

Regular Article

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The Problem of Arbitrary Creation for Impassibility

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Abstract: There is a particular question that has plagued classical Christian theism over the centuries. What reason could God have for creating a universe? In this article, I shall articulate the unique claims of classical theism that other rival models of God lack. I shall argue that classical theism's unique commitments entail that God cannot create the universe for a reason. Thus, any nonclassical model of God can claim to have the advantage over classical theism because they can affirm that God creates the universe for a reason. In Section 1, I shall articulate classical theism. In Section 2, I shall lay the groundwork for the debate by explaining what a reason is and what a creation is. In Section 3, I shall argue that a classical theist cannot affirm that God creates the universe for a reason, thus conflicting with God's perfect rationality.

Keywords: impassibility, rationality, creation, God

If the Eternal be conceived as in complete and perfect bliss, happily static and statically happy, there is no reason in logic or in life why he should ever be moved to engage in creation.

Bertrand R. Brasnett¹

1 Classical theism

In contemporary theology, there are multiple models of God on offer. For example, one can select from classical theism, neoclassical theism, open theism, panentheism, and pantheism.² These models typically agree on the following claims. God is a necessarily existent being who has the following essential properties: aseity, self-sufficiency, eternity, omniscience, omnipotence, perfect moral goodness, perfect rationality, and perfect freedom. Other than pantheism, these models of God deny that God and the universe are identical. Further, classical theists and nonclassical theists agree that God creates the universe out of nothing, thus distinguishing them from panentheism.³ Against open theism, both classical and neoclassical theism affirm that God has an exhaustive foreknowledge of future contingents. However, there seems to be no agreed-upon view as to what this looks like be it some form of theological determinism, Molinism, or simple foreknowledge.

¹ Brasnett, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, 3.

² Cf. Mullins, "The Difficulty of Demarcating Panentheism."

³ Cf. Göcke, "Panentheism and Classical Theism."

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What makes classical theism unique is its affirmation of the following four attributes: timelessness, immutability, impassibility, and simplicity.⁴ A classical theist will affirm all four of these attributes, whereas a neoclassical theist will deny one or more of these four divine attributes.⁵ Personally, I think that one cannot consistently deny only one of these four divine attributes because they are systematically connected, but I shall not argue for that here.

I shall start by defining the attributes that most models of God affirm. God exists of absolute necessity in that it is metaphysically impossible for God to fail to exist. This is distinct from aseity because it is possible for a being to exist necessarily and yet lack the property of aseity.⁶ God exists *a se* if and only if God's existence is not dependent upon or derived from anything external to God. God is self-sufficient if and only if God's essential nature is in no way dependent upon or derived from anything external to God.

From the necessary existence, it follows that God is an eternal being. God is eternal if and only if God does not begin to exist or cease to exist. God is omniscient if and only if God knows of the truth values of all propositions.⁷ Omnipotence is the most power-granting set of abilities that is logically possible.⁸ Theologians often describe this attribute by saying that God can perform all logically and metaphysically possible actions, yet there is more nuance needed. As T. J. Mawson explains, the maximal power-granting set does not simply contain all abilities. This is because not all abilities are powers. Some abilities are liabilities.⁹ For example, the ability to perform irrational actions is a liability.¹⁰ Thus, this ability will not be included in the maximal power-granting set of abilities. For most Christian theologians, it should seem quite obvious that a perfectly wise and rational God could not perform irrational actions. As such, she should have no problem denying that God lacks the ability/liability to perform irrational actions.

God is perfectly morally good if and only if God is appropriately responsive to morally relevant values.¹¹ In this way, a morally good agent is rational because it is rational to be responsive to moral values. According to Mawson, a perfectly good person always does what He has most objective reason to do. As omniscient, God will always know what He has most objective reason to do. As omnipotent, God will be free to perform the action that He has most objective reason to do.¹² Further, a perfectly good God is one whose intentions are always good and who never fails to satisfy His obligations. A perfectly good God's actions will give rise to the best possible consequences. In performing these good actions, God will necessarily instantiate virtuous character traits such as generosity, wisdom, and so forth.¹³

God is perfectly rational if and only if God always acts for a reason. As Richard Swinburne maintains, "God is guided by rational considerations alone."¹⁴ God's perfect rationality and moral perfection are mutually entailing because moral considerations are reasons for acting.

Perfect rationality and perfect moral goodness are related to God's freedom. Typically, it is said that God is free if and only if (i) God is the source of His action, and (ii) God has the ability to do otherwise.¹⁵ Yet, there is a constraint on God's free actions related to reason. Recall that a perfectly good God will always do what He has most objective reason to do. As perfectly rational, God will always act for a reason. If God does not have a reason to take a particular course of action, then God will not be able to freely choose to take that course of action.¹⁶ To do otherwise is to act irrationally and arbitrarily.

⁴ Williams, "Introduction to Classical Theism," 95–7.

⁵ Timpe, "Introduction to Neo-Classical Theism," 202.

⁶ For example, one might say that abstract objects necessarily exist and also affirm that abstract objects are dependent upon God for their existence.

⁷ Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, 177.

⁸ Mawson, *The Divine Attributes*, 41.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁰ Mawson, "Omnipotence and Necessary Moral Perfection Are Compatible: A Reply to Morrison," 217.

¹¹ Murphy, *God's Own Ethics: Norms of Divine Agency and the Argument from Evil*, 25.

¹² Mawson, *The Divine Attributes*, 50.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁴ Swinburne, *The Christian God*, 128.

¹⁵ Pruss, "Divine Creative Freedom," 213–4. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 378.

¹⁶ Timpe, *Free Will in Philosophical Theology*, 23.

Thus far, I have not said anything that is unique to classical theism. What makes classical theism unique is its commitment to a timeless understanding of divine eternity along with immutability, impassibility, and simplicity.

God is timeless if and only if God exists without beginning, without end, without succession, and without temporal location.¹⁷ God is immutable if and only if God cannot undergo any intrinsic nor extrinsic change.¹⁸ If God underwent even mere extrinsic changes, God would not be timeless.¹⁹ God is simple if all of God's attributes and actions are identical to each other and identical to God's existence.²⁰ A simple God does not have any properties, not even accidental properties.²¹ Moreover, the simple God is purely actual and lacks all potential.²² God is impassible in that it is metaphysically impossible for God (i) to suffer; (ii) to be moved by, influenced by, or acted upon by anything external to God; and (iii) to have an emotion that is inconsistent with perfect rationality, moral goodness, and happiness.²³ The impassible God is in a state of pure, undisturbed happiness that is entirely grounded in Himself.²⁴ Nothing external to God can move or influence Him to increase or decrease in His happiness.

2 Reasons and creation

My primary concern is trying to figure out if the God of classical theism has a reason to create the universe. Thus, I need to turn my attention to defining reason, creation, and universe.

A reason is a consideration that counts in favor of some particular choice or action.²⁵ A reason explains why an agent acts as she does. If an agent performs an action without any reason, then that action is performed arbitrarily. Theists claim that God is perfectly rational and thus always acts for a reason.²⁶ Classical theists say that utterly arbitrary actions are foreign to a God who is perfectly wise and rational.²⁷ Recall that God is perfectly rational if and only if God always acts for a reason.

Kevin Timpe distinguishes two kinds of reasons that motivate an agent to act: an intellectual motivational reason and an affective motivational reason. According to Timpe, "An intellectual motivational reason involves the agent judging that the content of the end is good, and thus desirable." Whereas "an affective motivational reason doesn't involve an intellectual judgment by the agent that the content is good, but rather an emotional response toward that content."²⁸ To be sure, there are some who will reject this distinction between intellectual and affective reasons because (a) emotions can be intellectual and (b) the distinction could potentially create a motivational gap in our free actions.²⁹ However, I shall set that worry aside for the purposes of this article.

¹⁷ Mullins, "The End of the Timeless God."

¹⁸ Lombard, *The Sentences Book 1*, Distinction VIII and XXXVII.7. Helm, *Eternal God: A Study of God Without Time*, 19–20, 81–7.

¹⁹ Deng, *God and Time*, 36.

²⁰ Dolezal, *All That Is in God: Evangelical Theology and the Challenge of Classical Christian Theism*, 41–2.

²¹ Bergmann and Brower, "A Theistic Argument against Platonism (and in Support of Truthmakers and Divine Simplicity)," 359–60. Rogers, "The Traditional Doctrine of Divine Simplicity," 166).

²² Cf. Dolezal, *God without Parts: Divine Simplicity and the Metaphysics of God's Absoluteness*, for a full exposition of simplicity.

²³ Helm, "Impossibility of Divine Passibility," 120–1. Arminius, *The Works of James Arminius Volume 2*, 117. Creel, "Immutability and Impassibility," 314. Cf. Mullins, "Why Can't the Impassible God Suffer?"

²⁴ Randles, *The Blessed God: Impassibility*, 43–5.

²⁵ Timpe, "God's Freedom, God's Character," 281.

²⁶ Leftow, "Two Pictures of Divine Choice," 152.

²⁷ Rice, "Reasons and Divine Action," 258. Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God*, 234–5. Strong, *Systematic Theology Volume 2: The Doctrine of Man*, 404.

²⁸ Timpe, *Free Will in Philosophical Theology*, 22.

²⁹ Cf. Helm, "Emotions and Practical Reason: Rethinking Evaluation and Motivation."

To be clear, reasons are not meant to deny God's freedom. Instead, reasons are what make an action free by defining what an agent is capable of freely performing. Timpe calls this the Reasons–Constraint on Free Choice.

Reasons–Constraint on Free Choice: If, at time t , A has neither any motivational intellectual reasons for X -ing nor any motivational affective reasons for X -ing, then A is incapable, at t , of freely choosing to X .³⁰

The idea here is that if an agent lacks a reason to perform some action X , then the agent cannot freely choose to do X . Given that a perfectly rational God always acts for a reason, God will not freely choose a course of action without having a reason to choose that action. That is enough about reasons. What about God's act of creating a universe?

In order to answer this question, I must make a distinction between worlds and universes and a distinction between world-actualization and creation. As I understand it, a possible world is a maximally consistent proposition that is best captured by modal logic. Such propositions express the entire way things could be. A maximally consistent proposition will contain an ontological inventory of all things that exist within a world and the relations that obtain between those objects. This proposition will also include the entire history of a world's timeline, if that particular world contains time. The actual world is a maximally consistent proposition that expresses the entire way things are. Worlds are distinct from universes. A universe is a smaller domain within a world. A universe is a collection of contingently existent beings who are spatiotemporally related to one another. This is why one finds theists talking about a possible world where God exists without any universe of any sort, or a possible world in which God exists with a universe. Classical theists affirm that the perfectly free God can exist without a universe.³¹

With this distinction between worlds and universes in hand, I can turn to the difference between world-actualization and creation. Creation, or God's act of creation, occurs when God freely causes some contingent thing to exist.³² For my purposes, I shall focus on creation as God freely causing a universe to exist. According to Klaas J. Kraay, world-actualization is different from creation. World-actualization need not involve any causal activity on God's part because the mere existence of God entails world-actualization.³³ To state this in other terms, the mere existence of God entails that there is an entire way that things are – i.e., God exists with a particular nature.

Allow me to clarify a point before moving forward. That there is a world of some sort is necessary because God necessarily exists, and world-actualization simply follows from the way things are. However, this does not entail that a universe necessarily exists because the existence of a universe depends upon the voluntary exercise of God's power. A creation occurs when God voluntarily exercises His power to cause a universe to exist.

This distinction is important to note because classical theists have long maintained that God is the free creator of the universe.³⁴ They deny that the universe is a necessary emanation from God. According to John Webster, a proper Christian understanding of creation involves distinguishing between God's immanent and transitive operations. God's immanent operations are actions within God that have God as their aim. Webster gives the example of the Father's begetting of the Son as a case of immanent operations. Immanent operations are acts that God necessarily performs. These are distinct from transitive actions, which have an external object as their end or aim. Webster gives the example of creation as a case of transitive actions. According to Webster, transitive actions are not necessarily performed by God. Instead, they are free, gracious gifts from God.³⁵ The focus of this article is on God's reason to perform a transitive action, and not God's reasons to perform immanent actions. Immanent actions are not actions that God has a choice over, whereas transitive actions are actions that God has a choice over.

³⁰ Timpe, *Free Will in Philosophical Theology*, 23.

³¹ Webster, "'Love Is Also a Lover': Creatio Ex Nihilo and Creaturely Goodness," 161.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Kraay, *God and the Multiverse: Scientific, Philosophical, and Theological Perspectives*, 4–5.

³⁴ Burrell, "Creation Ex Nihilo Recovered," 5.

³⁵ Webster, "'Love Is Also a Lover': Creatio Ex Nihilo and Creaturely Goodness," 160. Cf. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 393–4.

With these issues clarified, it is worth noting that God's act of creation is free. Given the Reasons–Constraint on Free Choice, God's act of creation must have a reason to motivate the act. Otherwise, God cannot freely choose to perform the act of creating the universe. Further, since theists maintain that God is perfectly rational, they will deny that God ever acts without a reason.³⁶ Again, to act without a reason is to act arbitrarily. Thus, theists will maintain that God's free act of creation is motivated by some reason, be it intellectual or affective.³⁷

The classical theist affirms the following principle about creation. God is free to create or not create the universe.³⁸ God would not be less perfect if He refrained from creating a universe. Given self-sufficiency, God's perfection in no way depends upon the existence of the universe. God would be no less perfect if He refrained from creating a universe. As Webster explains, “the triune God could be without the world; no perfection of God would be lost, no triune bliss compromised, were the world not to exist; no enhancement of God is achieved by the world's existence.”³⁹ Call this the Creation Principle (CP).

(i) God is free to create or not create, and (ii) God's essence is not dependent upon His act of creation.

CP will serve as a constraint on the possible reasons that one might give for God to create the universe. God's reasons for creating cannot involve God necessarily producing a universe in order to be who He is.

Yet classical theists will go further. Classical theism insists that God gains nothing from creating a universe.⁴⁰ In their analysis of God's self-sufficiency, God cannot have any unfulfilled desires that are satisfied by creation.⁴¹ Call this the No Unfulfilled Desires Constraint (NUDC). The nonclassical theist will deny NUDC.⁴² Classical theists, however, affirm NUDC for several reasons. First, they affirm that God is perfectly happy in Himself, and thus God could not possibly have any needs or desires. If God did have needs or desires that could only be satisfied by something outside of God, then God would not be perfectly happy as impassibility demands.⁴³ Second, desire–satisfaction is incompatible with timelessness and immutability. A desire is, straightforwardly, about something that one does not possess. Desires are directed at states of affairs that are not believed to have obtained yet.⁴⁴ The satisfaction of a desire takes place when the person who desires X obtains X. A timeless and immutable being cannot change from “having a desire” to “satisfying a desire.” Third, desire–satisfaction is incompatible with divine simplicity. The satisfaction of a desire would be an accidental property, and simplicity explicitly denies that God has any accidental properties.⁴⁵

In trying to discern what God's reason is for creating the universe, the classical theist needs to satisfy both CP and NUDC.

3 The Problem of Arbitrary Creation

What reason could God have for creating a universe? The classical theist maintains that God's reasons for freely acting cannot be due to anything *ad extra* to the divine nature. Recall that nothing *ad extra* to the

³⁶ Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 399.

³⁷ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 372, 399.

³⁸ Ward, *Christ and the Cosmos: A Reformulation of Trinitarian Doctrine*, 19. Creel, *Divine Impassibility: An Essay in Philosophical Theology*, 159. Kretzmann, “A General Problem of Creation: Why Would God Create Anything at All?” 208. Burrell, “Creation Ex Nihilo Recovered,” 5. McFarland, *From Nothing: A Theology of Creation*, 43. Skrzypek, “A Better Solution to the General Problem of Creation,” 148. Leftow, “Two Pictures of Divine Choice,” 152. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 378.

³⁹ Webster, “Trinity and Creation,” 12.

⁴⁰ Oliver, “Every Good and Perfect Gift Is from Above: Creation Ex Nihilo before Nature and Culture,” 35.

⁴¹ Beilby, “Divine Aseity, Divine Freedom: A Conceptual Problem for Edwardsian–Calvinism,” 648.

⁴² Peckham, *Theodicy of Love: Cosmic Conflict and the Problem of Evil*, 33–52.

⁴³ Ussher, *A Body of Divinitie, or the Summe and Substance of Christian Religion*, 34.

⁴⁴ Deonna and Teroni, *The Emotions: A Philosophical Introduction*, 10.

⁴⁵ Hughes, “Aquinas on the Nature and Implications of Divine Simplicity,” 2. Rogers, “The Traditional Doctrine of Divine Simplicity,” 166.

divine nature can move or influence the impassible God in anyway. Not even God's will can be moved or influenced by anything *ad extra*.⁴⁶ Classical theists are explicit that the impassible God cannot be influenced by considerations of things external to the divine nature.⁴⁷ This is why one will find classical theists saying that all of God's acts are toward His own glory, or that God's will is not moved by anything but His own goodness.⁴⁸

This raises an old problem for creation related to divine impassibility. As noted before, classical theists maintain that God is free, and thus God does not have to create because God could have refrained from creating the universe.⁴⁹ Further, given the Reasons–Constraint on Free Choice, God creates the universe freely if and only if He creates the universe for a reason. Yet, it seems that an impassible God literally has no reason to create. Here is one way to develop the argument. Call it the Arbitrary Creation Problem.

The Arbitrary Creation Problem starts by identifying three claims that classical theists affirm. Here are the three claims.

- (1) God is impassible.
- (2) God is perfectly rational.
- (3) God created the universe.

The Arbitrary Creation Problem tries to show that these three claims form an inconsistent triad. Thus, in order to avoid contradiction, a theist must reject one of the claims in (1) through (3). How does one derive the contradiction? One examines the entailments of (1) through (3). Here is one entailment.

- (4) If God is perfectly rational, then God created the universe for a reason.
- (5) Therefore, God created the universe for a reason.

(4) follows from the meaning of perfect rationality and God's free act of creating a universe. Recall that God is perfectly rational if and only if God always acts for a reason. A perfectly rational God must perform the act of creation for a reason. Thus, (5) follows straightforwardly from (2) and (4).

So far, there is nothing obviously worrying about this entailment for classical theism. Yet consider another entailment.

- (6) If God is impassible, then God created the universe for no reason.
- (7) Therefore, God created the universe for no reason.

I take it that (6) is the controversial premise in the argument. I will defend (6) in due course. For now, I wish to point out that if (6) is true, then (7) follows from (1) and (6). From (5) and (7), one can derive a contradiction.

- (8) God created the universe for a reason, and God created the universe for no reason.

The Problem of Arbitrary Creation is meant to push the classical theist to reject either (1), (2), or (3). This is because the contradiction in (8) is ultimately derived from (1) through (3). Which one should be rejected? No theist will deny (3), the claim that God created the universe. That just seems deeply implausible. Thus, it seems like the real clash is between impassibility and perfect rationality. Can an impassible God be perfectly rational? Can the impassible God have a reason to create the universe? That depends on the plausibility of (6).

Before moving forward, it is worth noting that there are some classical theists who are willing to bite the bullet and affirm (6). There are some classical theists who maintain that there literally is no reason for why God creates. They will say that one simply cannot give a deeper analysis than the fact that God does create.⁵⁰ However, most classical theists think that this makes God's act of creation arbitrary and thus threatens the goodness and rationality of God.⁵¹ Is this a legitimate threat? Yes. In order to maintain (6)

⁴⁶ Creel, *Divine Impassibility: An Essay in Philosophical Theology*, 22–6.

⁴⁷ Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 405.

⁴⁸ E.g., Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia.19.2.ad2. Ussher, *A Body of Divinitie*, 34.

⁴⁹ Ward, *Christ and the Cosmos: A Reformulation of Trinitarian Doctrine*, 19. Creel, *Divine Impassibility: An Essay in Philosophical Theology*, 159.

⁵⁰ Davies, *The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil*, 215–9. Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God*, 235.

and avoid the contradiction in (8), one will have to deny that God always acts for a reason. Thus, she is denying (2), the claim that God is perfectly rational.

Moreover, God's perfect rationality and moral perfection are mutually entailing because moral considerations are reasons for acting. In articulating God's perfect moral goodness, Mark C. Murphy explains that an agent is morally good if and only if she is appropriately responsive to morally relevant values. In this way, a morally good agent is rational because it is rational to be responsive to moral values. According to Murphy,

the sort of appropriateness of the response to value is *rational* appropriateness, simply acting in response to these values in a way that those values give reason to respond to them. To respond appropriately to morally relevant value is to do what there is good reason to do as a response to those values.⁵²

The worry from classical theists is that if God were to act arbitrarily in creating the universe, God would not be acting in a rational or morally good manner because God would not be acting in response to good reasons. A perfectly good being would always act in a manner that is responsive to morally relevant values. An arbitrary act is one that is performed for no reason whatsoever and so is not responsive to morally relevant values. Perhaps another way to think about this is that an arbitrary act is irresponsible because it is an action that is not motivated by reasons. No classical theist will wish to say that God acts irresponsibly in creating the universe.

Another worry is that if God's act of creating the universe is arbitrary, then it would violate the Reasons–Constraint on Free Choice. Given this constraint, God cannot perform an action freely unless He has a reason to act. Hence, if God's act of creating the universe is arbitrary, it will not be a freely performed action. This would violate the classical theist's commitment to God freely creating the universe.

I wish to highlight one further negative consequence for denying that God has a reason to create the universe. An arbitrary divine creation is bad for cosmological arguments. One of the unique differences between theism and atheism is that on theism the universe exists for a reason. Yet if the theist denies that God creates for a reason, she will be giving up any edge she has over atheism.⁵³ She will lose the explanatory power of theism.

Hence, I take it that denying premise (2) and affirming premise (6) is not a promising strategy for the classical theist to take. In the remainder of this article, I shall consider several strategies for rejecting (6).

3.1 The objective value of the universe

The nonclassical theist is going to say that one should reject premise (1), the claim that God is impassible. Any theist who rejects impassibility has an easy time avoiding this inconsistent triad. Those who reject impassibility have several ways that they can deny (1). Here is one way to deny (1). Most contemporary theists will say that God's reason for creating the universe is to actualize objective value that would otherwise be lacking in the world.⁵⁴ Perhaps things like the intrinsic value of creatures and the intrinsic value of God cooperating with free creatures.⁵⁵ On this view, God considers the objective intrinsic value of different possible universes that He might create and selects a universe based on its intrinsic value.⁵⁶ Call this the Objective Value of the Universe Strategy.

Can the classical theist use the Objective Value of the Universe Strategy to deny (6)? A classical theist might think that she can affirm this strategy in order to reject premise (6) of the argument, all while maintaining (1). She might try to say that the impassible God's reason for creating the universe is to

⁵¹ Brown, *God in a Single Vision: Integrating Philosophy and Theology*, 13–4.

⁵² Murphy, *God's Own Ethics*, 25.

⁵³ Leftow, "Two Pictures of Divine Choice," 158.

⁵⁴ Ward, *Christ and the Cosmos: A Reformulation of Trinitarian Doctrine*, 23–7. Cf. Garcia, "Divine Freedom and Creation."

⁵⁵ Ward, *The Christian Idea of God: A Philosophical Foundation for Faith*, 194–5.

⁵⁶ Cf. Kraay, "Theism, Possible Worlds, and the Multiverse."

actualize the objective value of creatures that would otherwise be lacking in the world. This strategy, however, is not open to the classical theist because it is incompatible with impassibility. This is not consistent with impassibility because it is a reason based on considerations external to the divine nature. Classical theists are explicit that impassibility will not allow God's decisions to be influenced by anything *ad extra* to the divine nature.⁵⁷ Not even the possible values of creatures that God foreknows can influence God's choice to create.⁵⁸ As Herman Bavinck explains, the object of God's will can only be Himself. Bavinck states that God "wills creatures not because of some quality inherent in them but for his name's sake. He ever remains his own object."⁵⁹

It is instructive to note the way classical theists typically talk about God's decree to create. Typically, they insist that in all of God's actions, God ultimately wills His own goodness.⁶⁰ Why? To emphasize that God's actions are not motivated by anything *ad extra* to the divine nature.⁶¹ God is not moved to act by any consideration external to Himself. If God is moved by external considerations, God will be said to depend upon these external considerations in some deficient way that would violate the NUDC. Hence, why they emphasize that creation does not add to God's goodness.⁶² Consider the following statement from William Bates where he describes God's eternal state prior to creating the universe.

From eternity he was without external honour, yet in that infinite duration he was perfectly joyful and happy. He is the fountain of his own blessedness, the theatre of his own glory, the glass of his own beauty. One drop increases the ocean, but to God a million of worlds can add nothing. Everything hath so much of goodness as it derives from him. As there was no gain to him by the creation, so there can be no loss by the annihilation of all things.⁶³

Why would a God like this do anything? Creating one universe does nothing for God. Neither would creating an infinite number of universes. Thus, the Objective Value of the Universe Strategy is ruled out by impassibility. It seems like the impassible God has no reason to create anything. Any creative action from the impassible God would seem to be utterly arbitrary. Thus, (6) remains.

3.2 Best possible universe reconsidered: God creates to exercise His attributes

Another common theistic strategy for avoiding an arbitrary creation is to say that God creates the best possible universe. However, this option will not be open to the classical theist for the same reasons that she cannot rely on the Objective Value of the Universe Strategy. If God's reason for creating the universe is because it is the best possible universe, then God's reasons will be based upon considerations that are external to the divine nature. That violates impassibility. As the classical theist Augustus Strong explains, the goodness of creatures is insignificant when compared to the goodness of God. God can choose no greater end than Himself. In willing Himself, God is infinitely happy. For Strong, this is why creation cannot add to God's happiness, and why the goodness of creation cannot factor in God's decision-making.⁶⁴

Further, given the classical theist's commitment to NUDC, she cannot say that God desires to create the best possible world. To say that God desires to create the best possible world would imply that God has a desire that can only be satisfied by creation. That violates NUDC. It would seem like the best possible world approach is a dead end for the classical theist.

⁵⁷ Pink, *The Attributes of God*, 15.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁵⁹ Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God*, 227–8.

⁶⁰ Dodds, *The Unchanging God of Love: Thomas Aquinas and Contemporary Theology on Divine Immutability*, 173.

⁶¹ Garcia, "Divine Freedom and Creation," 199.

⁶² Dodds, *The Unchanging God of Love*, 172–3. Cf. Beilby, "Divine Aseity, Divine Freedom," 648.

⁶³ Bates, *The Works of the Rev. Bates*, 286. Cf. Webster, "'Love Is Also a Lover': Creatio Ex Nihilo and Creaturely Goodness," 160.

⁶⁴ Strong, *Systematic Theology Volume 2: The Doctrine of Man*, 397–9.

There might be a way to try to salvage the best possible universe approach, but it cannot rely on the intrinsic objective value of the universe. Perhaps, one could offer an extrinsic value to possible universes. In reflecting upon the meaning of the best possible universe, William Shedd says that the happiness of creatures is not the criterion of the best possible universe. Instead, Shedd says that the best possible universe is one that is adapted to manifest the divine attributes that would not otherwise be exercised. For example, God's mercy would not be exercised unless there existed sinful creatures who can be the proper objects of God's mercy.⁶⁵

One could use this sort of analysis of best possible universes to develop an answer for why God creates the universe. Here are some examples. Jonathan Edwards says that God's wrath is an essential attribute of God, and that this wrath can only be exercised if there exist creatures who are sinful and deserving of wrath.⁶⁶ Thomas Jay Oord says that God is essentially loving, and God's love can only be exercised if there exist creatures who can be the recipients of God's love.⁶⁷ It is worth noting that on both Edwards and Oord's views, God must create a universe. It is not possible for God to exist without a universe. This violates condition (i) of CP, or the Creation Principle discussed above. Recall from above that CP has two conditions: (i) God is free to create or not create and (ii) God's essence is not dependent upon His act of creation. Hence, this strategy is not an option for classical theists to take since it violates condition (i) by entailing that God must create a universe. If God must create a universe, God is not free to refrain from creating.

There is another problem for the classical theist who wishes to take this strategy. It looks like it might violate condition (ii) of CP. Yet matters are a bit tricky here. Consider Edwards' claim that God's wrath could not be exercised unless there exist sinful creatures. Is that a motivating reason to create a universe? I suppose it is, but it might strike various theists as implausible. Why? This is basically saying that God's reason for creating a universe is so that He can punish sinful creatures. One might wonder why God would want to punish creatures so badly. Does God really need to exercise His wrath like that? If the answer is yes, then it seems like God needs the universe in order to be who He is. Thus, violating condition (ii) of CP.

However, it is worth pointing out that Edwards and Oord each have more going on in their theology that leads to violating CP. These worries that I have just outlined need additional premises in order to see an entailment from this strategy to further violations of CP. I think that those premises can be easily supplied from within the systematic theologies of thinkers like Edwards and Oord, but that would involve taking the conversation in a different direction. Instead, I want to explain why this strategy does not offer a reason for the impassible God to create a universe.

This strategy ultimately fails because God's decision to create this best possible universe is still influenced by external considerations. In order for God to discern, or determine, which universe is best adapted to the exercise of His attributes, God will have to consider the content of each possible universe. It is the content of each possible universe that will influence God's decision to create. For example, God will have to select from universes that have sinful creatures in them so that His wrath and mercy can be exercised. A similar analysis would follow from an attribute like divine love.

A classical theist might respond by saying that God's power is not subject to this kind of analysis. Perhaps, God's reason for creating a universe is as follows.

Classical Theist Rejoinder: God is essentially powerful regardless of whether or not God exercises His power. God does not need to create in order to be essentially powerful. Yet, God creates so that He might exercise His power. The idea here is that if God did not create, God would not exercise His power. The content of the possible universes is not influencing God's decision to create in this case. Rather, the only thing influencing God's decision to create is the desire to exercise His power.

This seems like a possible candidate reason for a classical theist. It does not violate CP because God is free to create or not create, and God's essential power is not dependent upon God's act of creating. The reason identified is not an external influence on God.

⁶⁵ Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 421–2.

⁶⁶ See Beilby, "Divine Aseity, Divine Freedom," for a full discussion of Edwards' view.

⁶⁷ Cf. Oord, *The Uncontrolling Love of God: An Open and Relational Account of Providence* for a full discussion.

However, this reason violates something else that the classical theist wants to say. Recall the NUDC. The classical theist says that God does not have any desires that are fulfilled in the act of creation. The desire to exercise God's power is an unfulfilled desire that would be satisfied by creating a universe. While it is true that God's perfection would not be enhanced by God exercising His power, it would still be the case that God satisfied a desire that could only be exercised by creating a universe. So this option is out. As one shall see in the subsequent subsections, classical theists have traditionally been aware of this problem and have tried to develop answers that do not violate NUDC.

3.3 God wills His own goodness

A classical theist might try to adopt a different strategy in order to reject (6). She might say that God has a reason for creating the universe, and that reason is God's own goodness.⁶⁸ The claim here is that whatever action God performs, God always has His own goodness as the end, aim, or goal of the action. An underlying assumption in this strategy is what is called The Guise of The Good Thesis. This thesis says that an agent performs an action because she perceives it to be good. Thus, an agent's actions are teleological in nature because they have a goal that the action aims for.⁶⁹ In the case of humans, human agents often perform actions that are aimed at acquiring goods that the agent does not already possess. At other times, an agent might perform actions to maintain, or keep, goods that an agent does possess. According to classical theists, human agents ought to aim their actions at acquiring the greatest good, which is God. Hence, the ultimate aim of human action is something external to humans.

In the case of God, the ultimate aim of God's action is not going to be something external to God. This is because God is the greatest good. The aim of the impassible God's action will always be Himself.⁷⁰ Thus, avoiding any worry that God's will is influenced by any reasons external to God. A classical theist might try to maintain that this allows her to affirm (1) and reject (6).

However, it is far from obvious that God willing His own goodness is a reason for creating the universe. As classical theists acknowledge, God wills His own goodness whether or not He creates.⁷¹ Nothing about saying "God wills His own goodness" illuminates why God creates because God wills His own goodness no matter what. On classical theism, God can't do anything but will His own goodness. This is sometimes referred to as God's necessary will.⁷² God necessarily wills Himself as His highest good regardless of His decision to create a universe.

As the classical theist Paul Helm maintains, there needs to be some further reason in addition to God's goodness that explains why God creates.⁷³ This is because God's willing His own goodness does not give us an answer to why God creates the universe. God willing His own goodness is not sufficient for the existence of the universe because God can will His own goodness and the universe can fail to exist. A classical theist might complain that Helm is asking for too much here. She might say that Helm is asking for an overriding reason or a contrastive explanation for why God creates a universe.⁷⁴ Some philosophers today maintain that contrastive explanations are incoherent.⁷⁵ A contrastive reason is a reason for why one chooses to perform some action X instead of not-X. A contrastive explanation is said to necessitate the action. A noncontrastive reason is simply a reason for why one chooses to perform some action X, and it is denied that this necessitates the action.

⁶⁸ Garcia, "Divine Freedom and Creation," 199.

⁶⁹ Timpe, *Free Will in Philosophical Theology*, 18.

⁷⁰ Ussher, *A Body of Divinitie*, 34.

⁷¹ Dodds, *The Unchanging God of Love*, 180.

⁷² Cf. Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God*, 228.

⁷³ Helm, *Eternal God: A Study of God without Time*, 176.

⁷⁴ Garcia, "Divine Freedom and Creation," 198–9.

⁷⁵ Garcia, "Divine Freedom and Creation," 198. Skrzypek, "A Better Solution to the General Problem of Creation," 156–7.

I think that one can easily deny that Helm is demanding a contrastive explanation. Helm is merely asking for a noncontrastive reason, and “God willing His own goodness” is not a noncontrastive reason for why the universe exists. A free action is one that is not necessitated. That is what makes contrastive explanations of free actions incoherent – a contrastive explanation of an action is a necessitated action. With regard to God willing His own good, there is no divine freedom or choice or decision involved. It is something that God necessarily does. God willing His own good is not a free act, and so not a reason for God to freely do anything. With regard to God’s creative act, it is free. What reason is there for this free action? If this action is going to be free, it cannot be necessitated. So the reason cannot be willing His own goodness because that is a necessary action of God. Helm is asking for the reason why God performs the free act of creating the universe.

Further, “God willing His own goodness” does not have any reference to God’s creative act. That God can will His own goodness without creation shows that this cannot be a reason for God to create. A noncontrastive reason is meant to be an explanation for why an agent does some action. The reason God wills His own goodness is because God is the greatest good. But what is God’s reason for creating the universe? It can’t be “in order to will His own goodness” because the reason for that action is that God is the greatest good. The act of creation has nothing to do with any of this. It is a separate action that needs a separate reason.

Ultimately, this strategy confuses the classical theist’s distinction between God’s immanent and transitive operations. God’s immanent operations are acts within God that have God as their aim or end. God’s transitive operations are acts that have an external object, like the created universe. The transitive operations are nonnecessary actions freely performed by God.⁷⁶ With this distinction in mind, one can ask if God’s act of willing His own goodness is immanent or transitive. It must be immanent since (i) it is aimed at God, and (ii) it is a necessary act. Hence, it cannot be a transitive operation, and thus cannot be God’s reason for creating the universe. The classical theist will need to look elsewhere for God’s reason to create the universe. Thus, this strategy does not help with denying (6).

3.4 God creates for our benefit

If the classical theist is going to deny (6), she will need to offer a reason why an impassible God would create a universe. Yet, what reason can be offered? She might say that God creates the universe for our benefit, and not God’s.⁷⁷ Call this the For Our Benefit strategy. Bates offers this suggestion. He says, “It is evident therefore, that only free and unexcited goodness moved him to create all things, that he might impart being and happiness to the creature, not enrich his own.”⁷⁸

The answer to “impart being and happiness to the creature” sounds promising, but it is not obviously consistent with impassibility. One might think that bringing about happiness to others is an intrinsically good state of affairs. Recognizing the intrinsic value of this state of affairs is a reason, or motivation, for actualizing this state of affairs. Yet, no such thing can serve as a reason to motivate an impassible God’s action. Again, an impassible God is not attracted to the possible or actual value of external things.⁷⁹ Nothing about the intrinsic goodness of this state of affairs excites God to act. As Bates makes clear, God enjoys an “unexcited goodness.” So again, I am left asking why God created the universe. It seems like a completely arbitrary act.

⁷⁶ Webster, “‘Love Is Also a Lover:’ Creatio Ex Nihilo and Creaturely Goodness,” 160.

⁷⁷ Creel, *Divine Impassibility: An Essay in Philosophical Theology*, 165.

⁷⁸ Bates, *The Works of the Rev. Bates*, 185.

⁷⁹ Pink, *The Attributes of God*, 77–8.

3.5 God creates for His glory

Maybe there is another potential reason that a classical theist could identify in order to deny (6). Pink says, “That He did create was simply for His *manifestative* glory.”⁸⁰ Here, Pink is drawing on a common distinction that theologians make between God’s essential glory and His manifestative glory. God’s essential glory is His solitary excellency or perfection.⁸¹ God’s manifestative glory is the state of affairs of God making His glory known to His creatures.⁸² With this in mind, one can reconsider Pink’s answer to why God created the universe. According to Pink, God created the universe so that His glory could be made manifest to creatures.

One might wonder if that is a good reason to create a universe. What value is there in manifesting the divine glory? It is not clear what value there is. Pink is absolutely clear that God gains nothing from creation. He says, “God is no gainer even from our worship. He was in no need of that external glory of His grace which arises from His redeemed, for He is glorious enough in Himself without that.”⁸³ When creatures come to worship God by recognizing His glory, God gains absolutely nothing because God already has this glory essentially.⁸⁴ The contemporary proponent of impassibility, James E. Dolezal, agrees. Dolezal claims, “There is no good that might benefit God that the creature is able to supply him [...] When we glorify him he does not thereby receive glory he previously lacked.”⁸⁵

The problem with Pink’s answer is that God cannot create a universe in order to acquire glory because God necessarily has all glory. So why create a universe at all? The answer cannot be that God recognizes any intrinsic value in being worshiped by creatures. As we have seen, Pink clearly rules that out as an option. Nor can the answer be that God creates because He recognizes that it is intrinsically good for creatures to come to know and enjoy God’s glory. This explanation is based on considerations external to the divine nature. Pink, like others who seek to be consistent with impassibility, will deny that God can act based on considerations that are external to the divine nature. So, it would seem that this explanation is out of the running too.

3.6 God’s goodness is necessarily diffusive

Why does God create? One classical strategy is to say that God’s goodness is necessarily diffusive.⁸⁶ What this means is that God’s goodness entails that God has to create more goodness is. To be clear, this strategy denies that God could exist without creation, and thus will violate condition (i) of CP. Hence, classical theists will wish to resist this move. As Webster maintains,

God is cause of all things by his will, not by natural necessity. His work of creation is not the natural overflow of his self-diffusive being, but intentional, personal action. Creation is spontaneous divine action, not the automatic operation of a “principle of plenitude.” And because of this, once again, creation need not have been.⁸⁷

Another problem is that this strategy seems to say that God is compelled to create by considerations that are external to the divine nature. It seems like the reason that God must create is because of the intrinsic values of creatures. Typically, however, a classical theist will say that the created goods of creatures are not intrinsically good, thus avoiding the worry that God is compelled to create by considerations external to the divine nature. In order to understand this claim, it is worth noting that classical theists say that

⁸⁰ Ibid., 10.

⁸¹ Ibid., 9.

⁸² Ibid., 10–1.

⁸³ Ibid., 10.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 11.

⁸⁵ Dolezal, “Strong Impassibility,” 20.

⁸⁶ Kretzmann, “The General Problem of Creation,” 218–20. Almeida, “The Multiverse and Divine Creation,” 2–3.

⁸⁷ Webster, “‘Love Is Also a Lover’: Creatio Ex Nihilo and Creaturely Goodness,” 161.

creatures only have goodness or value because they participate in God's goodness. In other words, the only goodness that can possibly exist is God's.

To illustrate this point, one can find classical theists saying that God only loves Himself. Nothing else could have intrinsic value for God to love. Following Augustine and many other classical theists, Bavinck explains that God's love must only be "self-love." God's "absolute love of self is nothing but a willing of oneself."⁸⁸ Because God is absolutely perfect, Bavinck says, "When [God] loves others, he loves himself in them: his own virtues, works, gifts. Hence, he is absolutely blessed in himself, the sum-total of all goodness, of all perfection."⁸⁹ To be clear, classical theists like Bavinck are not saying that God loves creatures because of intrinsic values that creatures have in themselves. Bavinck explicitly denies this.⁹⁰ For Bavinck, that would entail God's love being responsive to values that God does not possess, and that His blessedness is not fully satisfied in Himself. Instead, the classical claim is that God only loves the value of His perfect nature. No other values or goods exist.

This runs into a serious problem with regard to God's reason for creating a universe. On classical theism, God is the only intrinsically good thing. All other things merely participate in God's goodness. The notion that God has to create more goodness is thus incoherent. As Murphy explains, "God cannot create more goodness. Even considered apart from creation, there exists all the goodness that is or ever could be."⁹¹ So, once again, there seems to be no reason for God to create at all. It might seem, then, that classical theism has no way to deny (6). Thus, the conclusion in (8) remains.

4 Conclusion

In this article, I have articulated classical theism and offered an argument that the classical theist cannot provide a reason for God to create the universe. The nonclassical theist has no problem identifying a reason for God to create the universe. Thus, suggesting that the nonclassical models of God have a clear advantage here over the classical theist. I have surveyed some common classical strategies for avoiding the argument and have explained why they fail. There may very well be other strategies open to the classical theist that I am unaware of. Yet, as it stands, the Problem of Arbitrary Creation seems to be a serious difficulty that classical theist faces.

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⁸⁸ Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God*, 227.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 204.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 228.

⁹¹ Murphy, *God's Own Ethics*, 83.

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