

The Contingency of Creation and Divine Choice

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Abstract:

According to the Principle of Sufficient Reason ('PSR'), every fact has an explanation for why it obtains and not otherwise. If the PSR is true, then there must be a sufficient reason for why God chose to create our world, and not any other possible world. But because a sufficient reason for God's choice would necessitate that choice, it seems that God could not have done otherwise, and that our world exists necessarily. I argue that it is possible to both preserve the contingency of creation and divine choice and endorse the PSR in an unrestricted form so that it also applies to all facts about God's actions and his preferences. My solution depends on the coherence of a restricted modal realism, on which there is more than one possible morally optimal created world, and for every possible morally optimal created world there is an existing possibility in which God creates it.

Is the contingency of creation compatible with the rationalist demand that all facts, including those about God's actions, be governed by the Principle of Sufficient Reason (henceforth 'PSR')? According to the PSR, every fact has an explanation—a sufficient reason—for why it obtains and not otherwise.¹ Thus, given that God created this world, there must be an explanation for why God brought this world into existence rather than not. But if facts about God's actions have sufficient reasons, it is difficult to see how God's actions leave any room for contingency: if God's choice to create this world as opposed to any other is backed by a sufficient reason that necessitates God's choice, then it seems—at least on the face of it—that God could not have done otherwise.²

I will argue, however, that despite appearances, it is possible to both preserve the contingency of divine choice *and* endorse the PSR in an unrestricted form so that it also applies to all facts about God's actions and his preferences. In §1, I discuss in more detail how the tension between the PSR and the contingency of creation arises. In §2, I argue that, *contra* Timothy O'Connor's suggestion (in this symposium) that the rationalist should adopt a restricted PSR that allows for brute contrastive facts in order to secure the contingency of divine choice, there is a sufficient reason available for God's choice of one world over another even if God could have chosen otherwise. But my proposal in §2 seems to generate a brute fact further downstream. I resolve this worry in §3, and thereby complete my case for the compatibility of an unrestricted PSR and the contingency of creation.

¹ This contrastive formulation of the PSR traces back to Leibniz. In §31-32 of *The Monadology*, Leibniz writes: "Our reasonings are based on two great principles, that of contradiction...And that of sufficient reason, by virtue of which we consider that we can find no true or existent fact, no true assertion, without there being a sufficient reason why it is thus and not otherwise, although most of the time these reasons cannot be known to us." (Leibniz, 1989, p. 217)

² In his paper "Why The One Did Not Remain Within Itself" in this symposium, Timothy O'Connor writes: "[w]hile 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."

§1 The Problem

Why is the contingency of creation apparently incompatible with the PSR? Suppose that God's actions are governed by the PSR and that God can bring only one world into existence. Then there has to be an explanation for why God creates our world as opposed to any other world (or no world). A 'world', as I am using the term, is not a maximally complete way that things *simpliciter* could have been, but rather a maximally complete way that *created* things could have been. Thus, the term 'world', as I am using it, picks out a *created* world. This sense of the term is specific to a theistic or deistic framework on which God, as creator, is not part of his creation, but rather stands outside of it. As Leibniz puts it, God "is above the world, and, so to speak, extramundane".³ By contrast, I will use the term 'possibility' to pick out a maximally complete way that things (created or otherwise) could have been. On a theistic or deistic framework committed to the existence of God as a necessary being and creator, God does not occupy a vantage point that is outside of any possibility. Rather, God exists *in* every possibility. A possibility thus includes both God and his creation (if he creates anything in that possibility).

Now let us suppose for the sake of illustration, that God is deciding between two worlds, w_1 and w_2 in a given possibility. Then, by the PSR, God must have a sufficient reason for bringing one of the worlds into existence over the other. This does not mean merely that God has *a* reason to bring w_1 into existence, for God might likewise have a reason to bring w_2 into existence. Suppose for example, that w_1 is more symmetric than w_2 and God values symmetry, but w_2 contains more happy people than w_1 , and God also values happiness. Then it would seem that God has a reason to bring w_1 into existence, but also a reason to bring w_2 into existence. But if facts about God's actions are governed by the PSR, then God's choices are backed by the weight of reasons: they are the choices that God has most reason for making. God's choice—or so the argument goes—cannot be arbitrary in the sense that God chooses to actualize w_1 , but he might well have chosen to actualize w_2 . But if the PSR requires that God's choice not be arbitrary, then God's choice is seemingly necessitated: if the weight of reasons supports God's bringing about w_1 , then God could not possibly bring about w_2 . Why is that?

Given the truth of the (unrestricted) PSR, two assumptions generate the threat to contingency. First, that necessarily, God chooses the world he has most reason to bring into existence. To assume otherwise would be to suppose that God is irrational, because he could choose to bring about w_2 even if he had most reason to bring about w_1 . Second, that necessarily, w_1 (i.e., our world) is the world that God has most reason to bring about. If it were a contingent matter that w_1 is the world that God has most reason to bring about, then the necessitarian conclusion would not follow, for even if God necessarily chooses whatever world he has most reason to bring about, that world could have been w_2 , not w_1 , even if it is in fact w_1 . And so, it would not follow that w_1 's existence is necessary.

The first assumption follows from the claim that God is necessarily rational. To suppose otherwise would be to admit a defect in God, which goes against the conception of God as a being who is perfect in all respects. If the first assumption cannot be given up, the only way to save the contingency of creation is to deny the second assumption. Within a framework on which God must choose whatever world God has most reason to bring about, denying the second assumption requires insisting that a world other than ours could have been a world that God has most reason to bring about. And at least on the face of it, this claim does not look tenable. Suppose that God's reason for bringing about a particular world is that it is the best of all possible worlds. The standards for what count as 'best' cannot vary

³ Leibniz, 1989, p. 149.

between possibilities (otherwise, it would be true for us that God is possibly evil). And the set of worlds from which God must choose remains invariant across possibilities. Thus, it would seem that if God's choices are governed by the PSR, the existence of our world is not contingent, but necessary.⁴

Interestingly, in order to derive the tension between the claim that God's actions are governed by the PSR and the claim that our world exists contingently, we need not assume that God is omniscient, omnipotent and omnibenevolent. Suppose, for example, that God lacks access to some of the facts about the worlds that he might bring into existence. Nevertheless, if God's actions are governed by the PSR, then God must have a sufficient reason for choosing one world over another based on the facts that he has access to. Again, suppose that there was a world that God could not possibly actualize because it was beyond his power to do so, and he thus lacked omnipotence. Still, God can nevertheless have a sufficient reason for actualizing the world he brings about. It might not be the world he has most reason to actualize, but *of the options that are within God's power*, it can nevertheless be the one with the weight of reason behind it. Finally, suppose that God is not omnibenevolent. The PSR does not place any kind of constraints on the *kinds* of reasons God might have for choosing to actualize one world over another. It might not be in God's nature to create the world that is morally speaking the best world. The PSR requires only that whatever the reasons might be for God's choice, they constitute a sufficient reason, such that if God's reasons support actualizing w_1 , he could not then actualize w_2 while remaining rational.

§2 Non-Moral Divine Preferences

I will argue that despite appearances, the contingency of creation is not inconsistent with the claim that facts about God's actions are governed by the PSR. Thus, one can accept both the contingency of creation, and endorse an unrestricted PSR that permits no brute facts, even if the facts in question are about God's choices, preferences, and reasons for acting.

For the sake of argument, let us suppose that God is omnibenevolent, and thus seeks to create the best of all possible worlds, where 'best' picks out what is morally best.⁵ Suppose also that worlds w_1 and w_2 are equivalent in terms of bestness or, equivalently, moral optimality. Would not God's choice of one world over the other then violate the PSR, for God would have no reason to choose w_1 over w_2 , or vice versa? I will show that such a choice need not violate the PSR. Let us suppose that the moral optimality of a world is not one of its primitive properties, but is rather instantiated because the world instantiates some other properties. Perhaps it is a just and egalitarian world that is free from poverty. However, it need not be the case that every property the world instantiates plays a role in grounding the fact that the world is morally superior. For example, properties that pertain to shape—i.e., whether the world is cubical or spherical—might play no role in grounding the world's moral optimality.⁶ Let us call such properties 'extraneous'.⁷

⁴ According to Leibniz's correspondent Samuel Clarke, God's reason for choosing a particular world over others can consist merely in God's will (cf. Clarke 2000, p. 11). If God creates w_1 over w_2 simply because that is what his will dictates, then God could just as easily have chosen w_2 . However, Clarke's version of the PSR is not unrestricted, for it entails that there is no sufficient reason for *why* God wills what he does.

⁵ My argument does not require this assumption. Presuming omnibenevolence merely permits us to focus on a particular kind of reason—namely, a world's moral optimality—as a reason that motivates God's choice about which world to create.

⁶ I'm assuming for convenience that worlds can be cubical or spherical. The argument goes through for any pair of incompatible properties which are morally irrelevant.

⁷ One might claim—as Leibniz arguably does—that no properties of a world can be extraneous to the world's overall goodness. But this view about the properties instantiated by worlds is not forced upon us.

On the assumption that God is omnibenevolent, God has a reason to choose the world that is morally the best. But unless we suppose that God has no other preferences except to bring about what is morally the best, it does not follow that God's choice of world w_1 over world w_2 has no sufficient reason. And it is very implausible to think that God's nature precludes his having any preferences apart from the preference for what is good. Finite creatures like us are not limited in this way: my friend Sam is perfectly good, and capable of no evil, yet that does not mean he thereby has no *non-moral* preferences. He still, for example, prefers chocolate over vanilla ice-cream. If finite creatures like us can have both moral and non-moral preferences, there's no reason to think that God—a being who is infinitely greater and more powerful than us—cannot. Moreover, to suppose that God can only have moral preferences would be to presuppose that God is limited in his abilities: that he is not able to have non-moral preferences.

Yet, one might object—correctly—that not just any limitation in God's abilities qualifies as a weakness. For example, God does not have the ability to act immorally, but that God lacks this ability does not imply that God is deficient in his power. However, God's inability to have non-moral preferences does, I contend, suggest a deficiency in God's power. The difference between God's inability to be immoral and his putative inability to have non-moral preferences lies in this: God lacks the former ability *because* he is perfectly moral, but there is no obvious explanation that stems from God's nature for why God should lack the ability to have non-moral preferences. In other words, God's lacking an ability does not imply that God is deficient, as long as that lack is explained by a feature of God that belongs to God's nature. By contrast, God's lacking an ability *does* imply that God is deficient if the lack is not explained by any feature that belongs to God's nature. Thus, if God lacked the ability to have non-moral preferences, God would be limited in his abilities in an objectionable way.

Now suppose that w_1 and w_2 have some extraneous properties, i.e., properties that do not play a role in grounding the moral bestness of those worlds. For concreteness, let us suppose that w_1 has the extraneous property of being cubical, whereas w_2 has the extraneous property of being spherical. Now because God may have both moral and non-moral preferences, God can choose to actualize w_1 because there is no world that is better than w_1 , morally speaking, *and* because it is cubical. Thus, even in a situation where there is more than one morally optimal world, God's choosing to actualize one morally optimal world over another can be backed by a sufficient reason. God's preference for a world that is morally optimal but also cubical provides the sufficient reason for God's choosing to actualize that world. Moreover, it also serves as a sufficient reason for the contrastive fact that God chooses to actualize w_1 *rather than* w_2 .

Still, one might worry that by allowing a non-moral reason—such as the preference for a cubical world—to be part of the sufficient reason for choosing to create w_1 , we risk either losing the contingency of creation or violating the PSR. In what follows, I discuss each risk in turn.

Why would the claim that God has a sufficient reason—one that has both moral and non-moral components—for choosing to create w_1 over w_2 threaten the contingency of world w_1 ? If the PSR is true, then all facts—including facts about God's preferences—have an explanation. God's preference for a world that is morally optimal is easily explained: it is part of God's nature to be omnibenevolent, and this explains why the moral optimality of a world can figure as a reason for God's decision to actualize w_1 . However, what could possibly explain God's preference for a cubical world? At least on the face of it, it seems that we have two options. We can either say that it is part of God's nature that he prefers a cubical world, or we can say that there's no further explanation for why God prefers a cubical world—he just does. The second option clearly violates the PSR. By the PSR, there must be an

explanation for why God has the preferences he does. One might adopt a restricted PSR that does not apply to God's preferences, even if it applies to his choices and actions. But from a purely rationalist perspective, such a restriction would be *ad hoc*.

Let's then explore the first option. According to this option, it is part of God's nature that he prefers a cubical world, just as it is part of God's nature that he is omnibenevolent and thus prefers a morally optimal world. But if God's preference for a cubical world were part of his nature, then it is difficult to see how God could have chosen to actualize a morally optimal world other than the one that is cubical. In particular, he could not have actualized w_2 , which is also morally optimal, but spherical (at least not on the assumption that God cannot have both a preference for a spherical world and an equally strong preference for a cubical world at the same time).⁸ Thus, it seems that if God's preference for a cubical world were part of his nature, then God could not have done otherwise.

§3 Contingency Regained

Is there a way to preserve the contingency of creation without introducing a brute fact about God's preferences? I will argue that there is: an unexplored third option remains. On this option, God's preference for a cubical world (say) is neither completely explained by his nature nor unexplained. Instead, it is part of God's nature to have a disjunctive set of preferences: a preference for cubicity, or a preference for sphericity, and so on. Moreover, God's actual preference need not be a necessary preference, where a necessary preference is a preference that God has in all possibilities.

The appearance of a brute fact about God's preferences results from an overly simplistic conception of how God's preferences could relate to his nature. Once we have a more complex picture of God's preferences, we can resolve the apparent tension between the PSR and God's ability to contingently choose to create a particular world.

Consider a pair of incompatible preferences: the preference for cubicity over sphericity, and for sphericity over cubicity. No coherent being could have both of these preferences at once. If any creature has coherent preferences, it is surely God, so God cannot have both of these preferences. It is possible, of course, that God is agnostic about whether he prefers cubicity over sphericity or vice versa. But while God may be agnostic with respect to some non-moral preferences, he cannot be agnostic with respect to every set of incompatible non-moral preferences: that would be an unacceptable limitation on his capacities. So, let us assume God does have a preference between cubicity and sphericity. Must this preference be necessary? Surely not. Nothing about God's nature suggests that his non-moral preference for cubicity (or sphericity) must be necessary. In fact, it seems that with respect to a non-moral choice like that between cubicity and sphericity, God should have the ability to have contingent preferences: in some possibilities he prefers cubicity, in other possibilities he prefers sphericity. Generalizing, it seems plausible that for any set of pairwise incompatible preferences, God should be able to have each of the preferences in the set. Hence, for each of these preferences, there is a possibility in which God has that preference.

What then explains why God has a certain preference in a given possibility? I suggest that the question is ill-formed in this case. We cannot pick out a possibility and then ask: why does God have such-and-such preference in this possibility? God's having a particular preference in a possibility is simply essential to that possibility. My suggestion is that it is part of God's nature that he has a disjunctive set of non-moral preferences, and that for each

⁸ Of course, if God has both a preference for a cubical world and an equally strong preference for a spherical world, then the fact that a world is morally optimal and cubical cannot explain God's decision to actualize that world over one that is also morally optimal but spherical.

preference in the disjunction, there is a possibility in which God has that preference. Thus, God does not have the same non-moral preference in each possibility. Moreover, that God has a particular preference in some possibility is not unexplained: it is explained by the fact that God's nature requires that he have some preference of the relevant kind in each possibility, and that he could have had any one of the preferences. What is ill-formed is the demand to explain why, in a given possibility, God has a certain preference. It is simply essential to a possibility that God has a certain preference in that possibility.

But there seems to remain a recalcitrant brute fact. One might ask: why is the possibility in which God has a preference for sphericity over cubicity *actual*? To ask this question is to just ask why the possibility we are in is actual—a question that is notoriously difficult to answer. Yet proponents of an unrestricted PSR must answer it. Fortunately, a way out is available: one can adopt a modal realism according to which all and only those possibilities obtain, or exist, in which God chooses a morally optimal world. To make this picture vivid, suppose that there only two possibilities, P1 and P2, in which God chooses a morally optimal world. On the restricted modal realism I am proposing, both possibilities obtain. It is an essential feature of P1 that God prefers cubicity in P1 and an essential feature of P2 that God prefers sphericity in P2. Then in P1 God chooses to create a morally optimal world that is cubical, and in P2, he chooses to create a morally optimal world that is spherical. But there is *no* possibility in which God creates a morally sub-optimal world. So, unlike a standard Lewisian modal realism (cf. Lewis 1986), the modal realist view I have just sketched does not have the result that an unrestricted plenitude of worlds exists—some of which are evil, or otherwise morally sub-optimal. In this respect, the view I am proposing comes apart from 'theistic modal realism' as discussed and defended by Michael Almeida.⁹ Like standard Lewisian modal realism, theistic modal realism takes possible worlds—both actual and non-actual—to be existing, concrete entities. On such a view, 'actual' is in indexical, and simply picks out the possibility that we inhabit. Theistic modal realism extends this standard modal realism to allow for God's necessary existence.¹⁰ But while theistic modal realism, like standard modal realism, is unrestricted, and is thus committed to the existence of *every* possible world, the restricted modal realism I am proposing does not entail the existence of every possible world. It entails only the existence of those possible worlds that are morally optimal. Put differently, on theistic modal realism, for every possible world, there is an existing possibility in which God creates it. By contrast, on my restricted modal realism, only for every possible *morally optimal* world is there an existing possibility in which God creates it. Thus, on my restricted modal realism, there are fewer existing worlds than on (unrestricted) theistic modal realism. At least one reason to prefer my restricted modal realism to the theistic modal realist's unrestricted modal realism is that it does not run into the problem of having to reconcile the existence of morally suboptimal or evil worlds with God's benevolence.¹¹

My restricted modal realism cleanly captures the contingency of creation. A world exists contingently just if it exists in some but not all possibilities. My restricted modal realism preserves the contingency of divine choice by allowing that there are non-actual (though existing) possibilities in which God chooses otherwise (i.e., chooses a morally optimal world that is cubical rather than spherical). God chooses otherwise in these possibilities because God's non-moral preferences in those possibilities are distinct from

⁹ See Almeida (2008, Ch. 8; 2011; 2017).

¹⁰ See Cameron (2009) for a helpful and compelling discussion of how the theistic modal realist can accommodate the necessity of God's existence.

¹¹ Almeida argues that theistic modal realism is compatible with God's omnibenevolence, because, on that view, God couldn't possibly have prevented the existence of possible worlds with evil in them, and even an omnipotent being can't do that which is impossible.

God's non-moral preferences in this possibility, and so the other possibilities include created worlds that differ from our own (despite being equally worthy of creation from a purely moral point of view). For those that complain that this is not genuine contingency, since a modal realist holds that all the relevant possibilities exist, I can appeal to the standard modal realist reply. For modal realists, 'actual' is an indexical, and so while each possibility (and thus created world) counts as actual relative to itself, it is false (relative to each possibility) that every possibility is actual.

The way in which my restricted modal realism captures the contingency of creation also highlights how the view substantially differs from the multiverse hypothesis. According to the multiverse hypothesis, as discussed by Kraay (2010), a single possibility includes multiple worlds (in my sense of 'world'). These worlds may differ from one another as long as they are logically compossible, i.e., they do not contradict one another. Unlike my restricted modal realism, the multiverse hypothesis does not permit the different worlds to be created in virtue of incompatible preferences that form God's disjunctive non-moral preference (since God could not actually have incompatible preferences). And the actual creation of distinct worlds, which the multiverse hypothesis allows, is not sufficient to secure the result that God could have done otherwise. God could have done otherwise only if there is some possibility in which he does otherwise. Hence, it is not sufficient to multiply created worlds; these worlds must be distributed amongst distinct possibilities.

Finally, the compatibility of the unrestricted PSR and the contingency of divine choice does not require the truth of the restricted modal realist view that I have sketched: it requires its mere coherence. And there is no reason to think that the view is *incoherent*. What I have provided is a model on which we can have both the contingency of divine choice *and* the truth of an unrestricted PSR. A skeptic might argue that even if I have shown that the contingency of divine choice is compatible with the unrestricted PSR, it is too costly to endorse them both at once, since any form of modal realism is too bizarre or objectionable (even if coherent). I cannot engage with this skepticism fully here, except to say that insofar as we have independent reasons to endorse both the unrestricted PSR and the contingency of divine choice, we arguably have *prima facie* reason to adopt the modal realist view I have sketched. Objections to that modal realist view must therefore overcome that *prima facie* consideration in favor of it.

§4 Concluding Remarks

My goal has been to show that the contingency of creation and divine choice is compatible with an unrestricted PSR. I have put aside the questions of why we might *want* to preserve the contingency of God's choice, or endorse an unrestricted PSR that governs all facts, including facts about God's actions and preferences. Those inclined to accept both will see my paper as a welcome salvation from the threat of inconsistency. And those who may have hoped to use the one against the other—who either argue from the unrestricted PSR to the necessity of God's choice, or from the contingency of God's choice to a restricted PSR—face a more difficult task than they may have assumed: they must provide a direct argument against the model I have proposed, a model that renders the contingency of God's choice compatible with an unrestricted PSR.

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