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To What Extent Must Creatures Return to the One?

Caleb Cohoe

If there must be an ultimate being, incomparable in goodness and entirely unsurpassable, why are there any other entities? In his article, Timothy O'Connor responds to a recent piece by Mark Johnston addressing this issue, which arguably goes back at least to Parmenides. To put it in its ancient form: if Being (in Parmenides' terms) or the Good Itself (in the terms of the Platonic tradition) is so good that nothing can add to it, what reason can there be for anything non-identical to it to exist? I agree with Johnston that Plotinus, together with many thinkers from the Abrahamic traditions, rejects the meliorist answer on which creation increases the amount of goodness in the world. Both Johnston and O'Connor explore answers on which creation is a manifestation of God's goodness to the glory of God, not a project to add more value to reality, as if that were possible.

Before turning to one point of agreement with O'Connor and one problem for his approach, I wish to draw attention to a lacuna in both pieces. Both focus on how a contingent creation can be compatible with both a principle of non-coercion (God has reasons to create, but not ones that impel or reduce God's freedom) and a principle of sufficient reason, in order to avoid a Spinozistic universe in which everything is necessitated. Johnston and O'Connor both move directly from the necessary being to considering reasons for the existence of contingent reality. Yet historically, many of the most influential thinkers in the perfect being tradition have addressed the question of why the One does not remain within itself by including both necessary and contingent elements within

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the set-up of reality. The metaphysical alternatives are not just "a single necessary being plus an entirely contingent reality" or "an entirely necessitated cosmos." Instead, thinkers such as Plotinus, Ibn Sīnā, and Thomas Aquinas recognize, in addition to a contingent creation, a necessary emanation from the first principle, albeit in quite different ways. For Plotinus, even if the order of material reality involves contingency, *Nous* (Intellect) and the Forms must flow forth from the One, as water from a fountain. For Aquinas, the Son is the internal procession of the Father, the eternal intellectual emanation that is the "the word of the Heart."[1] We should note a real divergence here between versions of perfect being theology that involve some sort of necessary emanation from the ultimate being in addition to the contingent creation of the material universe and those that deny any such emanation. Those who allow for some sort of necessary emanation can appeal to it to accommodate the thought that goodness and being are diffusive. The One is already expressing itself, on Plotinus' view, by emanating *Nous*, the perfectly self-aware Being that contains all Forms. On the classical Christian view, God the Father is always emanating an internal Word that is "light from light, true God from true God."[2] This means that the Good is already manifested in the most important and perfect way (albeit a way much different than contingent material reality). This can accommodate the insight that goodness is diffusive by internal necessary emanations, without requiring or involving anything contingent or external. The question of creation is then a question about an external and contingent emanation in addition to the perfect internal emanation, for classical Christians, or the initial generation of Being and the Forms, for Platonists. On the Christian view, creation is the gratuitous and contingent add-on to the perfect and internal divine life. This arguably lessens any coercive pressure to create.

I agree with O'Connor that we should not require a contrastive explanation for why God created this world rather than another. Artistic production provides a better analogy here than explanations

[1] *Summa Theologiae* (*ST*) Ia 27.1 corpus, see articles 2–3 for the generation of the Son and article 4 for the procession of Love or the Holy Spirit.
[2] Nicene Creed.

modeled on the physical sciences and contrastive hypotheses. If we ask why Johann Sebastian Bach's Mass in B Minor exists, we are asking about how Bach made it and served as its source. We need to appeal to Bach and his mastery of the musical art to explain his Mass, but we do not need a further explanation for why Bach didn't write a different mass. Bach could have written many complete masses, as he wrote many cantatas, each manifesting something of his musical genius in a different way. The explanation for why this piece of music rather than another depends on contingent facts, often external to the production or artistry itself. For example, the presence of a five-part chorus is explained by the style and structure of masses popular at the Dresden court while the orchestral talents Bach had to work with explain which instruments get the most prominent solos.[3] In these artistic cases, the causal explanation of the resulting product appeals to both the art itself and the limitations of the artist and the matter. Together, this determines a particular manifestation. But this is different from the divine case where there are no external factors and where God creates both the forms of created things and their matter and so has no such limitations.[4] In the divine case, the creative power is unlimited and there are no external factors, so we have a supremely sufficient source with no contrastive reasons that are relevant for determining one creation over another. I agree with O'Connor that such an approach fits with the PSR where it can be necessarily true (and also explained) that *there are some contrastive truths without explanation* (where the truth of that statement is itself explained). This does not mean that there are no constraints on God's creative action. God's free creative activity (when it occurs) will plausibly satisfy the Best Ordering Principle, as I have called it, that Thomas Aquinas articulates.[5] Any world created by God will be ordered in the best way possible, given that it is being directed by God's infinite wisdom and justice. Nevertheless, there are no contrastive reasons for why these

[3] Markey Rathey (2003). "Johann Sebastian Bach's Mass in B Minor: The Greatest Artwork of All Times and All People," Tangeman Lecture, New Haven: Yale.

[4] Cf. *ST* Ia 44.

[5] Caleb Murray Cohoe (2014). "God, Causality, and Petitionary Prayer." *Faith and Philosophy* 31 (1), 29.

creatures are created rather than those, because there is no best creature or set of creatures.

There is a problem lurking for O'Connor, however, resting not in the initial act of creation, but on what happens to creatures once created. O'Connor's piece, like Johnston's, focuses on the procession of creation from the first principle, but there is a corresponding puzzle about the return of creatures to the first principle. Does a world in which there is only a limited return of creation to God manifest God's own goodness similarly to a world in which some or even all creatures fully unite with God and even share in the infinite divine nature, giving them infinite value? O'Connor rightly resists the idea that God would be required to multiple copies of valuable things as much as possible, so that we would end up with a world containing an infinite number of things. Yet at the same time O'Connor accepts constraints on the kinds of creatures that must feature in whatever God creates, insisting that "a creation lacking creatures who bear [God's] image . . . and who can receive his generosity seems deficient in the way it manifests his glory." This suggests that God needs to create a world that features creatures who are able to and do, in fact, achieve "union with God" in a maximal way. A universe with millions of mollusks but no other living things may not be a good enough manifestation. O'Connor lays out several significantly different modes in which God could create worlds. Even allowing that there are an infinite number of ways in which God could realize certain sorts of created orders, there are still theological and philosophical worries about coercion.[6]

O'Connor is willing to accept the "necessity of divine creative activity," but his claims have stronger implications. O'Connor accepts "a qualified meliorism of desiring to make things better for those sentient creatures there are" and also is confident, as we saw, that God must create a world with sentient creatures capable of meaningful union with the divine. But for such creatures perfect and infinite union with God is better than lacking such union, so if God's goal is to make things better for those creatures then it seems that God must do everything possible to allow

[6] O'Connor mentions "a single, organically unified totality," "infinitely many, wholly discrete universes," and "an ever *improving* created order that has merely potential infinity of value which it approaches as a limit."

these creatures to achieve full communion with God and infinite happiness. If this is the case, O'Connor's meliorism is much stronger than it initially seems. It is not just, as O'Connor puts it, that "God inevitably creates something or other," but that God must create a world with creatures who can achieve union with him and do everything possible to ensure that they all achieve full communion.

This not only suggests that O'Connor is underplaying the constraints he thinks are present, it calls into question whether O'Connor's position can respect the *non-coercion* condition. *Non-coercion* initially required that the reasons for God's actions "cannot outweigh reasons for acting in any other way, or for not acting at all." O'Connor explicitly gives up on this last clause but he is also in danger of modifying the first clause in ways that undermine it. O'Connor's position does avoid complete modal collapse. There may be an infinite number of ways of getting to the destination, so any of the steps before the final state can be seen as contingent. Nevertheless, his view is in danger of violating divine coercion theologically and substantively. If God must create creatures who perfectly unite with him in an infinitely good universe (or series of universes) in order to properly manifest his goodness, then God's salvific acts might seem forced, rather than gratuitous or freely given. If the ultimate state must feature one sort of thing (the infinitely valuable union of image bearers with God) for whichever image bearers God creates, then the scope of contingency for divine action might have narrowed too far. Having "infinitely many distinct ways to realize the stratagem's central feature" does not ensure contingency in a significant way. If I need to tip my server, having infinitely many methods of payment for doing so does not add significant contingency or choice to the matter.

We can see the issue by contrasting O'Connor's view with the constraints put forward by Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas agrees that God's own goodness and justice guide how God creates, but the requirements Aquinas posits are relative to the natural powers of the creature and are thus much weaker. For any creature God creates, God will give to that creature "what is owed to it according to the account of its nature and status [*secundum rationem suae naturae et conditionis*]."[7] For Aquinas,

[7] *ST* Ia 21.1 ad 3; note that this is an internal requirement of God's justice that involves giving "what is owed to Himself," not a constraint coming from creatures externally.

this means that God creates creatures with the tools they need for their activities and places them in an environment which enables them to exercise their causal powers. If God creates a mollusk, God's justice requires that the mollusk be placed in a world that allows it to do the work proper to its nature. This requires, in general, that the creature can causally interact with other things and, in the specific case of the mollusk, that it be able to nourish itself, grow, and reproduce in its own characteristic ways. In acting and being acted upon in ways that express their nature, each creature manifests God's goodness in its own limited way. This expressive requirement is much weaker than the position to which O'Connor is moving. God could create a universe full of creatures that satisfy this condition without featuring beings that can achieve perfect divine union (though Aquinas recognizes other reasons for creation that may be more constraining, as we will see soon).

O'Connor's views, by contrast, seem to imply that God must create creatures who can fully enjoy him and then give them everything required to make that enjoyment as perfect and infinite as it can be. Some, such as Nevin Climenhega, wholeheartedly embrace this approach: God will continue creating creatures who can know and love God and will ensure that each and every one achieves moral perfection and "full communion with God," guaranteeing that the world will have an infinite number of creatures with entirely fulfilled lives and lives as perfect as they can be.[8] This view has antecedents in the insistence of Origen and Gregory of Nyssa that the goodness of God will ultimately bring all rational creatures to their best possible end. As Gregory puts it, "[God's] end is one: when the complete whole of our nature shall have been perfected from the first human to the last . . . to hand over to all the sharing in the goods in Him . . . this is nothing other than to come to be in God himself, for the Good which is above hearing and eye and heart must be that Good which transcends the universe."[9] But obviously affirming the universal restoration of all things and their perfect union with God is much stronger than conceding, as O'Connor does, that "God inevitably creates something or other." The issue here is not primarily

[8] Nevin Climenhaga (2018). "Infinite Value and the Best of All Possible Worlds." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 97 (2), 372.

[9] Trans. Moore and Wilson with modifications; *Patrologia Graeca* 46, *Peri Psuchēs Kai Anastaseōs Ho Logos* (Migne, 152); cf. Origen, *Peri Archōn* (*De Principiis*), III 6.

universalism: you could take a position on the nature of free will and creaturely freedom that would prevent universalism from being necessarily true. The issue is rather how much generosity God is rationally required to show to creatures. Given God's goodness and power, does God need to give any willing creature infinite happiness? O'Connor's commitments seem to imply not only that God must create but that God must create worlds with image bearing creatures in it who all (at least to the extent that they become open to this possibility) achieve lives of infinite value and union with God.

This is not to say that this issue arises only for O'Connor or Origen. It confronts any view of reality on which created things are in some way capable of either attaining or approaching the infinite. The tension shows up even in Aquinas. He argues that there are strong reasons for the universe not only to contain a wide variety of creatures (*Summa Contra Gentiles* [*SCG*] 2.45) but to specifically contain intellectual creatures, since they better show forth the perfection of God's mind in their intellectual and volitional activities and thus can more fully imitate and return to God than non-intellectual creatures (*SCG* 2.46). Aquinas rejects the idea that there is some best world God must create by emphasizing creatures' limited ability to express God's goodness (*ST* 1a 21.1, corpus). At the same time, he also recognizes the infinite goodness creatures can participate in through their union with God. Aquinas concedes that "from the fact that . . . created happiness is the enjoyment of God . . . it follows that [it has] a certain infinite dignity that stems from the infinite goodness which is God. And in this respect nothing can be made that is better than [it is], just as there cannot be anything that is better than God."[10] So Aquinas thinks there are strong reasons for God to create intellectual creatures and Aquinas thinks that such creatures are capable of sharing in God's infinite value. But this may undermine Aquinas's insistence that every created order will be a similarly limited manifestation of divine goodness. If there are universes which contain created things than which "nothing can be made that is better," then it seems that

[10] Trans. Freddoso, *Ad quartum dicendum quod humanitas Christi ex hoc quod est unita Deo, et beatitudo creata ex hoc quod est fruitio Dei, et beata virgo ex hoc quod est mater Dei, habent quandam dignitatem infinitam, ex bono infinito quod est Deus. Et ex hac parte non potest aliquid fieri melius eis, sicut non potest aliquid melius esse Deo.*

God should create such universes, where creation itself shares in infinite goodness, over any universe which features only finite and surpassable creatures and activity. Indeed, since Aquinas thinks humans can only achieve perfect bliss if God supernaturally grant us union with the divine, there is an ongoing debate in the Thomist tradition over whether God needs to give us this beatific vision in order to fulfill our human nature.[11] While there would be many ways for God to do this, there is once again a risk of divine coercion. So perhaps O'Connor, who already takes Aquinas to be tempted by the idea that God necessarily creates, will also read Aquinas as joining him in thinking that God must create a universe in which created things share in infinite goodness.

We can express the problem more fully by returning to the art analogy. There is a difference in kind between all limited manifestations which only express aspects of the art (even if the artist produces them with perfect wisdom and justice) and a manifestation that, through return to and union with the artist, came to express the whole art itself, not some part of it. This would be not just Pygmalion's statue come to life, but a living statue that, through its ongoing connection to the artist, fully expressed all the shapes of which sculpture is capable. If such a thing were possible, it would be a better manifestation, even if the more limited statue was created and ordered with the same perfect skill. If some particular pieces of art have the capacity to somehow, with the artist's help, become such manifestations that they express not just their own being but the whole of the artist's art, then would it not be better for the artist to create and bring to completion such manifestations? Even an infinite number of partial manifestations would not have the same value as such a perfect image. Thus there seems to be pressure to make some or all of these partial manifestations of God into manifestations that universally and perfectly manifest the art itself.

Now there are places where this train of reasoning can be resisted. There are questions about whether even an endless relationship of union to a being of infinite goodness is sufficient for giving the limited creature

[11] See, *inter alia*, Henri de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1998) and Jacob W. Wood, *To Stir a Restless Heart: Thomas Aquinas and Henri de Lubac on Nature, Grace, and the Desire for God* (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 2019).

an axiologically infinite value that would be of a higher order than other creatures with limited connections to God. Yet to some extent this tension is unavoidable for any thinker who thinks that perfect union with God is best for us and what our natures want, even though we are not capable of achieving it on our own. Dante's Aristotle, living forever in limbo, enjoying the full fruits of the natural knowledge he achieved, is living a good life, but not an infinitely good one, and there is something deeply sad about that fact (*Inferno*, Canto IV). The question going forward is whether O'Connor and others working on divine freedom and creation can avoid divine coercion when it comes to the return of all things to God. Can you affirm that union with the Infinitely Good God is the best thing for creation, while still seeing such union as a gracious gift that is not guaranteed and is, in fact, one that God is free to withhold? Or is there inevitable slippage towards the radical position of Origen and Gregory where God must ultimately be "all in all" by ensuring that each and every image of God becomes as divine and fully manifesting as it can be?[12]

[12] Thanks to Thérèse Cory for sharing her insights on how to read Aquinas on these issues, though she should not be held liable for the reading I put forward.