The Metaphysical Doctrine of Creation

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The majestic introduction to the book of Genesis proclaims that[1]

> In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

This is the key to a distinctively theistic perspective on reality. This one statement captures the heart of a theistic world-view: We live in a created universe. For centuries, theists have held that the most important truth about our world is that it is a created world. And it is no exaggeration to add that one of the most important truths about God is that He is the creator of this world.

Aquinas once expressed the core of the doctrine of creation quite succinctly with the single sentence:

> Anything that exists in any way must necessarily have its origin from God.[2]

The philosophical view which is here so crisply and simply conveyed, I shall refer to as the *metaphysical doctrine of creation*. I understand it as a thesis about the metaphysical or ontological dependence of all things distinct from God on God as their source of being, the ultimate cause of their existence.

As a philosophical thesis, the metaphysical doctrine of creation is not to be thought of as necessarily allied to, or as in competition with, any particular scientific theory of physical cosmology or biological development. A few years ago, many religious people enthusiastically welcomed and loudly endorsed what is popularly known as the *Big Bang Theory of Physical Cosmology*. The physical event which was postulated to have issued in an almost inconceivable, explosive origination of our current cosmos was widely baptized as a scientific acknowledgement of the act of divine creation. But, as

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many physical cosmologists were quick to point out, the postulation of the Big Bang is not at all the same thing as the acknowledgement of an absolute origination of all things physical from some nonphysical, divine source. The theorized explosion is compatible with an oscillating universe cosmology, according to which, on a colossal time scale, there are repetitive cycles of explosion, expansion, equilibrium and contraction, resulting in a further explosion, and so forth. An intelligent person can accept a Big Bang cosmology without endorsing any form of divine creation, or can adopt the metaphysical doctrine of creation without any commitment to the hypothesized Big Bang. A theist might, for example, endorse instead some form of the alternative tale told by recent plasma physics. Physics is not metaphysics. So in order to understand the theistic doctrine of creation, it is important to keep these two enterprises of human intellectual explanation distinct.

Nor is the metaphysical doctrine of creation alone to be viewed as a determinant of biological theory. In recent years, there have been high-pitched courtroom battles and skirmishes in the popular press between people widely known as *creationists* and others, called *evolutionists* by the creationists. However this ongoing debate is to be understood, it is not a debate in metaphysics, or in basic philosophical theology. Within the world of serious religious believers, there are both theistic creationists and theistic evolutionists in the battle over developmental biology. Biology is not metaphysics.

Our concern in this essay with the doctrine of creation will be entirely a concern with some of the fundamental metaphysical and philosophical issues faced by any traditional theist who thinks of God as altogether perfect, however he might appraise current theories of physical cosmology and biological development. We are seeking a level of understanding distinct from that promised by any application of the methods of the natural sciences. And our focus will be not so much on the natural world itself as on some of what can be learned about God by reflecting on the metaphysical doctrine that He is its creator, the ultimate source of its existence.

THE NATURE OF CREATION

In order to grasp what it means for God to be the world's creator, we need to examine some of what has been said about the act of divine creation, the nature of the activity itself, as well as about the dependence of God's creatures on Him which results from that activity. It will be natural to begin with a consideration of God's activity of creating.

It is often said that divine creation is an activity that is completely free, rational and good. People can, and usually do, mean a variety of things by this threefold characterization. I believe we can explicate them best by considering these three characteristics in reverse order. We shall thus explore first what is meant by the goodness of divine creation, then its rationality, and finally, its freedom. This will be a proper ordering of our examination due to the fact that, as will become clear, the goodness of creation informs its rationality, and both together structure its freedom.

In the Anselmian tradition of Perfect Being Theology, God is thought of as the greatest possible being, a being whose goodness could not possibly be surpassed by that of any other individual. And in all main streams of Christian philosophical theology, God is conceived of as a perfectly good agent. And as we shall see, a perfectly good agent's character can be expected to be manifested in his actions. Now, it is easy to see that the fundamental activity of creation, as performed by God, is the most basic *giving of being*. Human creation, by contrast, involves a *using of being* in novel ways. Any act of creation on the part of a creature presupposes the existence of things not brought into existence by that creative agent. Creaturely creation thus works with what is already given. Divine creation is more thorough-going and is not to be thought of as an operation performed upon something already existing. And since this most basic giving of being is thought to be the province of God alone, this sort of creation can be thought of as the most distinctively divine activity. As such, then, it should manifest God's goodness if anything does. It should be good. And, appropriately, from early on in the book of Genesis, we are told that God surveyed the products of His creative acts and saw that they were good, very good.[3]

But here we run up against what can be thought to be a philosophical problem. We expect any act of divine creation to be a good act. And it seems natural to suppose that no act of creation can be good unless its product, what is created, is itself also good. For, ideally, good gives rise to good. But this is where the problem arises. If God is the greatest possible being, no act of creation can result in anything greater. It is just impossible that anything be greater than a greatest possible being. Now, consider our universe as God's creation, the product of His creating activity. Either the universe has positive value, or it does not. But if it does have positive value, then it seems we are forced to admit that *God plus the universe* is greater than God alone. For if God manifests some positive level of value n and the universe manifests at least a single unit of positive value, *1*, then the additive value of God plus the universe is at least $n + 1$, which is greater than n. But it is impossible that anything be greater than God, so it is impossible that the universe have positive value.

This, however, seems to leave us with something equally unacceptable. For if the created universe has no positive value whatsoever, then nothing in it has positive value. If parts of the universe had value, then, as the sum of its parts, the universe would have positive value. But if nothing in the universe has value, human life has no value. Nor could God have been right when He gazed upon various items in creation and perceived them to be good. But these conclusions are totally unacceptable from a Christian, or traditionally theistic, point of view. It is impossible that God be wrong in His perceptions, or judgments, and as created in God's image, human beings must be of value. Furthermore, if nothing in the universe has any positive value, what reason could God possibly have had to create it?

Either the universe has value or it doesn't. There is no third option. But either supposition seems to get us into trouble, yielding, as it does, some impossibility or other. We thus seem to be faced with a true dilemma. Let us refer to it as the *Dilemma of Created Goodness*. Some such line of reasoning has troubled many people who have reflected on the nature of creation. Fortunately, however, it is a problem which is easy to solve.

We must first clearly distinguish between a being, an entity, an individual, on the one hand, and any *state of affairs* which involves that individual. The distinction is a well-known, fundamental and quite simple one. I am an individual being, my Pelikan 800 fountain pen is an individual entity, and we are both involved in the state of affairs of *my writing this sentence with my Pelikan 800 fountain pen*. Likewise, we must carefully distinguish between the state of affairs of that fountain pen's existing and the object which is that fountain pen.

With this sort of distinction clearly in mind, we can clarify exactly what the central claim of Perfect Being Theology is: It is that God is to be thought of as the greatest possible *being*. And that is a claim that does not entail the separate proposition that the state of affairs of God's existing alone is the greatest possible state of affairs. This latter proposition is one that the Anselmian theist can deny. And it is one which the Christian theist will deny. Following the affirmations of the book of Genesis, and in accordance with some metaphysical or axiological principles connecting the goodness of God with the goodness of His creation, we can acknowledge that the state of affairs consisting in God's sharing existence with our created universe is greater than the state of affairs of God's existing in pristine isolation, or solitude. But from this, it does not follow that there is any being or individual greater than God. This would be the case only if God and the created universe could be thought of as parts of a larger object, God-and-the-world, which could be assigned a value as a distinct individual, additively derived from the values of its parts. And this is prohibited for at least two reasons. First, there is no natural principle of unity in accordance with which God and the created universe would together compose one object.[4] Second, it is conceptually precluded by Perfect Being Theology that God ever be considered a part of a larger and more valuable whole, an entity distinct from, but partially composed by, God. With all this in mind, we can affirm the positive value, even the great positive value, of the created universe without thereby posing any threat to the conception of God as the greatest possible being and without any risk of contradiction arising in connection with that conception. With sufficient care in our thought about God and creation, the Dilemma of Created Goodness does not arise at all.

In creating our universe, most theists have supposed that God brought into existence goodness, or value, He was not obligated to bring into existence. That is to say, in creating He brought into existence good things, valuable things, which need not have existed. As productive of good, and as both freely and intentionally productive of good, the activity of creation itself is good.

What is it for creation to be rational? Part of what we can mean to convey when we characterize creation as rational is that it is *thoroughly intentional* in character. There is nothing "blind" about divine creation. God does not say "let there be something or other" and then look to see what has come into being. He is, rather, thoroughly superintendent over all the details of creation. There is nothing inadvertent or unintentional in God's bringing being into existence.

Further, it is part of the rationality of creation that it is *purposive*. It is directed toward some goal perceived to be of value. In particular, many theologians and philosophers have specified, God creates in order to share His being and His glory. What He creates, He creates to that end. Of course, in order to be rational, it is not enough that an activity be goal directed or purposive. Goal-oriented behavior can be stupid, clumsily devised and ineffective. In order to be thoroughly rational, a behavior or activity must be *teleologically efficacious*, effectively directed to the *telos* or end in view.

And finally, in order to be rational, the activity of creation cannot be thoroughly arbitrary. Creation cannot be, as some Hindu theology has it, the arbitrary, free play of the deity. In order to be rational, or reasonable, the activity of divine creation must be in some way *expressive* of God's character and nature. There must be some deep consonance or harmony between the nature of the act of creation and the character of the creator. For example, if God's purpose in creating is to share the value and joys of existence, and He is a perfect being, we would not expect creation to be in any way miserly or stingy. Instead, we would expect it to be liberal, magnanimous, profuse. Likewise, mirroring His perfection, we might expect a certain kind of efficiency in creation. Now, in one standard form of its usage, the word "efficient" connotes the careful husbanding of limited resources. But God, of course, is not limited in resources. There is, however, another closely related sense of "efficient," according to which the efficient person just acts in such a way as to attain the greatest possible ratio of ends to means: the greatest possible results are brought about with only the most modest means imaginable. This form of efficiency clearly can be connected with the property of being teleologically efficacious.

When we consider our universe, we find a vast profusion of being. There is not just a single form of existence. There is not just a single star system or a single galaxy. There is, rather, a bewildering, awe-inspiring quantity and variety of beings to be found in the universe. Moreover, this profusion of being seems to be the result of very few basic laws, perhaps only one. It would be difficult to imagine greater efficiency in this proportioning of means to ends. And this is clearly a universe conducive to life. Within the extraordinarily broad spectrum of apparently possible universes, only a tightly delineated range would be hospitable to the rise of life, sentient existence and conscious, intelligent beings capable of entering into moral and spiritual relations with each other and with a divine creator. From this perspective, our universe can appear purposive in just the way to be expected if

it is in fact a created realm. In short, our universe can reasonably be thought to resonate with just those qualities it would be expected to have if it were indeed the product of a divine act of creation properly described as rational.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition of reflection on matters theological, divine creation is also believed to be in some sense, free. At the most basic level, this means that the act of creation is not causally compelled or constrained by the action of anything existing independent of God. God did not merely form our current cosmos out of partially resistent, or even perfectly malleable, previously existent material. No such mere forming or designing would capture the absoluteness of origination meant to characterize the fundamental act of divine creation. Traditionally, theologians and philosophers have sought to make this point by insisting that God has created this world *ex nihilo*, "from nothing." There is nothing distinct from God which is used by God as raw material for the formation of this world. Nor is the created realm cut from the cloth of the divine being. It is produced strictly *ex nihilo*. If it were not, the act of production would not be free from the compulsion or constraint of previously existent being, nor would it be as great and dramatic an act as it is. God is not just a molder. He is an absolute maker. The freedom of His creative activity extends to this great an extremity.

Throughout the centuries, it has often been seen as central to the Christian conception of creation to affirm two other propositions about the scope of God's freedom with respect to the activity and products of creation:

(1) God was free to refrain from creating any universe at all, and
(2) In choosing to create, God was free to create some other universe instead of our universe.[5]

However, distinct beliefs about the goodness and rationality of both the Creator and His act of creation have been thought by some philosophers to create philosophical problems for each of these affirmations.

First, was God in fact free to refrain from bringing into existence any created beings? Could God have chosen to exist eternally without any creatures? Or was there some necessity about His creating something rather than nothing? As we shall see in the next section, an ontology, or theory of existence, can be developed according to which there are necessarily existing objects distinct from God which lack His aseity, such items as numbers, properties and propositions, abstract objects which are necessarily created by a divine intellective activity. If there are such objects which depend on God for their necessary existence, He could not have refrained from creating them. His creation of them is necessary. But what about the creation of a universe of concrete individuals, of stars, planets, molecules and persons? Was God free to refrain from ever bringing into existence any such created realm as this? Was God free to refrain from creating any contingent objects, any objects which are individually such that any of them could have failed to exist? Some philosophers have thought not.

In the Middle Ages, a number of principles connecting being and goodness were widely endorsed by philosophically inclined theists. One of these we can refer to as the *Principle of Diffusiveness*:

(PD) Goodness is essentially diffusive of itself and of being.

What this means is, roughly, that it is of the essence of goodness to be shared, communicated or conveyed. Goodness does not remain bottled up; it expresses itself. It is diffusive of itself and it is diffusive of being. Goodness is neither inert nor destructive. It is creative and productive of existent manifestations of itself. The Principle of Diffusiveness claims that goodness naturally expresses itself by bringing things into existence, by thus sharing the wondrous status of being.

If this principle is true, if goodness is essentially diffusive of itself and of being, then, some philosophers have thought, God was bound to create some contingent universe or other. For God is perfectly good and perfectly powerful. He will thus seek to express His character by bringing things into existence, and nothing will prevent this manifestation of His goodness. He therefore *necessarily* will create contingent beings of some sort or other. And if this is true, He is not free not to create a contingent realm.

In a number of recent essays, Norman Kretzmann has brought this principle to our attention and has used it to argue that God's creation of some contingent universe or other is necessitated by His perfect goodness.[6] Kretzmann's papers are models of historical care and theoretical philosophical argument. I find his case for the necessity of creation to be extremely attractive on a number of grounds. A necessary connection between God and the world, or at least between God and the *type* of world we live in, would simplify immensely the construction of a defensible and plausible cosmological argument for the existence of God, as well as that of a good design argument; it would clarify the ultimate modal equality of the two basic ways of defining or conceiving of God, Perfect Being Theology and Creation Theology; and it would make a defense against the argument from evil a good deal easier in some respects. But I must admit that I have serious reservations about the application of the Principle of Diffusiveness needed for establishing such a necessary connection.

What is the status of the Principle of Diffusiveness? It seems to have been an influential part of Neo-Platonist metaphysics, which has been found attractive by a number of great Christian thinkers. And it is natural to think of goodness as being, of its very essence, expressive of itself. It would be exceedingly odd to think of an individual as good, whose purported goodness was never expressed in any way at all. But is it necessary for perfect goodness to be manifested by the creation of contingent beings? It is hard for me to see how this interpretation of the principle could be thought compelling, or even very plausible, as it stands.

The moral goodness of a being is naturally expressed by what that being does. And many of the morally good things done by a person can be thought of as ways of passing along or sharing ("communicating," "diffusing") the resources of one's goodness. It may even be the case that an individual's goodness would be somehow truncated or incomplete unless there were some other person with whom to commune and to share. But Christians believe that God exists as three persons in one nature, eternally and necessarily. The eternally existing relations among these members of the divine *Trinity* are thought to encompass precisely the sort of communications of love, and sharings of goodness, that the legitimate insight behind the Principle of Diffusiveness requires. So, in order for divine goodness to be expressed in an interpersonal way, it was not, after all, necessary for God to bring about the existence of a contingent universe containing created persons. It is expressed quite naturally in intratrinitarian relations.

But some philosophers seem to have thought that such an internal expression of divine goodness, internal to the divine Trinity, would not alone suffice to satisfy the full requirements of diffusiveness. This appears to be Kretzmann's view. Completeness would demand an expression of divine goodness outside the bounds of divine life. The first sort of expression of divine goodness possible outside the orb of deity would have to involve the creation of other entities. Thus, if there is to be an external as well as an internal manifestation of divine goodness, there must be divine creation.

It can be argued that if God necessarily creates numbers, properties and propositions and exists as a divine Trinity, any reasonable completeness requirement concerning the diffusiveness of goodness is satisfied. God's goodness is expressed internally by trinitarian relations and externally by the giving of being to these necessary abstract entities. It is expressed both personally and metaphysically.

It seems to me that, ultimately, the only way a diffusiveness theorist could plausibly insist upon the necessity of God's creating some contingent universe or other would be by insisting upon the truth of some sort of *Principle of Plenitude* as well:

> (PP) Perfect Goodness necessarily expresses itself in as many ways as are possible, and produces as many kinds of good as it can.

The existence of human beings is a good thing. It is possible for human beings to exist. It is possible for God to manifest His goodness by creating human beings. Therefore, by (PP), God must create human beings. (PP) thus seems to entail the necessity not only of God's creating some contingent world or other, but much more specific results as well. In fact, it clearly entails too much.

It is possible for perfect goodness to express itself by providing me with many millions of dollars with which to do good, and perhaps to buy a Jaguar sedan and a beach house. By (PP), I can be assured that God, being all-

powerful as well as perfectly good, will diffuse His goodness in every way possible. Therefore, at some point, the check will be in the mail.

This, of course, is crazy. Yet (PP) is not an absurd principle. Like (PD), it attempts to capture in logically precise form an insight about goodness. (PP) is an attempt to present, as a morally precise, metaphysical principle, the liberality or generosity that characterizes true goodness. The problem is that it is exceedingly difficult to capture the essence of love or goodness in this sort of metaphysically exact form.

It is natural for a man and a woman who love each other, and who are good people, to want to bring into existence a child, or children, with whom to share that love and toward whom to express that goodness. But it is not necessary for marital love and moral goodness to be expressed in this way. A person physically or biologically prevented from having children of his or her own is not necessarily condemned thereby to an incomplete state of personal goodness. A person is not necessarily less loving or good for choosing to remain celibate. Bringing new life into existence is a natural expression of love and goodness. But it is not essential.

There is also no good reason to believe that maximization principles like (PP) actually succeed in requiring determinate tasks of an omnipotent being. First, there may be kinds of good, or forms of expression for goodness, that are noncompossible. So (PP) would have to be qualified accordingly. But even then, there is hardly any more reason to believe that there is a complete array, or a best complete array, of compossible forms of creatable good, or expressions of goodness, than there is reason to believe that there is any such thing as a highest possible number. And without this, the requirement of (PP), even suitably qualified, would be wholly indeterminate. But a wholly indeterminate principle cannot be taken to be an accurate articulation of any truth about reality. A wholly indeterminate principle does not succeed in specifying precisely anything in particular about reality, despite any appearances to the contrary. And whenever nothing in particular is successfully specified with any precision about reality, no truth is accurately conveyed. In particular, it cannot be true that "Perfect Goodness necessarily expresses itself in as many ways as are possible, and produces as many kinds of good as it can" if there are no determinate, definite upper limits to the number of ways in which the expression of goodness is possible, or to the number of kinds of good that can be produced by the only sort of being who, in a theistic worldview, can be considered perfectly good, namely, the God who is also perfectly powerful. So it is quite reasonable to reject (PP), and thus the interpretation of (PD) which it provides. And I can find no other compelling reason to endorse the view that God must have created some contingent universe or other.

With this conclusion, I believe we have secured our right to conceive of the scope of divine freedom with respect to the act of creation to be so extensive as to encompass the freedom to refrain from bringing into being any contingent creatures such as ourselves. And such a conception is clearly

consonant with a very natural interpretation of the overall thrust of Perfect Being Theology, when it is brought to bear on this topic. For it surely would seem greater for God to have the most extensive range of freedom we can imagine, consistent with His never acting in such a way as to violate His character or nature. And in addition, with the conception of God as free never to have created any contingent beings, we have secured the basis for another important insistence of Christian theologians that the very existence of a universe at all should be experienced and accepted by us as a free gift from God.

At the present time, I am convinced that God's creation is to be thought of as free in this most radical sense. And yet, it would be misleading for me not to admit that I feel the attraction of the necessitarian line, particularly as presented by Kretzmann—a philosopher whose work has proved time and again his uncanny instinct for sensing the deep insight behind apparently problematic or currently unpopular traditional views, whether they are majority or minority reports from the history of philosophical theology. In the present case, it seems to me, the power of the necessitarian view is tied up with the portrait of God to be found in the New Testament. Most theists concur in holding that God is perfectly good. The New Testament clearly presents that goodness as encompassing perfect love. The God of Jesus seeks to save the lost, as a good shepherd or a mother hen gathering her chicks together within the warmth of her presence. It is easy to imagine the boundless love of an infinite power as seeking to bring all possible creatures into the bright communion of actuality, leaving none to languish eternally in a netherworld of mere *possibilia*. Correspondingly, it is difficult to imagine a completely perfect God, who easily could share the joys of existence with creatures, deciding for all eternity that He would not.

Our imaginations, however, are so formed by the actual that it is sometimes difficult to conceive of the remotely possible. Under the dispensation of being and goodness vouchsafed to us by the divine, it is quite hard for many of us to entertain a convincing vision of eternal trinitarian solitariness mitigated only by the unchanging co-presence of a necessarily existent realm of abstract objects. We are tempted to ask how a perfect God capable of creating finite persons at no cost to Himself could nonetheless eternally resolve not to share the wonder of existence in this way. It is not as if there is a limited metaphysical space to share with a created universe, or a limited amount of power, some of which would be expended on such a project and thereby lost for other purposes.

But if this is our judgment on the cost of creating, we are focusing too narrowly on considerations concerning the being and power of God. Our created realm is marked by both beauty and blight. And, if anything like the polarity characteristic of traditional Christian eschatology is to be taken seriously, the full cost of creating free persons may be far beyond our power to imagine. Furthermore, it may also be the case that any need we might suppose there to be for the interpersonal flow of divine love and goodness to

spill beyond the bounds of intratrinitarian life reflects only our failure to grasp the magnificent completeness of that life, of which the Aristotelian conception of divine self-sufficiency is only the thinnest and most impoverished reflection. Intimations of such possibilities as these reinforce my sense that, as deeply attractive as the necessitarian line can sometimes appear, we are right to resist its strictures and insist on the fullest divine freedom with respect to the most basic issue of contingent creation.

There is, however, one remaining objection to the claim that God was free not to create a contingent world. It typically proceeds by way of an objection to the other proposition about divine freedom mentioned when we began our examination of the freedom of creation:

> (2) In choosing to create, God was free to create some other universe instead of our universe.

Critics of this claim have typically maintained that, since God is a perfect being, God's creative products must be perfect as well, since effects resemble their causes, or creations manifest the skill and greatness of their creators. So, as the greatest possible being, God could create only the best possible world. He has created this world. Therefore, this must be the best possible world, despite any appearances to the contrary. But if our universe is the best possible universe, God was not free to create some other universe instead. Proposition (2) is thus false.

The great philosopher Leibniz (1646-1716) reasoned in this way, saying:

> Now this supreme wisdom, united to a goodness that is no less infinite, cannot but have chosen the best. For as a lesser evil is a kind of good, even so a lesser good is a kind of evil if it stands in the way of a greater good; and there would be something to correct in the actions of God if it were possible to do better.[7]

He further elaborates:

> Now God cannot will to do anything other than that which he does, because, of necessity, he must will whatever is fitting. Hence it follows that all that which he does not, is not fitting, that he cannot will to do it, and consequently that he cannot do it.[8]

Leibniz even boldly describes how God chooses what to create. First, God knows all possibilities concerning what might exist. But then:

> The wisdom of God, not content with embracing all the possibles, penetrates them, compares them, weighs them one against the other, to estimate their degrees of perfection or imperfection, the strong and the weak, the good and the evil. It goes even beyond the

> finite combinations, it makes of them an infinity of infinities, that is to say, an infinity of possible sequences of the universe, each of which contains an infinity of creatures. By this means the divine Wisdom distributes all the possibles it had already contemplated separately, into so many universal systems which it further compares the one with the other. The result of all these comparisons and deliberations is the choice of the best from among all these possible systems, which wisdom makes in order to satisfy goodness completely; and such is precisely the plan of the universe as it is.[9]

And, making it all the more impressive, God accomplishes all this, according to Leibniz, atemporally.

This is clearly a majestic conception of the nature of the divine activity in creating. It has an undeniable, initial attractiveness for anyone committed to the method of Perfect Being Theology. But its troubling result is to turn creation into something akin to a mechanical procedure. God does an immensely complex calculation, the result tells Him what world to create, and from that result he *cannot* deviate. He was not free to create any world different from this world in even the smallest respect—one more atom, or one less elementary particle. And, of course, by the same reasoning, He was not free to refrain altogether from creating a world. It was necessary that He create the best.

Critics of Leibniz have been quick to point out that this world certainly does not look like the best possible world. It is easy to think of many ways in which things could be improved. There are evils that could be eliminated. There are goods that could be increased. Leibniz's response is to argue that "the evil that occurs is an inevitable result of the best."[10] From where we stand, it might seem as though the universe could be improved in a great many ways. We, however, fail to see the big picture. We are not in, and could not possibly be in, the best position to see how the many aspects of this world fit together into a whole and affect its overall value. Only God could occupy such a position. So appearances can be misleading, and should not alone cause us to reject the result of this reasoning. Such is the reply available to Leibnizians.

In a highly influential article entitled "Must God Create the Best?" Robert M. Adams has resisted the Leibniz view in a different way.[11] Adams suggests that God could create a less than best possible world without wronging anyone and without treating anyone, all things considered, unkindly. He maintains that God has no obligation to anyone to create only the best, and so God is free to graciously create good worlds which fall far short of being the best possible. But suppose Adams is right about God's having no such obligation. Do we expect manifestations of great goodness to be restricted to contexts of obligation to some particular person or other? Could the mere fact that no one need necessarily be wronged by an inferior creation suffice to justify God's creating less than the best? Adams does not rule

out there being principles governing perfect goodness, truths constitutive of perfection, which would still generate Leibniz's conclusion.

But is it at all plausible to think that, among all the possibilities for creation, there is a single best possible world? Leibniz thought that if there were no such world, God would not have created at all. But refraining from creating would have resulted in the circumstance of there existing nothing but God alone, a circumstance or state of affairs with great value, but, as we have seen earlier, a state of affairs with less overall value than that of God's existing along with a created universe. Leibniz, however, seems to have thought that God would never, and indeed could never, act without a fully sufficient reason for every aspect of His action. If there were no best possible world, and refraining from creation would not itself be a mode of divine action, God would have no sufficient reason to create any possible world, and so would refrain from creating anything, thereby refraining, in this regard, from acting.

The first point that must be made here is that we often think of ourselves as refraining from action in a certain regard only on account of reasons we have for so refraining. But if refraining from creating falls within the scope of possible reason giving, or the having of reasons, it is hard to see how Leibniz's argument here can go through, from his own point of view. God would have no sufficient reason to satisfy Himself with the state of affairs of His existing bereft of any contingent creatures.

But there is a deeper problem with Leibniz's argument on this point. If God is truly free, it can be argued that He can act without a completely sufficient reason for every aspect of his action. This is just what the fullest possible range of freedom involves. This point blocks Leibniz's reasoning here and also counts against another related Leibnizian conviction that if there were a class of best possible worlds, each surpassed by no other world but all tied in maximal value, then again God could not create at all, since He would have no sufficient reason to select one of those maximal worlds over the others. If He were truly free, however, He could just pick one.

Thus, from the perspective of a robust conception of the range of God's freedom, it does not seem to be the case that in order for God to create at all, there must be a single best possible universe He could bring into existence. And this is surely a good thing, since it is extremely difficult to suppose that there is a single scale of value on which all possible creations could be ranked, with one and only one surpassing all others with respect to degree of overall value. There are all sorts of values which different sorts of creatures might exemplify. And there is no good reason to believe that all these creaturely values are commensurable or comparable on the same scale of measurement. Some world *A* might be better than a rival world *B* in some respects, but with *B* surpassing *A* in some others, and the relevant values not such that they could be summed over and compared overall. There is no reason to suppose that things are as tidy as the Leibnizian perspective requires.

Furthermore, as many philosophers have pointed out over the centuries, for any world composed of a certain number of good creatures, or exemplifying a certain number of goods, n, there is always conceivable a greater world with $n + 1$ goods, or good creatures. So, on the simplest, barest grounds of additive value alone, it seems impossible to suppose that there can be a single best possible world. And without this, Leibniz's overall argument collapses.

If creation is to be good and rational, it must be consonant with the moral character of God. But if we are to think of it as truly free, we should be very wary of metaphysical principles whose effect would be to straightjacket the activity of God in this regard. If we have no good reason to think that there is or could be any such thing as a single best possible world creatable by God, and we have no good reason to suppose that there must be a sufficient reason for every single aspect of God's activity, then we have no good reason to follow Leibniz in believing that only a single world falls within the range of God's freedom to create. We can thus endorse both of the traditional affirmations that God was free to refrain from creating and free to create something other than what He did choose to create.

In rejecting Leibniz's conclusions, however, we do not have to reject all his insights. Surely it is fair to expect excellence of workmanship in any divine creation. Even if the perfection of the Creator cannot be manifest in a single perfect creation alone, God's surpassing greatness will surely manifest itself in His creating only worlds of tremendous value. It is even natural to suppose that, with respect to whatever aspects of creation can be maximized, say, in certain kinds of efficiency, any world God creates will be the best possible in those respects. But this is far from supposing that there is a single best possible creation which alone God can bring into being. God will express Himself in His activity. But His freedom of expression is vast.

CREATURELY DEPENDENCE

We have been exploring the idea of God as a free, rational and good creator. In this section, we shall examine a bit more the way in which all things thus depend upon God for their existence. All things distinct from God stand in a dependence relation to God, a relation which is both *direct* and *absolute*.

It is never the case that some created object x depends upon God only in the sense of depending for its existence upon some other created objects y and z, which in turn directly depend upon God. Every created object depends upon God directly for its existence. There is no indirectness about any such dependence relation. It is not just that my body depends on air and water and other physical substances for its existence, and these in turn depend upon God. Metaphysical or ontological dependence upon God, dependence for *being*, is, rather, in every case direct.

Such dependence is also absolute. God does not launch things into existence and allow them subsequently to persist on their own. He does not

support an object's existence in only some of the circumstances in which it exists. The dependence is thorough and continuous. To convey this idea, many philosophers and theologians have spoken of God's activities of *creation* and *conservation* with respect to the world. God does not bring things into existence and then take a hands-off approach to them. This is the error known as *deism*. God continually supports things in existence, moment to moment, throughout the entirety of their careers on the stage of reality. Divine conservation is thought to be so absolute a requirement for existence that, if God were to withdraw His support for our contingent universe for even an instant, it would all cease to be. To stress the importance of the divine activity to the continuous existence of any created object, some theologians have spoken of *continuous creation*. The idea is, roughly, that just as God creates an object at its first moment of existence, He recreates it at all subsequent moments at which it exists. Yet, as the term "continuous" indicates, this is not to be thought of as involving a staccato repetition of numerous, discrete creative acts. There is a continuity to the activity of divine creation which can be conceptualized either as conservation or as continuous creation. The important point is that at each instant of the existence of any created thing, it stands in a relation to God of absolute dependence.

There is another feature of absoluteness manifested by the most exalted version of a metaphysical doctrine of creation. Absolutely everything distinct from God depends on God for its existence. This is a foundational claim for any thoroughly theistic ontology. If God is the greatest possible being, a maximally perfect source of existence, then He is not just one more item in the inventory of reality. He is the hub of the wheel, the center and focus, the ultimate support, of all. The difference between theism and atheism is thus not just a disagreement over whether one entity of a certain description exists or not. It is a disagreement over the origin, and thus the ultimate nature, of everything.

God is often said to be *omnipresent*, or to have the property of *omnipresence*. He is present everywhere in the realm of His contingent creation. But His presence is not best understood as something akin to physical location. It is rather to be thought of as a function of His knowledge and power. God is thought to be present everywhere in the sense that His perfect knowledge and power extend over all. There is nothing outside the scope of His awareness or independent of the exercise of His creative power. He can act anywhere, and interact with anyone at any place. That is because He is ever-active and ever-aware at every place. All contingent physical objects, all contingent nonphysical objects, and all external relations which hold between and among them depend on God's activity of creation. Absolutely nothing in the realm of contingency exists independent of Him.

But what of the realm of necessity? Are there necessarily existent entities distinct from God, such as properties and propositions or numbers? And if so, how do they relate to God? Following Plato, many philosophers over the centuries have believed that there are such abstract objects, that they do nec-

essarily exist, and that it follows from this that they exist independently of any exercise of divine power.

It is difficult, though, to conceive of what the existence of such independent objects might amount to. For, following Plato, abstract objects are not thought of as existing anywhere in the physical universe. They are instantiated, or exemplified, are true or false, or obtain, within the space-time realm. But they themselves have a more ethereal existence. Various human beings, for example, may be more or less just in their dealings with others. But justice itself—the property, the abstract entity—does not dwell in the land in any other than a metaphorical sense.

Abstract objects existing in their own realms of being are also typically thought of as standing outside any causal relations whatsoever. But then the existence of such things does look *sui generis*, different from anything else imaginable, and very strange. For what is the difference between a thing's existing and its not existing? In all clear and relatively uncontroversial cases of existence, it seems that for a thing to exist is for it to have a place in a causal nexus, and thus to be capable of interacting with other existing things. If a tree exists outside my door, there is something out there I can bump into. There is something there which can cool me with its shade. Now, clearly, there are many things we can't just bump into, but their existence causally impinges upon us in other ways. For example, there are things whose existence is manifest only due to their abilities to causally affect sensitive detection devices. But to say that something exists utterly outside any causal context at all is to break away from our clearest paradigms of what existence amounts to in a most decisive way.

Because of these and other worries, some philosophers have denied that there is any robust sense in which abstract objects really exist at all. And if the position of these anti-Platonists is true, if there really are no necessary, abstract objects existing distinct from God, then from God's being the creator of all contingent things alone it would follow that there is nothing distinct from God which exists independent of Him. But it is difficult to construct a metaphysically satisfactory world-view without acknowledging some objective reality for numbers, properties, propositions and the like. So a great number of theistic philosophers have found the severe anti-Platonist move unacceptable. They have wanted to endorse the reality of numbers, properties and propositions, and have seen a way of avoiding the problems which attend the conception of these entities as abstract objects existing autonomously, wholly independently in their own realms of reality. To this end they have taken up and developed St. Augustine's suggestion that these things be thought of as ideas in the mind of God. The *divine ideas tradition*, as this way of thinking is referred to, maintains that it is an ontologically efficacious divine intellective activity which is responsible for the existence of these things which we customarily classify as abstract objects. They are ideas which God thinks, eternally and necessarily. And the creative efficacy of His thought gives them being. They are caused to exist by being thought.

And they are as they are in virtue of being thought of, or conceived, as they are by God.

This is a powerful metaphysical perspective: God is the creator not only of contingent reality, but also of all those necessities which comprise the modal framework of reality. All possible worlds exist in God as thoughts in the infinite divine mind. He is the creator of possibilities, the eternal upholder of necessities. God necessarily gives being to the realm of abstracta, *the framework of creation*—so called because all the possibilities and necessities resident in the divine mind structure all the available avenues of creative production, and thus all the ways the world can be.

It is not that God brings such things into existence at a time prior to which they have not existed. If they are eternal objects, He must eternally have been creating them. If they are necessities, He creates them, or gives them being, in every possible situation. But if they owe their being to God, as they must on an absolutely thorough-going theism, their necessity does not entail their aseity or ontological independence. Necessity is compatible with created-ness. Only God is both necessary and independent.

If properties, propositions and the like depend on God for their existence, they can be thought of as standing in a causal nexus—they are caused to be by God. And the realm of their existence is clarified—it is God's mind. So the troublesome worries of standard Platonism are avoided, but without the cost incurred by strict anti-Platonism. And, at the same time, we have a view which is clearly consonant with a thoroughly theistic ontology. All things, including these things, depend on God.

The theoretical benefits of such a view are great. When in seeking to understand the scope of omnipotence we find we must admit that God cannot do the logically impossible, we are freed from having to think of God's activity being restricted by logical principles that have objective reality and force completely independent of Him. The principles that structure His activities are ideas or thoughts in His mind whose existence derives from Him. Likewise, when in coming to appreciate the full stature of divine goodness, we say that God necessarily acts in accordance with moral principles, we do not have to think of objective moral laws as somehow existing "out there," independent of God, constraining His activity from above. They also are thoughts in the divine mind, existing as entertained by God, true as affirmed by Him, necessary as endorsed by Him in all possible worlds.

The creation of necessarily existent abstract objects by God is interestingly different from His creation of a contingent universe in many ways, and this should not be overlooked. The activity responsible for this realm will not be characterizable as "free, rational and good" in precisely all the same senses as the divine activity productive of a contingent world. It will be free only in the sense of being uncompelled and unconstrained by anything independent of God. Its rationality will be essential, and of the most fundamental sort possible. Its goodness will consist precisely in giving rise to being which in turn gives rise to all the possibilities for contingent good.

With necessities, there is no selection. There is no alternative. But there can still be a dependence on God, a dependence which is both direct and absolute.

This is a fairly esoteric realm of divine creation, but it was important to consider, however briefly, because it is important to see how the theist can subsume all things distinct from God under the umbrella of divine creation. The greatest possible being will be the most thorough source of reality imaginable. Everything will testify to His greatness. Nothing will escape His domain, not even abstract objects.[12]

Notes

1. Genesis 1:1.
2. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Compendium of Theology*, tr. Cyril Vollert (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Company, 1948), p. 63.
3. Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31.
4. To illustrate the presence and absence of a natural principle of unity, consider a purported object consisting of: one drawer of my desk, my Pelikan pen, my left foot and Notre Dame's Golden Dome. This is clearly a "cooked up" entity for which there is no natural principle of unity. It is thus not to be considered a real individual composed of those named individuals. By way of contrast, there is a natural principle of unity according to which my desk drawer can be thought of legitimately as one entity.
5. For convenience these propositions are stated in the past tense. Atemporalists will want to restate them tenselessly. It must be said, however, that it is a bit trickier to explain and justify these commitments from an atemporalist perspective since, on that view, there is no time before the creation of this world when God has real creative options, any one of which He can then go on to take. It should also be noted that I use the term "universe" here to denote any created object or collection of such objects, whether physical or nonphysical, insofar as that object, or collection of objects, is all that exists distinct from God.
6. See Norman Kretzmann, "Goodness, Knowledge, and Indeterminacy in the Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas," *The Journal of Philosophy*, Sup. to 80 (October 1983): 631-649; "A General Problem of Creation: Why Would God Create Anything at All?" in *Being and Goodness*, ed. Scott MacDonald (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 208-228; and "A Particular Problem of Creation: Why Would God Create This World?" *Being and Goodness*, pp. 229-249.
7. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Theodicy*, abridged, ed. Diogenes Allen, *The Library of Liberal Arts* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1966), p.35.
8. Leibniz, p. 101.
9. Ibid., pp. 120-121.
10. Ibid., p. 79.
11. *Philosophical Review* 81 (July 1972): 317-332, reprinted in Thomas V. Morris, ed., *The Concept of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 91-106.
12. For more on this, see my *Anselmian Explorations* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), chapter 9. See also Christopher Menzel, "Theism, Platonism, and the Metaphysics of Mathematics," *Faith and Philosophy* 4 (October 1987): 365-382.