

Why The One Did Not Remain Within Itself
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The central metaphysical question for Plotinus was: *Why did the One not remain within itself?* Transposed from Plotinus's neoplatonist to a classical theistic framework, the question becomes: Why did the omnipotent, omniscient, unsurpassably and perfectly good being who is necessary in himself, and having a supremely rational will, *contingently* create ex nihilo? What motivation could account for such freely undertaken activity, displaying it as neither necessary nor less than fully rational?

My point of departure is a richly detailed and carefully argued article by Mark Johnston (2019) addressing this ancient question. Johnston makes several astute critical points and correctly identifies some of the central pieces needed to answer the question satisfactorily, but his proposed answer is at best significantly incomplete. I will argue that a more complete answer will plausibly posit an ordered complexity in God's motivations, with surprising implications, possibly severe, for the scope of contingency.

I. The Problem

Given God's supremely rational will, his creative activity must have *completely adequate* reasons: there must be considerations that motivate his so creating that are not outweighed by the reasons for creating differently, or for not creating at all. Given that God is of himself unsurpassably good – indeed, *is* the Good itself – his activity cannot arise from need, or more generally from any desire or goal that, if unrealized, would render him somehow incomplete, less good than he would be were he to realize it. This suggests to Johnston and many others that

while God's reasons for acting as he does must be completely adequate, they cannot be *coercive*: they cannot outweigh reasons for acting in any other way, or for not acting at all. Putting these two constraints together, the challenge is to offer an intelligible account of God's creating what he does such that his reasons for so doing neither outweigh nor are outweighed by reasons he had for not creating, or for creating differently in any number of ways. (Johnston, **8-11**).

Some would object to this way of framing what we should be after in an account of the reasons God might have for acting as he does. They will say that if the totality of reasons God has for acting as he does satisfies the second of these two constraints – it is not 'coercive' – then his action will fail to satisfy the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR), as traditionally and stringently understood by rationalists. Let us table this objection until the end and, for now, focus on whether there is an intelligible way of thinking about the divine motivation such that both constraints, complete adequacy and non-coercion, are satisfied.

II. Two Rejected Answers and Johnston's Proposed Third Answer

A. Meliorism

One reason for creation that Johnston considers and rejects is melioristic: the aim of improving (or preventing the diminishment of) reality overall (**42-4**). This reason is rejected on the grounds that improvement to reality is impossible for an unsurpassably good being. Whether we think of the value of such a being as measured by an infinite cardinality greater than that measuring any other possible reality or as beyond (even infinite) measure altogether (as Cantor himself supposed), its act of creating a lesser reality would be like adding a point to a line (**43**): it is no addition at all.

B. Generosity

Consider a second possible reason God might have to create: generosity. It is not that God in creating is moved to be generous to *us*, or to any possible creatures in particular, as he cannot have concern for or attachment to beings who do not yet exist, merely possible beings. Instead, the suggestion must be that God simply is disposed to be generous, he has the virtue of generosity, and he creates so that there might be beings (as it happens, *us*) who receive his generosity in coming to be.

Johnston contends that this proposal, too, must be rejected. He gives two reasons. First, precisely because this reason does not suffice for creating *us* (along with all the other denizens of contingent reality) in particular, it cannot be completely adequate. It is incomplete, being a reason only for creating someone(s) or other. In consequence, there must be a further reason that points to our created reality in particular. And whatever that further reason might be, it will do all the explanatory work, making idle the appeal to God's generosity. A second reason to reject the generosity explanation is that it succumbs to the threat of necessary creation. It would be a reason that, if it were completely adequate, would have no counterpart reason not to create, since (Johnston contends) "there cannot be some positive value which he would have instantiated had he not created, but did not instantiate because he created." So if instantiating the value of generosity were the reason God created, it would be rationally *coercive*. Since this is contrary to our aim of finding a non-coercive, though adequate reason, we must look elsewhere. (38-41)

C. Manifestationism

Following Aquinas, Johnston suggests that the needed insight is that God necessarily wills or affirms his own goodness. Any reasons for particular forms of creative activity *or* inactivity are ordered to (are contingent modifications of) this *fundamental* and necessary aim. They are ‘adverbial’: different *ways* of willing his own goodness. Johnston further suggests that Cantor’s account of the transfinite enables us to see God’s reasons for acting as he contingently does as ‘extra’ reasons: they are unmatched by reasons for *not* so acting, without being weightier (and so without making Creation compulsory for a fully rational will). Whether God creates or not, he fundamentally wills an unsurpassable good, his own goodness.

Johnston then proposes that the reason for creating (as an optional way of willing his goodness) is to manifest, to show forth, his own glory in what he creates. This provides an extra reason, one that would not have a counterpart had he willed his own goodness in creating nothing at all, but in either case, God’s overall reasons for choosing as he does would be equally weighty, as both target an unsurpassable good. (44-7)

III. Going Deeper

Notice that the specific modification of God's central, necessary willing of himself that Johnston settles upon as a reason for creating is highly inspecific and does not point to any particular creative activity. But (plausibly) manifesting the glory of perfect goodness does *exclude* certain choices. For example, a perfectly good God could not will a created reality that is fundamentally and ultimately unjust – notwithstanding the fact that the aggregate value of such a world would be unsurpassable. Furthermore, important facets of God’s perfection center on his personhood, and in particular encompass his generosity; a creation lacking creatures who bear his image in

this most profound sense and who can receive his generosity seems deficient in the way it manifests his glory. And since God's perfection is multi-faceted, perhaps infinitely-faceted, a created reality that contains widely diverse kinds of good creatures would seem to better manifest his glory than one that is more uniform. The general point is that there are more or less good ways that God might manifest his glory, and it seems that a perfectly rational will would tend towards the better ones.

Thus, it is inevitable that there will be further structure to God's willing, rooted in the general, fixed aim of willing goodness that Johnston (following classical thinkers) has identified. God's reasons for creating *this* reality, for example, might have something like the form: *willing his own goodness by manifesting his glory in a Creation of great value which includes creatures to whom he may express his generosity*. (Note that this provides the basis of a response to Johnston's first criticism of the 'generosity' answer: while generosity may not be wholly adequate, it may be a necessary component of a wholly adequate, complex reason for God to create what he does. But more below on whether the expression of generosity should, in the final analysis, be thought of as a partial reason for God's creation.)

Since unsurpassable aggregate value – the sum of individual values – is a given no matter what, God's willing must be sensitive to something other than simple aggregate value. The natural alternative is that it is the *organic* value of Creation as a whole. It is a delicate matter how to understand this. It is initially tempting to say that this value attaches to possible creations considered in abstraction from God, their necessary source and ground: *their* value *qua* divine manifestation. But reflection suggests otherwise. On theism as opposed to deism, God is the one

in whom we live and move and have our being. Every created thing is by very nature ontologically dependent moment to moment on God's sustaining activity. Which is to say, the created order cannot be properly and fully understood in abstraction from God. Furthermore, theists typically and plausibly suppose that union with God is our ultimate end (and perhaps that of other sentient creatures as well). For such creatures, at least, there can be no describing their place in the created order apart from God. Thus, the organic value of every possible creation is partly constituted by creaturely relations to God on which such possible creations are centered.

Think of God as like a master craftsman. He would want to fashion only those created orders that have great value as organized totalities. Within the created order, he would also take into account the value of organisms and perhaps things such as ecosystems – components of the universe that are interesting unities and so whose own organic value can sensibly be gauged. Should we suppose that God would be further motivated to multiply *copies* of such valuable things, without end? Not obviously so. Certainly, the master craftsman analogy doesn't suggest it: it is not merely for lack of time that human craftsmen aren't highly motivated to duplicate their valued outputs – apart from considerations of instrumental utility to them (e.g., money), which have no analogue in God's case. There will be only a qualified meliorism of desiring to make things better for those sentient creatures there are, whose reason for existing lies elsewhere.

If we take the above considerations to provide decisive reasons to favor some creative options over others, then we will have narrowed the scope of contingency. (There is no possibility that the necessarily existing God would select the rejected options, and his creative power sets the bounds on what concrete realities *can* exist. If classical theism is true, fundamentally unjust

worlds are impossible.) Will this lead to some option's being the *best* possible manifestation, leading to complete modal collapse? I think not. There may well be kinds of goods that are noncompossible (at least within a single universe) *and* incomparable. If so, the choice of any option among such pairs or n-tuples will not be rationally coerced. Johnston considers this issue briefly, but I am unsure of his reasoning. (11) The point he tries to make seems to turn on the fact that if two values are incomparable, they are not 'equally weighty', something required in his preferred form of solution. But incomparable values no less than equal values can serve to block there being coercive reasons for one particular course of action. Each option will be weightier than the others *in some respect*, but none will be weightier *simpliciter*. (At least, that will be so if there is no generic scale of value with respect to which they have a positive value relation – that is, if the values are not just incomparable but are incommensurate.)¹

A further hedge against modal collapse will be present if there are variable options for attaining the maximal value along any of the incomparable value dimensions – that is, significantly different ways of expressing each maximal compossible mix of values.

But what if, for each of the incomparable value dimensions, there is no maximal value, and possible creations instead either approach aleph-null as an unrealizable limit or, crossing that threshold, fail to top out at any higher aleph? (I find the former of these scenarios more plausible for systems of finitely-valuable fundamental created entities, even when they are oriented on an unsurpassably valuable source and telos. But it is hard to identify a firm basis for such a conjecture. It is not obviously false that fractal-like nested and fathomless systems with infinitely

¹ On this distinction, see Chang (2013).

many elements at each level, arranged in aesthetically and otherwise valuable ways, might have transfinite organic value.) It is a little jarring to contemplate an infinitely perfect creator having to choose a creation of some particular, limited value in the face of attainable alternatives of arbitrarily greater value. If the structure of possibility space rendered it inevitable, we should accept it with the piety of the modal investigator²; but if there were a way around such submaximalization, it is plausible that a supremely rational and unsurpassably good chooser would take it. And indeed, there appear to be two natural and possible alternatives:

1. Rather than create a single, organically unified totality, a limitless creator might opt for a multiverse of infinitely many, wholly discrete universes. This would circumvent submaximalization provided the individual evaluable universes were formally orderable by ascending value along some value axis with no upper bound. Submaximalization of *universe* creation is avoided by 'covering all the bases.' If (contrary to my own instinct) one maintains that there is a kind of non-additive value attaching to multiverses, despite their spatiotemporal and causal isolation, then the original question of whether there might not be

² William Rowe (2004) sees, unconvincingly, the makings of an argument for atheism here: if a creator of limitless power and knowledge were to choose any option under such constraints, of value x , then we might imagine a morally better being, one who places a floor to his preferences at the value of $2x$. As Christ Tucker (2016) observes, Rowe's argument rests on a principle (that the goodness of one's character is necessarily expressed by the value of one's choice) that is widely rejected in ordinary human contexts. Dean Zimmerman (2018) extends Tucker's point to analogous 'expression' principles concerning certainty and desire.

a maximal value seems answerable in the negative: an appropriately-diverse, infinitely-numbered multiverse plausibly has maximal such value.

2. A second, single-universe option depends on a view about time, on which there is real becoming in the created order, rather than time being, like space, a fully realized dimension. Given such a metaphysics of time, it appears there could be an ever *improving* created order that has merely potential infinity of value which it approaches as a limit.³ Selecting it does not require settling for a fixed value less than that of other options. This option seems most attractive on the assumption that time *necessarily* involves real becoming. If it is not, then a proponent must confront the question of the value of such a universe relative to the wholly realized value of a 'static' (B-theoretic), temporally infinite universe with increasingly valuable stages.⁴

For each of these strategems, the threat of modal constriction re-emerges (rationality would seem to *compel* the selection of one of these options), and there is an analogous response to the original: there appear to be infinitely many distinct ways to realize the strategem's central feature.

Let us press on by returning to the most fundamental choice point faced by God: whether or not to manifest his glory in Creation. Is it plausible that this might be contingent, such that there was a real possibility that God might not have manifested himself at all? Johnston thinks that we

³ This option has been explored recently by Nevin Climenhaga (2018).

⁴ I thank Dean Zimmerman for pressing this modal question.

should agree that it is, once we see the option of manifesting himself as ‘adverbial’ expression – as one way of willing his own unsurpassable goodness, alongside another, equally weighty way that refrains from any outwardly creative activity. But we have already suggested that some determinate ways of willing God’s own goodness might be better than others – such that God’s selecting the others would not be backed, in Johnston’s terminology, by ‘fully adequate’ reasons. I am inclined to follow pseudo-Dionysius, when he said that goodness naturally ‘diffuses itself’ – goodness has a creative impetus built into it. And when it comes to God’s perfect goodness, there is opportunity, no limits on resources, time, or energy, and no conflicting obligations or needs to adjudicate. In short, there is nothing to restrain or override such an impetus. The natural conclusion to draw is that God inevitably creates something or other. (Thomas Aquinas plainly was mightily *tempted* to agree in a number of places. But finding the conclusion theologically unpalatable, he draws back and allows only that it is ‘fitting’ that God, who *is* perfect goodness, should create. But what does that mean, if not that, other things being equal, it is *better* for him to do so than not?)⁵

The thesis that perfect goodness naturally diffuses itself outward in Creation does not entail that generosity is a fundamental creative motivation for God. God has a natural impetus to create diverse good kinds of things, and these include self-aware beings. So it was perhaps inevitable that he would create some self-aware beings or others, and this would rightly be perceived by them as generous. However, generosity is best seen not as a fundamental attribute, but only as a consequence of the more fundamental attribute of goodness, which is creatively disposed. To

⁵ For trenchant discussion of assorted texts in Aquinas discussing this matter, see Norman Kretzmann (1986).

those creatures capable of receiving his generosity, there is nothing stinting or qualified about it. Even so, if (as I am supposing) God is not an aggregate value maximizer, we will avoid the suggestion that God is *as generous as he can be* in an extensive sense.⁶

Alex Pruss (2016) has recently pushed back on this necessity-of-creation conclusion by arguing that there can be positive reasons not to create that counterbalance reasons to create and hence reasons that contribute to grounding real contingency in whether, and not just how, God creates. By not creating (and merely contemplating the possibilities), God would realize three world values not obtainable otherwise: *maximal simplicity*, *uniformly maximal excellence*, and *all beings perfectly achieving their natural telos* (and so a world without any tincture of metaphysical 'evil' or defect). Pruss does not argue that a world manifesting such values would be on balance better than ones that lack them (that would be an argument for atheism!). Rather, he sees them simply as among the many incommensurable world-values, any of which a perfect being might opt to realize, foregoing the others.

In reply, I observe that each of the values Pruss cites are simply and uniquely characteristics of God, as classically conceived, here considered in relation to God-centered worlds. They apply to a world in the unique case where God is the sole reality. Thought of as world values, they are disguised conjunctive values: there being the unique possible being that is maximally simple, excellent, and fully realizing the 'potential' or 'end' of its nature, *and* there being nothing else. Whether God creates or not, he necessarily realizes the first of the conjuncts in himself. The question is whether the second, negative conjunct – the absence of anything else, which

⁶ Thanks to Mark Johnston for helpful correspondence on the issued discussed in this paragraph.

necessarily would fall short of these characteristics – contributes to a reason for not acting that would be just as adequate as the positive reasons for acting in specific ways. I am skeptical. In a world where God creates lesser realities, he is not just one thing among others in the world, nor even is he merely the 'biggest' reality, ontologically speaking. His being swamps all such lesser beings and permeates them. When the world is seen aright, the divine attributes are no less lustrous in the dependent presence of other realities, each of which 'speaks' of the divine nature. As Augustine put it, "...all these things have the same message to tell, if only we can hear it, and their message is this: we did not make ourselves, but he who abides forever made us" (*Confessions*, Bk XI). I don't see that there is a kind of *additional* value had by actuality in the case where the unsurpassable God is all there is.

Pruss is part of a long tradition in seeking a way to reject the necessity of divine creative activity. But what is the problem, exactly?

One worry is that it renders God unfree. We could spend a fair bit of space scrutinizing the distinctive character of divine freedom. Here I will say only that its being open to God to creatively express or manifest himself in infinitely many ways, circumscribed only by his own self-subsisting nature that is unmarred by compulsions and guided only by rationality and goodness, is to be mighty free indeed. For those who think this not freedom enough, the natural alternative is to suppose that it is open to God – really open to God, something he might actually have done – to do anything that is possible in itself (including nothing). But reflection on that maximal-scope understanding of perfect freedom reveals it to be a chimera. It could be true only of something that had no preferences, no character at all. We are here supposing that God

naturally expresses himself somehow or other, much as he naturally thinks the eternal truths.

This is not a constraint on freedom, but a reflection of the perfect divine nature that provides the context in which choice among alternatives makes any sense at all.

A second worry might be this: if it is necessary that God would manifest goodness in some manner or other, it follows that there is some incompleteness of God's perfection 'within himself', so to speak, such that he is completed only in the activity of creation. But while this worry has a little more force to it, I think it can be comfortably resisted. If God's necessarily thinking the eternal truths is not a 'completion' of his nature, neither need this be the case when it comes to the necessity of his expressing his goodness in some creative fashion. It simply reflects his perfection; there is a congruence between this necessary impulse to self-manifestation and what his perfect rationality judges as fitting. If one worries that creatures praise God's generosity but one ought not to praise (in the moral sense) what is necessary, the answer of course is that we can praise his freely-given generosity in creating *us*, non-coercively.

IV. The Principle of Sufficient Reason

While many theists are concerned to maximize the contingency of creation, some others will equate any contingency in the divine choice with the breakdown of rational explanation. If God does A when he might just as well have done B, then whatever allegedly explains A cannot explain why God did A *rather than* doing B. So this contrastive fact, at least, will be unexplained.

In recent philosophy of science, there is some debate about what contrastive causal explanation requires, with two main accounts on offer, one of which is actually consistent with the availability of true contrastive explanations for indeterministic events in many kinds of scenarios. Peter Lipton (1990) contends that cause C explains why P rather than the non-occurring Q if and only if C causes P and there is no ‘corresponding’ event to C in the history of $\sim Q$ – no relevantly similar event C^* that would have been a cause of Q had Q occurred instead. Setting aside complications concerning how we might understand God's agency in causal terms, any analysis along these lines will plausibly rule out contrastive explanations for undetermined divine choices of the sort that theists generally envision, as they are ones in which certain divine motivational states explain what actually occurs and *other* motivational states would have explained alternative possible outcomes. Let us call this the ‘strong account’ of contrastive explanation. Christopher Hitchcock (2012) argues for a significantly weaker analysis. As he sees it, C explains why P rather than Q just in case C raises the objective probability of P more than it, C , raises the probability of Q . This ‘weak account’ will easily accommodate contrastive psychological explanations of divine choices for all scenarios save ‘Buridan's ass’ cases where the very same motivation would explain either or any of the arbitrary choices made.

One might well wonder whether one or the other (or some third) analysis must be the *correct* analysis. The question, ‘Why P rather than Q ?’ is in general a way of requesting a particular kind of explanation of P against the background assumption that it was not possible in the circumstance that P and Q both obtain. That much is clear. But it is possible to hear the question as imposing more or less strong requirements on a satisfactory answer, as is brought out by placing verbal emphasis on ‘rather than’, or by repeating the question with emphasis on the fact

that the explanation doesn't show why *Q* could not have occurred. No matter. The most fundamental point to see is that contrastive explanation strongly construed is not some kind of explanatory 'gold standard', let alone the only standard. We may accept the more stringent requirement on contrastive explanation while rejecting the claim that the absence of a contrastive explanation entails a deficiency in explanation *simpliciter*.

On the envisaged scenario, God and his creative motivations are the source of contingent reality, and thereby explain whence it comes. (Some will think of this as noncontrastive 'causal source' explanation, others as tacitly pointing to a weaker, Hitchcockian variety of contrastive explanation. In what follows I will assume that it is noncontrastive, as I wish to show that conceding the absence of contrastive explanations does not have the damaging consequence that some suppose.) We can go on to ask more fine-grained explanatory questions about aspects of this reality, including (strongly) contrastive questions. But we should observe that contrastive truths correspond to nothing real – there are no 'contrastive facts' in the sense of concrete structures or constituents in reality. The concrete totality that contingently obtains has a 'completely adequate' explanation in the productive activity of God, guided by particular reasons.

But (an objector may continue) even if we grant that there is a non-contrastive explanation of why *this* in terms of God's motivated generative activity, allowing that there would be no explanation why *this* as opposed to *that* (where 'that' is any possibility not precluded by God's perfect goodness and rationality) is to accept an explanatory surd, something incompatible with the philosophical theist's pursuit of ultimate explanation of reality. But this, too, I deny. Notice

that our conception of a necessarily-existing, purposive, and free source of contingent reality provides an explanation of why there *can be no* explanation of certain contingent contrastive truths. Explanatory completeness, we might say, is restored at a ‘higher level’ of explanation. There are the first-order concreta, explained by God’s reasoned-governed activity. And there are various second-order truths about them, including those contrastive truths. We can have a robust and principled PSR that is also open to all epistemic options concerning the ‘causal character’ of what lies at the necessary foundation of reality. It can allow that there are some second-order truths lacking an explanation, provided that there is an explanation of this lack of explanation, a *third-order* truth. Such a formulation of PSR will require only a kind of completeness theorem that, at *some* level, complete explanation is gained in the sense that every lower-order truth falls under the umbrella of a true explanation, and this persists up the hierarchy. If this makes sense, then it could be *a necessary, grounded truth that there are (contrastive) truths without explanation.*

This general truth, notice, will not be a result of what God *does*. It would obtain were God not to create anything at all; it is grounded in his nature, in the fact that he has the all-things-considered *potential* for a plurality of outcomes. It also does not reflect something distinctive about rational explanation of the actions of a free agent. Were the One (contra theism) a ‘blind’, impersonal source of contingent reality, a non-intentional but non-deterministic cause, the explanatory situation would be precisely parallel. Given that indeterministic activity is consistent with a kind of explanatory completeness, on which nothing is objectionably brute (i.e., lacking any basis

whatsoever), we should ask ourselves: by what epistemic right do we formulate the PSR in the manner of Leibniz and Spinoza so as to preclude these epistemic possibilities from the outset?⁷

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⁷ I presented material resulting in this paper at colloquia at the Center for Philosophy of Religion, Rutgers University, Central European University, the University of Birmingham, and the University of Wuhan. I thank the audiences on these occasions for helpful feedback. I especially thank Mark Johnston and Alex Pruss for private conversation that has (I hope) led to numerous improvements, as well as Dean Zimmerman for queries and objections on the penultimate draft.

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