The Art of Creation and Conservation

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In a humorous, fanciful collection of stories by R.M. Rilke, *Stories of God,* God forgets about parts of the creation and then gradually comes to learn of them, sharing in their suffering and joy.[1] The notion that God can forget about the created order or fail to know some of its basic features in not unique to Rilke. Some Christian philosophers believe that an essential feature of creaturely freedom is that God does not know what free acts will be performed. They claim that God either cannot know, or elects not to know, important events which will occur.[2] More extreme is the deistic conception of God in which the creator is less than fully apprised of human history, past, present and future. Early gnostic myths envisioned God as being unaware of the created world, the world being the result of some demiurgic intermediary emanating from God. Aristotle held that God does not apprehend all the particular features of the world. In contrast to this sampling of deism, gnosticism, and Aristotle, the classical Christian conception of God is that God does not avert his gaze from the creation; the knowing presence of God is inescapable. Notwithstanding some disagreement whether the scope of divine knowledge includes future free acts, Christians have claimed God's knowledge of the world is supreme and unsurpassable. God does not forget about the world, nor does the world blindly emanate from him. The creation and conservation of the world is deliberate and consciously willed. The importance for Christian theology of ascribing awareness of the world to God is readily apparent, for without such awareness it is problematic to regard God as a personal agent, let alone a free personal agent. How could God deliberately and freely create and conserve the world if God has no awareness of it and, *a fortiori,* no awareness of the possibility for him to create and conserve it or not to do so?

Despite the pivotal importance of viewing God's creative activity as conscious and cognitive, many current accounts of divine creation and conservation fail to make explicit the requisite cognitive element.[3] Thus philosophers have simply specified relevant conditionals such as the world being such that it would not exist except in virtue of God's causal power. These accounts of creation leave undecided the question of whether a being can conserve or create a world unknowingly or without properly grasping all the world's features. In what follows I hope to clarify the cognitive element involved in creation and conservation by

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1986.tb06550.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

proposing what may be called the argument from determinate features. The argument makes explicit the scope and dimension of God's knowledge by employing a version of the cosmological argument from natural theology. As it is not possible to offer a full defence of the cosmological argument here, the most I hope to show is that if certain versions of the cosmological argument are plausible, then it is reasonable to believe the being causally responsible for the contingent world is aware of all its determinate features. Even if the cosmological argument is unconvincing, the argument from determinate features might shed light on the cognitive nature of God's creative power.[4] As a final concession, I consider that the argument from determinate features shows it is more reasonable to believe that, if there is a noncontingent being responsible for the contingent world, then the being is aware of all the world's determinate features, than to believe the being is unaware of these features; nevertheless, this does not entail that it is more reasonable to accept such a thesis than to be agnostic with respect to the determinate cognitive nature of the noncontingent being. As I write this, it is more reasonable for me to believe that Thatcher is at 10 Downing Street than to deny it, but (at least given my current beliefs) it is more reasonable still for me to suspend judgement regarding her whereabouts.

There are many versions of the theistic cosmological argument. The driving forces of these versions are principles such as: every positive fact requires an explanation, there is a sufficient reason for the occurrence of every event, every existing thing requires an explanation for its existence either in terms of its own nature or in the causal efficacy of some other being (or beings). For reasons outside the scope of this article, I am inclined to accept the following: there is a reason for the existence of every existing thing in virtue of the causal power of another being (or other beings) or in virtue of its own nature. I do not think the principle is demonstrably true, though I believe it has considerable intuitive appeal and is not known to be false. Classical Christian, Islamic, and Jewish theologians have understood God to exist in virtue of God's own nature, whereas objects like you and me do not. Unlike ourselves, God was not (nor could be) brought into existence by another being. God's status is akin to the Platonist's conception of abstract objects insofar as they are considered to exist necessarily and to be nonphysical. Thus, on a Platonist scheme, the number 7 was not brought into existence by mathematicians (human or divine), nor was it brought into existence by the number 5. It exists in all possible worlds and could not fail to do so. Unlike abstract objects, God is believed to be a personal agent, able to bring about states of affairs, and so on.

The cosmological argument can be developed in at least two ways. One may be termed horizontal and the other vertical. Both permit the argument from determinate features. The horizontal argues from the

world's present existence to a temporally prior, first cause responsible for the world's origin. The vertical argues from the world's present existence to a contemporaneous cause of the world. Both arguments hold that the universe is contingent. It seems a plausible assumption that it is metaphysically possible for the universe—you and I, subatomic particles and galaxies—not to have existed. As philosophers have become accustomed to putting it, there is a possible world (metaphysically and logically) in which our universe does not exist. Both versions of the cosmological argument claim that the existence of our world cannot be satisfactorily explained without appeal to a noncontingent ground responsible for the world's existence. To appeal continually to prior contingent states of the world, or to the workings of some contemporaneous, causally powerful, but contingent being, does not satisfactorily account for the universe's existence. As noted earlier, I do not defend the argument here. Plausible versions of the cosmological argument are available in the literature.[5] Assuming both versions of the argument have some plausibility in grounding belief in the existence of a noncontingent being responsible for the contingent universe, is it plausible to believe that this noncontingent being is aware of the contingent world's determinate features? I believe it is.

First, it may be pointed out that every existing object has determinate features. If a spatially extended object exists at any given time, it has a certain shape, constitution, location, and so on. Some of our concepts may fail to be sufficiently precise to capture the features of an object, but that does not entail that the object itself has imprecise features. It may not be clear whether a person is middle-aged or there is a heap of sand on your floor, but it does not follow that the person is not clear or the sand vague. If there was a first state of the universe, then its features are determinate; it is either infinite or finite, entirely physical or not entirely physical, containing certain things, and so on.

Imagine that the vertical version of the cosmological argument is sound. For ease of exposition, imagine the first stage of the universe consists only of a small planet with a single flower similar to the one in Antoine de Saint-Exupery's tale, *The Little Prince*.[6] Substituting a scientifically more respectable alternative will not affect the force of the argument. The first flower would display indefinitely many determinate features, it being of a particular kind, a certain size, a certain number of microparticles, and so on. Imagine that the noncontingent being simply willed (or brought it about) that there be a flower and planet without the being intentionally specifying any of the determinate features, and the planet with a rose with 20 petals materialized *ex nihilo*. What determined that there was a rose with 20 petals as opposed to a tulip with 25 petals? If the original cause had helpers, perhaps the noncontingent being could simply submit a rough outline of what it wanted and the helpers would

then fill in the details. Certainly the existence of such intermediaries would be puzzling, unsupported by Christian tradition or independent philosophical argument. (I return to the hypothesis of intermediaries at the end of the article.) If there are no intermediaries and the noncontingent being did not itself fix the particular characteristics of the grove, what might account for its features? Contrast the above scenario with the creation of a work of fiction such as *Hamlet*. When Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet,* he did not have to specify all of the Princes's determinate features. Thus we do not know how Hamlet parted his hair, whether he was left-handed or had a birthmark on his toe. Nonetheless, for any existing Prince of Denmark we would rightly expect all these features to be determined. All Shakespeare needed to do was to fix the dramatically relevant features of Hamlet: that the Prince hesitates to kill his stepfather, and so forth. But unlike works of fiction, if the noncontingent being brings into existence particular objects, then the noncontingent being must fix all the determinate features. Otherwise there would be no sufficient account for the particular features of the object.

It might be suggested that the particular features of the first flower could be a random matter and that the noncontingent being need not fully determine all its features. If we assume the success of the cosmological argument, then we cannot posit a radical randomness in which objects came into being for no reason whatsoever. However, perhaps the creation of flower and planet have a satisfactory explanation of the sort required by the cosmological argument simply in virtue of the general will of the noncontingent being and there was a certain probability that such and such a rose and planet showed up.

What would account for such a probability? It cannot be in virtue of the probabilistic propensities of nonexisting flowers. One would not want to suggest there are indefinitely many possible, but not actually existing, flowers which tend to have a certain probability of coming into existence when beckoned by the noncontingent being. Sometimes roses come when called and at other times tulips come. Likewise, it would be puzzling to imagine that the noncontingent being which fails to specify the object's distinctive features has certain probabilistic propensities to bring into being a rose with 20, as opposed to 19, petals. If the noncontingent being simply willed a flower into being (or, lacking any awareness at all, the noncontingent being is somehow causally responsible for bringing a flower into existence), what categorical feature of the noncontingent being would ground or account for its being probable that the rose with just so many and no more petals come into being? It is difficult to speculate what such a categorical feature might be. If the noncontingent being is nonphysical (assume the cosmological argument establishes this) and lacks all conscious life, one cannot

account for the characteristics of the contingent world in virtue of the being's spatial location, shape, size and weight. It is plausible to hold that nonphysical objects can have distinctive features. Abstract objects, for example, have properties like being self-identical, being the successor of some number, even or odd, but none of these shed any light upon what properties a nonphysical, nonconscious noncontingent being might have which would account for its bringing into being the particular cosmos it does. Also, if the noncontingent being has a conscious but general, unspecified will to create, there would not be an explanation of the world's features. If the noncontingent being willed that either roses or tulips come into being, there is nothing apparent about what is willed *per se* that would account for the fact that roses materialize and not tulips. The generalized will would even be compatible with the noncontingent being only bringing into being roses and never tulips.

Is the hypothesis of a noncontingent being with a fully specified will of what it creates in any better position than a noncontingent being with only a general awareness of what it wills to create, or a noncontingent being bringing about the creation without any grasp of what it doing? After all, in virtue of what does the more informed noncontingent being will that there be 20 petals as distinct from 19? If it is supposed that the noncontingent being freely chooses 20 petals, then, by the very nature of free will, there is no sufficient reason why the being brought about the precise number. Even if we specify reasons of an aesthetic or moral kind prompting the noncontingent being's creation, such reasons do not prevent a free being from not acting in virtue of these reasons. Does not the fully informed noncontingent being act in a way that is just as mysterious as the uninformed noncontingent being?

It may be an equal mystery why either the fully specified noncontingent being or the unspecified noncontingent being brings about any creation at all, but I believe creation itself is more mysterious for the unspecified noncontingent being. In the case of the fully specified noncontingent being, there is a clear connection between cause and effect, the willing of 20 petals and 20 petals coming into being. If we accept the metaphysical principle that whatever the noncontingent being wills to occur, occurs (call it 'M'), then from the fact that the being wills there to to be 20 petals, we may deduce that 20 petals exist. We could not deduce the precise number of petals from knowing that 'M' is true and that the noncontingent being wills petals. Most theists hold that a principle like 'M' is correct. A full defence of the intelligibility of free creation would require a defence of metaphysical libertarianism, a theory I find compelling. In the case of the fully informed, free noncontingent being there would not be a sufficient reason (*ex hypothesi*) for the being to create a specific number of leaves, but there would be an explanation for the resultant specific number of petals, which is as intelligible as any

of our free actions. If I write this article freely, my intention to express certain propositions must enter into a plausible account of this article's being written. If libertarianism is correct and I could have done otherwise, this in no way discredits the explanatory role of my intentions. It would be more problematic to explain this article's being written on the hypothesis that all I am intending as I write this is the general intention to write something or other and I am in no way aware of the particular points being expressed!

I have argued that the horizontal form of the cosmological argument provides grounds for believing that the being reponsible for the world's initial state must apprehend its initial features. But could the initial state of the world be set up and then the rest of its history be left to unfold without the being's cognizance? The vertical version of the cosmological argument seeks to rule this out. This argument holds that the contingent world requires a reason for its existence at each instant of its being and not just for its original first state. This demand for an account of the continued existence of the contingent world is a radical one. It does not compete with naturalistic scientific explanations. Surely it suffices for ordinary life and science to account for the number and kind of flowers in a garden in virtue of the prior states and activities of other agents. However, it does not follow that the endurance over time of contingent objects requires no metaphysical explanation. There is just as much a demand for an explanation for the universe's continuation as there is for its initial, first stage (if there was a first stage). A defender of the vertical argument may well concede that natural reason cannot establish a temporarily first cause of the universe.

The vertical argument need not threaten belief in the omnipotence of God. It might be argued that if God is truly omnipotent, surely he could endow the cosmos with the power to exist unconserved by him. In reply, defenders of the vertical argument hold that the underlying principle requiring the noncontingent being's continual causal power is a metaphysically necessary truth. As such, the fact that God could not create a contingently existing universe which did not require the continual exercise of his causal power would no more impinge upon divine omnipotence than the fact that God cannot create a square circle. It should also be noted that the argument from determinate features need not endanger attributing free will and 'the dignity of causality' (Pascal's phrase) to the created order. The vertical argument denies that contingent objects can endure over time without the conserving exercise of a noncontingent being's power. What the objects do with their free will (and possession of such freedom would itself be a determinate feature of an object) is not thereby determined by the being's causal activity.

If the vertical argument is plausible, I believe the same reasoning

about determinate features cited in connection with the horizontal argument applies with equal force. The continued existence of the contingent world's determinate features is not explained simply by appealing to the noncontingent being's general will that there be some world or other in existence. If there is to be a satisfactory metaphysical account of the fact that some particular flower endures over time at all rather than ceases to be, then the explanation must include the fully specified will of the noncontingent being.

I close by replying to three objections to the argument from determinate features. Would the above understanding of the noncontingent being's creative sustaining of the world have the absurd result of the being sustaining the world in virtue of indefinitely many discrete acts of the will? Must the being engage in distinct willings that each petal exist and each of its parts? I do not think so, though it is far from clear how to individuate acts of the will or intention. The noncontingent being may well conserve the world in what we may regard as a single act, but one that encompasses all the determinate characteristics of the relevant objects. An analogy may be useful. In writing a sentence, I intend to write the sentence as a whole and am not engaged in hundreds of discrete acts of will to write each letter and each part of the letter. Nonetheless, in writing the sentence I will each letter to be in a certain order. Likewise, we may envision the noncontingent being as sustaining the world in a supreme act. The being need not add up discrete acts of willing that Mars exist, Earth exist, and so on. Yet in his supreme act of world conservation, the being wills that all the constituents of the world exist in a certain order and have their determinate features.

Does the above argument estabish that the noncontingent being must grasp all the determinate features of an object or only the most basic? Some philosophers have subscribed to what are called supervenient theories. According to them, certain features of objects, their macroscopic properties for example, are fixed by their microscopic properties. Thus, if you brought into being an automobile, you need not bring into existence all the microscopic particles making up the car in addition to the car itself. Create the former and you have created the latter. A prominent defender of the supervenience thesis, Jaegwon Kim, writes: 'If God were to create a world, all he needs to do is create the basic particles, their configurations, and the laws that govern the behaviour of these basic entities. He need not also create tables and trees and refrigerators; once the micro-world is fixed, the rest will take care of itself'.[8] Kim and others have also argued that the psychological characteristics of persons are fixed or determined by all the physical ones. Thus, if you were creating the world as we know it, you would not have to create both the physical and the mental. Perhaps the creator and

conserver of the cosmos need only grasp the physical micro-properties of the universe and disregard (and even be unable to comprehend) important features of the mental life that supervenes on the micro-world.

In reply, I make three brief critical observations. (1) It is not clear that the supervenience theory of the mental is true.[9] (2) If the supervenience theory is true, then perhaps the very existence of supervenient laws would have to be fixed by the noncontingent being. Thus, in order for the psychological to supervene upon the physical, the noncontingent being still has to will that such supervenient laws obtain, and thus the noncontingent being would have to be apprised of the resultant psychological features of the world. (3) Even if '2' fails and supervenient laws have some special metaphysical status so that God is not responsible for them (such as the Platonist belief that God is not responsible for 6 being an even number), then at least the argument from determinate features establishes that the noncontingent being knows the basic, nonsupervening features of the world.

Finally, consider the objection that the argument from determinate features fails because it does not exclude there being an intermediary between the noncontingent being and the world. Could not the being have brought some demiurgic force into existence and then allowed it to be responsible for the universe? In such a case perhaps the argument from determinate features establishes only that the demiurgic being is cognisant of the creation. In *The Coherence of Theism,* Richard Swinburne seems to allow for the possibility of an intermediary creator in Christian theism.

> It would hardly seem to matter to theism, if God on occasion permitted some other being to create matter. He would hardly be less worthy of worship if he did. I shall therefore understand the doctrine that God is the creator of all things as the doctrine that God himself either brings about or makes or permits some other being to bring about the existence of all logially contingent beings that exist (i.e. have existed, exist, or will exist) apart from himself.[10]

I am not sure that Swinburne is correct that it makes no difference to theism whether such an intermediary exists. Perhaps it is of no serious importance if an intermediary were allowed only infrequent, 'occasional' creative action. But consider a more extreme case. Imagine that God did not create any of the contingently existing universe except for a demiurge, Eric, whom he permitted to bring into being the cosmos as we know it. God leaves it up to Eric's free choice whether to create the cosmos at all. God's being worthy of worship and obedience is sometimes thought to rest (in part) upon his having created the cosmos. It would seem that Eric would assume a role which classical theists have held to be uniquely reserved for God. But if we allow that there could be

such an intermediary like Eric, does the argument from determinate features fail?

I do not think so. If the vertical version of the cosmological argument is sound, then Eric's features must themselves be fixed and sustained by the noncontingent being, God. These features would include Eric's will not just that some flower come into being, but that a single rose with 20 petals exist, and so on. Thus the noncontingent being would still know all the world's features even if we attribute the creation of these features to some contingent intermediary between the noncontingent being and the world.

I have argued that it is reasonable to believe that if there is a noncontingent being, then this being could not simply will 'Let there be light' without cognitively grasping and fixing all of light's determinate features. The art of creation and conservation of light requires a thoroughgoing grasp of the features of light which even the best of our physics has failed to achieve. This should not surprise the classical theist. As Anselm argued in *The Proslogion,* God cognizes things to the highest degree.

1 R.M. Rilke, *Stories of God,* translated by Herter Norton (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1963).

2 J.R. Lucas has defended this position in *Freedom of the Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970).

3 See Richard Swinburne, chapter 8, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977). See also Philip Quinn's 'Divine Conservation, Continuous Creation, and Human Action' in *The Existence and Nature of God,* edited by F. Freddoso (South Bend, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984). Quinn offers a superb analysis of the distinction between creation and conservation, but he does not elucidate the cognitive element involved in either divine activity.

4 For example, H.D. Lewis found the classical theistic arguments to be unsuccessful as natural theology and yet believed they had great value in explicating the concept of God.

5 For example, William Rowe, *The Cosmological Argument* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), Richard Taylor, *Metaphysics* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1963), Hugo Meynell, *The Intelligible Universe* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1982), John Shepherd, *Experience, Inference and God* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1975), and Bruce Reichenbach, *The Cosmological Argument* (Springfield, Illinois: Charles Thomas Pub. Co., 1972). Earlier defences of the argument may be found in the works by E.L. Mascall, F.R. Copleston, E. Gilson, and Austin Farrer, among others.

6 Antoine de Saint-Exupery, *The Little Prince,* translated by Katherine Wood (San Diego, CA.: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968).

7 A recent defence of metaphysical libertarianism can be found in Peter Van Inwagen's *An Essay on Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983). For a good discussion of the freedom of God see Thomas Flint's 'The Problem of Divine Freedom', *American Philosophical Quarterly,* vol. 20, July 1983 and James Ross, *Philosophical Theology,* chapter 7 (New York: Bobbs Merrill Co., 1969).

8 Jaegwon Kim, 'Causality, Identity, and Supervenience'. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy,* vol. IV (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1979), p. 40.

9 Howard Robinson, *Matter and Sense: A Critique of Contemporary Materialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

10 op. cit. p. 128.