it is capable of creating is less than perfectly good. Zimmerman pointed out that one who accepts this claim and the ensuing argument ought to accept a parallel claim that if an ideal gambler is willing to bet n dollars on a horse x but could have bet more, then it is possible for someone to be more certain that x would win. So in a scenario where there is no finite limit to the sum the gambler could bet, we should conclude, whatever the sum

looks to be a natural aspiration (overall value maximization) of a perfect Creator. And yet the claim that our universe is a prominent component of this world's being the best of all possible worlds seems unduly bold.

So the philosophical theologian will naturally seek a different way of framing the matter, one which may lend itself to a better option. I suggest we start by questioning the common assumption that in deciding what to create, God contemplates *possible worlds*, conceived as *total* ways things might have been, maximal propositions that encompass *all* the facts, including facts about God and his acts of creation. If God were to create a particular universe that unfolded by indeterministic processes, then plausibly His creation decision could not be informed by comprehensive knowledge of which particular world-path would eventually be actualized as a result of His creative activity. God's evaluation of the options might focus accordingly on the degree of goodness of the indeterministic universe *type* that His activity directly ensures, independent of the particulars of how this is realized in its details.

Perhaps we should think of a universe type as a massively branching structure, each complete branch of which represents one possible total way that world might unfold if the type is selected. And then the value of a universe-type might be thought of as some sort of function from the values of the individual branches, weighted to reflect their particular probability. (I will not here consider the issue of how to assign values for universe-types with infinitely many branches, each of which would have probability zero on standard assumptions.) It would be a mistake to assume that in a universe-type that incorporates pervasive indeterministic activity, the values of the specific branches will sharply vary, leaving the value of the determinate universe that results hostage to fortune. Plausibly, the value of a determinate outcome is heavily determined by global features that will be invariant across the branches. Granted, the specific choices of human and other responsible agents is a relevant feature. But it is one among many others, including the very fact of there being agents given some measure of control over their destiny, which is independent of how they choose to exercise that control. A second point to bear in mind is that God might well

the gambler bets, that he was less than maximally certain, yet this seems an unwarranted inference.

Note, however, that we may plausibly modify the principle such that the conclusion of the gambler argument, also plausible, is that a maximally certain ideal gamble will inevitably be frustrated in his aim of value maximization. Likewise, in the scenario Rowe envisions, it is plausible to conclude that a perfect Creator will inevitably be frustrated in His creative ambition. Unlike Rowe's argument, this is not a threat to theism, but it does motivate the theist to consider whether there was, after all, a way around making a less-than-optimal choice. If so, it is plausible that God would take it. In what follows in the text, I suggest just such a way.

plan to orchestrate large-scale outcomes for humans, channelling human choices towards optimal overall results. (Think here of Geach's 'chess Grandmaster' analogy.)⁸ Finally, a universe-type is perhaps an incomplete type in one more subtle respect: prior to an individual object's coming to be, there are only facts about its possible qualitative nature, a nature which could be instanced more than once by exactly similar yet distinct constituent objects. God could conceive you, for example, only in qualitative terms prior to your coming to be. Your irreducible particularity—your being the very individual that you are—is not an eternally existing quality, but is instead inseparable from you yourself, and so could not have pre-dated your coming to be. Or so I believe.⁹ Nonetheless, for expository simplicity, I shall speak of God's considering this or that 'universe'.

Let a 'single universe' be a concrete totality whose components are causally connected to each other but to nothing else save God. A universe is a relatively causally isolated part of the one actual world. Let us say that a 'super-universe' is a collection of one or more totalities that are mutually disconnected save for their common origin within God's creative choice. Clearly, God's choice isn't between the single universes, but between the super-universes. A perfect being would be capable of creating more than one universe, and should God choose to create only one particular universe, there is a super-universe having it as its sole member.

How might thinking of things this way help with our puzzle of creation by a perfect creator? Here is a first pass at a line of thought that seems to me to have considerable plausibility. We have supposed that no single universe has maximal value (as much as or more than that of any other universe). And it is plausible that God, intending to create, would not wish to settle for a universe than which there are an infinity of better universes, whose increase in value over our universe stretches without limit as we go up the series. What is more, since the value of universes is likely not fully

⁸ 'God is the supreme Grand Master who has everything under his control. Some of the players are consciously helping his plan, others trying to hinder it; whatever the finite players do, God's plan will be executed; though various lines of God's play will answer to various moves of the finite players. God cannot be surprised or thwarted or cheated or disappointed. God, like some grand master of chess, can carry out his plan even if he has announced it beforehand. "On this square," says the Grand Master, "I will promote my pawn to Queen and deliver checkmate to my adversary": and it is even so. No line of play that finite players may think of can force God to improvise: his knowledge of the game already embraces all possible variants of play, theirs does not' Peter Geach (1977: 58).

⁹ Robert Adams (1981) has defended this claim; Alvin Plantinga (1983) replies. Christopher Menzel (1991) tries to show the consistency of the claims that there are only general (qualitative) truths concerning non-actual possibilities and the unrealized future with the claim that God knew (for example) that Prior (the very individual) was to be a philosopher, through a novel analysis of the semantics of statements of the latter sort.

commensurate—there is not a linear ordering of the possibilities, given the wide diversity of types—a perfect Creator would be disposed to create universes from among every significant type. So, God has reason not to settle for creating a super-universe which has only one universe as member. Nor will it help for God to create a two- or three-membered super-universe, or, in fact, an n -membered super-universe, for any finite value n . But it would appear to help if God were to create an infinitely-membered super-universe, provided there is no finite upper limit on the value of its members. For example, God could simply bring about the entire, partially-ordered hierarchy of single universes (that super-universe containing all possible universes). On reflection, this simple option appears unsatisfactory, since presumably there is some goodness threshold τ below which God would not create.¹⁰ More likely, then, is that God would elect to create that super-universe containing every single universe at or above τ . But notice that he could also avoid the unwanted consequence by creating every other universe, or every third universe, or every n -th universe, for all finite values of n . So, at least as far as our puzzle is concerned, God retains an infinity of adequate choices among the super-universes. Any of these choices would have the same aggregate value of infinity.

Against this simple, initial line of argument, there is the following natural objection: Won't super-universes also be ordered in a hierarchy according to value, with the result that there is no best super-universe? In that case, wouldn't a perfect Creator who contemplates all possible super-universes confront the same problem as one who merely confined his attention to single universes?

In reply, notice that as we go up the scale of super-universes (unlike universes), eventually the values become infinite, in such a way that the hierarchy seems to 'flatten out'. The super-universe God creates is one of these equally top-valued members, the choice between them to be decided on grounds *in addition to* objective value. To defend this response, I need to explore the formal properties of the value had by possible universes.

It seems that the value of a single universe is measurable in at least three different ways:

- (i) the *intensive* value of each of its basic objects, reflecting both the value of its kind and its degree of perfection as an exemplar of its kind;¹¹
- (ii) the *extensive, or aggregate*, value of those objects taken collectively;

¹⁰ Perhaps it is a vague threshold, but if the subsequent reasoning in the text is correct, this will be of no significance.

¹¹ Basic objects in the sense intended here will include both unstructured fundamental particulars, such as electrons might be, as well as composite objects which are true unities.

- (iii) the *organic* value of the universe as a whole, and perhaps of its subregions. Aesthetic, moral, and other kinds of objective value all attach to situations or complexes partly in virtue of their relational structure. For example, it has been supposed (by Leibniz and many others) that rich complexity achieved through elegant, simple laws governing simple basic elements is an arrangement of great metaphysical goodness and beauty. Still better and more beautiful, *ceteris paribus*, are nested structures or processes, whereby the manifestation of complexity through underlying simplicity is repeated at stages of resolution (as with fractals or living organisms). However precisely we conceive its determinants, the organic value of a universe seems analogous to the intensive value of a natural object. It will be a function both of the value of its constituent objects and their qualitative states and of the relational structure they embody.

Earlier, I suggested that it is plausible to suppose that simple universes may not have 'maximal' value. It would seem that a universe could have infinite value (of cardinality aleph-null only?) *extensively* simply in virtue of its having infinitely many natural objects, all possessing some finite value. But, plausibly, a finite created object could not have infinite intensive value and a universe, however well-ordered, could not have infinite organic value. The limit case, if attainable at all, could be reflected only by that which is perfect goodness itself—God Himself. If there is an absolutely perfect being, it is one for whom nature and existence are not separable. When such a being creates, it cannot convey one of its essential attributes to its creation, so inevitably any candidate creation will be less than maximally perfect. (I'm assuming that a natural assignment of units will assign aleph-null, or countable infinity, as the maximum for organic unity.)

The total value of a universe appears, then, to be a point in a 3-space. Given that none of a universe's objects may have infinite intensive value, its value in this regard (perhaps measured as the average value of its basic objects) will typically not be infinite. (The exceptional case is where a universe instances an infinite number of basic object types whose value can be ordered without a finite upper bound. Note, however, that universes meeting this condition might necessarily be constrained in organic value.) And, crucially, a universe's organic value will be less than maximal. Even allowing for infinite aggregate value, then, no single universe will be of maximal value—the highest possible value along all three dimensions. Hence, there is a natural impetus for a perfect being to create an infinitely-membered super-universe, whose members are ordered by value without an upper bound.

One might worry that these three measures of value vary inversely, at least once values get high enough, as might be the case when it comes to

mean intensive value and organic value. In that case, were these equal inputs to the value of a universe—something I will dispute below—it could be that the product of all three measures has a maximum, so that there really is a best possible simple universe. But while I can't show that this isn't so, it doesn't strike me as plausible. Why should the organic value of a certain arrangement be diminished if each of its elements were themselves realized by multiplicities of arbitrary size?

Now let us return to the value of super-universes. Recall the objection that they also might be ordered in a hierarchy according to value, without a maximal value. At first glance, it seems that if a perfect Creator would be dissatisfied creating a single universe, knowing that there are an abundance of alternatives whose additional value is arbitrarily large, a similar dilemma would arise when considering the range of super-universes. In reply we have said that it may be that there is a maximal aggregate value of super-universes, one shared by all infinitely-membered super-universes meeting certain constraints on the value of each of their members. (There does not seem to be anything analogous to organic value for super-universes, however, given their disconnectedness in all respects save their point of origin.)

But now we must confront a substantial complication: there is no highest transfinite cardinal. (There is the infinity of the natural numbers—countable infinity—a still greater infinity of the real numbers, and greater infinities still, without end.) Thus, a strategy that concedes that God would opt for *unlimited* aggregate goodness requires us either to assume that there is an intrinsic upper limit, inscrutable to us, to the size of super-universes omnipotence may create (a limit measured by a particular infinite cardinal) or to suppose that God may create a proper class of universes, one which simply has no measure at all. The latter option would not have sat well with George Cantor, the great nineteenth-century mathematician who first unveiled the limitless structure of the infinite. A devout Lutheran, Cantor thought that God alone (the 'Absolute Infinite') is beyond the limitless hierarchy of transfinite cardinals.

There is a better response, however. It is doubtful that a perfect being would desire to pursue maximal aggregate value at all. Why should a master artisan, even one of maximal goodness and without limitations, pursue mere duplication, much less unlimited duplication, of similar objects and systems?¹² What clearly will be of concern, it seems to me, is not to

¹² For a discussion of puzzles concerning value in infinite contexts where the value in question is assumed (unlike here) to be finitely additive, as with utilitarian theories of moral value, see Peter Vallentyne and Shelly Kagan (1997). For example, one might be inclined to think that two universes having infinite aggregate value may nevertheless be ordered by value (as when one contains a duplicate of the other as a proper part).

place arbitrary limits on the intensive value of whatever natural objects, and organic value of whatever overall systems, He contemplates. We've already seen that, plausibly, neither of these could attain infinite value. (God alone, who is an uncreated independent being and the source of every possibility, is an infinitely valuable individual.) If both these claims are right, then the worry about finding an upper limit on the cardinality of the value of super-universes is circumvented. The natural object of a perfect Creator's consideration will be any infinitely-membered, partially-ordered super-universe for which there is no finite upper bound on the organic value of its members (and perhaps intensive value of its member's constituent objects), all of which exceed threshold τ . However, we may need to add one further condition. Imagine two infinite super-universes, SU_1 and SU_2 , the members of which can be ordered similarly, such that the first member of each is of the same organic kind, O_1 , and so on for each successive pair of members. Now suppose that the SU_2 universe is always a more valuable instance of the relevant kind than the SU_1 universe. If this is possible, then, plausibly, a perfect Creator would opt for SU_2 . But equally plausibly, for reasons similar to before, there will not always be a finite upper bound on the values that can be reached by universes that are instances of some organic kind. If this is right, it seems natural to extend our reasoning by supposing that God will select a super-universe in which there is no upper bound on the values taken by the set of universes of value type O_i , for every value-type O_i .¹³

I have argued that all the possibilities deemed creation-worthy by a perfect Creator would conform to a rich structure. Even so, an infinity of options satisfy these constraints, and there is no reason yet uncovered to suppose that any highly particular sort of universe will be deemed necessary. Hence, for all we've seen, the extent of alternatives open to a perfect Creator may be quite wide indeed.

Some will suppose that a perfect being would naturally opt for a *plenitude*, creating as many valuable things as he can. If this were so, it would seem that the existence of every possible universe (recall that I here am speaking of universe types, as described above) is inevitable. I believe this supposition is on a par with the thought that a perfect being would be concerned with mere aggregate value. And so my reply is similar as well: this assumption is far less plausible than the more limited thesis that perfection would opt to realize every basic *kind* of valuable thing, incommensurate with the other basic

Vallentyne and Kagan defend such an intuition through use of the infinitesimals of non-standard analysis.

¹³ Thanks to Ted Sider for helpful commentary on a paper I gave presenting some of this material and to the audience at Azusa Pacific University for discussion on this point.

kinds. (Suppose the theist *does* make the stronger assumption. Rowe would object that doing so is to endorse, in the end, the Leibnizian claim that this is the best, or one of infinitely many equally best, of all possible worlds, and this is incredible. But the theist who endorses plenitude may reply that once we recognize that his thesis implies nothing about the organic goodness of our particular universe, we should regard the judgement of its incredibility as totally unfounded.)

II. PERFECTION AND FREEDOM

I have argued that the theist has reason to believe that it is inevitable both that God create something or other and that He create at least a countable infinity of universes (in the broad sense of causally connected and effectively isolated totalities or systems). Both of these conclusions were rejected by most traditional philosophical theologians on the grounds that they compromise God's perfect freedom. This line of thought assumes that freedom is necessarily proportionate to the range of alternative possibilities open to the agent. I suggest that this belief, while natural enough, results from a hasty generalization from particularities of our own case as finite, conditioned agents.

It is plausible that the core metaphysical feature of freedom is being the *ultimate source*, or originator, of one's choices, and that being able to do otherwise is *for us* closely connected to this feature.¹⁴ For human beings or any created persons who owe their existence to factors outside themselves, the only way their actions could find their ultimate origin in themselves is for such acts not to be wholly determined by their character and circumstances. For, if all my actions were wholly determined, then if we were to trace my causal history back far enough, we would ultimately arrive at external factors that gave rise to me, with my particular genetic dispositions. My motives at the time would not be the ultimate source of my willings, only the most proximate ones. Thus, only by there being less than deterministic connections between external influences and choices—and so my having alternative possibilities open to me in the final analysis—is it possible for me to be an ultimate source of my activity, concerning which I may truly say, 'the buck stops here'.

However, the conditions for freedom in the divine and human cases differ in a way that reflects the difference in ontological status between an absolutely independent Creator and a dependent, causally conditioned

¹⁴ See Robert Kane (1996), Ch. 6, for an extended defence of the primacy of ultimate origination to freedom of will.

creature. God's choices reflect His character—and His character alone. He was not *given* a nature, nor does He act in an environment that influences the development of individualizing traits. If His character precludes His undertaking various options that are within the scope of his power, this fact cannot be attributed in the final analysis to something else. (And we may note that most of those theologians who hold that there was a real possibility that God not have created anything or have created something other than an infinite Creation, also suppose that God is perfectly good, an essential, not acquired, attribute. God cannot lie or be in any way immoral in His dealings with His creatures. Unless we take the minority position on which this is a trivial claim, on which whatever God does *definitionally* counts as good, this is a substantive limit on the range of open alternatives.) Therefore, the impossibility of His undertaking such actions is solely and finally attributable to Him.¹⁵ Anselm had it right: although God is certain to act with perfect goodness (and, we have added, with a kind of maximal creative ambition), it is not true that God is good out of an 'inevitable necessity'. Instead, his perfect goodness and freedom are both attributes he has 'in Himself', for all eternity (1998: 327).

III. THE MANY-UNIVERSE-CREATION HYPOTHESIS AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

My contention that a perfect Creator would opt for an infinite number of universes, ordered without a finite upper-bound, appears to have some relevance to the problem of evil, which in its various versions raises the question of whether the existence, quantity, and/or distribution of human and animal suffering, or of certain horrific instances of such suffering, render

¹⁵ Of course, this allows the possibility that God's reasons might lead him to conclusively favour the creation of one specific array of universes. (We have been bold enough to suppose that God's creative choice will be shaped by certain considerations. We are not so bold as to claim to know *all* such considerations.) So, for all that we have argued, it might be that God's creative choice was both certain to occur and yet free.

This might be at odds with certain official theological positions on God's freedom in creation. As Michael Rota has pointed out to me, for example, the Roman Catholic First Vatican General Council (1870) condemns the position that 'says that God created not by an act of will free from all necessity, but with the same necessity by which He necessarily loves Himself'. However, it seems that one might draw the required distinction by maintaining that God's love of Himself is a different sort of activity than would be His 'necessary' choice in creation, if such it is. Plausibly, this self-love is not an intending (as is a creative choice), but is instead a kind of desire (or joint desire and affirmation).

the existence of God unlikely.¹⁶ To put the point crudely, if the question is, ‘why didn’t God create a realm much like ours in its having significant positive respects, yet without its seemingly avoidable horrific kinds of evil, or without the quantity and distribution of suffering therein?’, the answer made possible by the present perspective is: He did—lots of them!

Objection 1

This suggestion is flagrantly *ad hoc*. You are vastly inflating our ontological commitment in order to avoid a straightforward conclusion from the data that we have.

Reply

This objection might be apt if we were positing that God has created a vast plurality of universes in order to respond to some version or another of the problem of evil. But we have argued that this thesis is independently motivated.

Objection 2

A morally perfect being would desire to prevent unnecessary suffering. No doubt there are valuable universes that contain intense, prolonged suffering, and perhaps for all we know the suffering in our universe often or always leads in the end to goods of various kinds. But consider the choice between a super-universe that contains this sort of suffering, and one of *equal* value that contains no suffering at all. Why would God choose a super-universe with suffering (even suffering that leads to good) when He could have chosen a super-universe of equal value that contains no suffering?

Reply

It is not my purpose here to so much as hint at a full-blown theodicy. But I do wish to point out that the present view has an advantage in replying to this kind of question, which is just a version of a question that is standardly posed to theodicies of all kinds. In common with typical theodicies, I

¹⁶ Cf. Donald Turner (2003). (I learned of Turner’s article after developing the essential ideas of this chapter.) Turner argues that a perfect being would create *all* possible universes above some cut-off point, defined in terms of intrinsic goodness. One instantiation of each maximally specific type, since (he holds, contrary to the haecceitistic position I voiced earlier) qualitatively indiscernible worlds are identical. He uses this assumption in offering a limited response to the problem of evil from the vantage point of his thesis. Also see the related set of ideas developed in a fascinating way by Hud Hudson (2006). This work appeared too late for me to engage with it directly here, but I hope to do so elsewhere.

suggest that certain moral goods entail the real possibility or outright existence of significant suffering. These include the creaturely goods of heroism, perseverance, and trust.¹⁷ A Christian theist may also plausibly contend that suffering is integrally connected to the great goods of divine incarnation and atonement.¹⁸ The sole point I wish to make here is that, given our multiverse theism, we needn't claim that these suffering-entailing or suffering-risking goods are the *greatest* goods, or such that some possible universes that contain these goods as well as significant suffering are on balance better than any possible universe that lacks them. We have argued that a perfect Creator would desire so to act that

- (i) there would not be an arbitrary upper bound to the goodness of the universe(s) that He creates, such that He might have created a universe that was better to an arbitrary degree than any that He did create; and
- (ii) every significant kind of goodness capable of creaturely realization would be instantiated somewhere or other in the created order.

If these contentions are correct, then on plausible assumptions, God will in fact have compelling reasons to create a universe in which significant suffering is permitted to occur *even if the goods that require suffering are not the greatest goods, or if the universe in which they occur does not belong to a class of supremely valuable realms*. All that is required is that the suffering-risking universes satisfy a minimum threshold of goodness. Since it is plausible that the one-universe theist is rationally committed to something along the lines of the stronger claim—it is another matter altogether whether the rational theist must suppose himself to be able *to show* that our universe plausibly falls into this special class—the present view has the advantage that it can get by with weaker assumptions in responding to the problem of evil.

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¹⁷ Numerous authors develop this sort of point, e.g., C. S. Lewis (1940), John Hick (1978), and, more recently, Richard Swinburne (1998).

¹⁸ Alvin Plantinga (2004) develops this point.

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