

The Problem of Creation *Ex Nihilo*: A New Argument against Classical Theism

Felipe Leon

ABSTRACT: It's constitutive of classical theism that there is a necessarily existent personal god who is also the creator of the universe, where the latter claim includes at least the following three theses: (i) God is wholly distinct from the natural world; (ii) God is the originating or sustaining cause of the natural world; and (iii) God created the natural world *ex nihilo*, i.e., without the use of pre-existing materials. Call this tripartite component of classical theism *the classical view of creation*. In this paper, I offer a new argument against classical theism. In particular, I argue that creation *ex nihilo* is *prima facie* impossible, and that since the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* is constitutive of classical theism, classical theism is false.

1. Introduction

Call *classical theism* the view that there is a necessarily existent personal god who is omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect, and call *the classical view of creation* the view that consists of the following three theses: (i) God is wholly distinct from the natural world: the world is not identical to God or made from the stuff of God's being. Nor is it an idea in the mind of God or a mere feature or mode of God's being. Rather, it is a concrete object that exists in its own right (or an aggregate of such¹); (ii) God is the originating or sustaining cause of the natural world; and (iii) God created the natural world *ex nihilo*, i.e., without the use of pre-existing materials. Finally, call *classical theism_{cvc}* any version of classical theism that includes the classical view of creation.² In this paper, I offer a new argument against classical theism_{cvc}. In particular, I shall argue that creation *ex nihilo* is *prima facie* impossible, and that since the classical view of creation is constitutive of classical theism_{cvc}, classical theism_{cvc} is false.

2. The Argument

¹ Henceforth, let this qualification be assumed when unstated.

² Berkeleyan idealism arguably fails to satisfy clause (i) of the classical view of creation as defined here. As such, while it may count as a version of classical theism, it fails to count as a version of classical theism_{cvc}.

The problem of creation *ex nihilo* can be expressed in terms of the following argument:

1. All concrete objects that have an originating or sustaining efficient cause have an originating or sustaining material cause, respectively.
2. If classical theism_{cvc} is true, then the universe is a concrete object that has an originating or sustaining efficient cause with neither an originating nor a sustaining material cause.
3. Therefore, classical theism_{cvc} is false.

The argument is valid, and so the conclusion follows from the premises of necessity. What, then, can be said on behalf of the premises?

Premise 1 expresses a causal principle, which I shall call *the Principle of Material Causality*, or *PMC* for short. In simple terms, PMC says that all *made* things are made *from* other things. A bit more carefully, it says that concrete objects (and aggregates of such) have an originating or sustaining material cause whenever they have an originating or sustaining efficient cause, respectively. Before I defend the premise, some preliminary remarks about terminology are in order.

First, *concrete object* denotes at least the sorts of entities classically individuated by the ontological category of *substance*, and is meant to distinguish the entities at issue from those of other ontological categories (e.g., properties, relations, events, tropes, and the like). Examples of substances or individuals thus include atoms, stars, rocks, planets, trees, animals, people, and (if such there be) angels, Cartesian souls, and gods. They are thus to be distinguished from concrete entities in other ontological categories (shapes, surfaces, events, and the like) and abstract objects (propositions, numbers, sets, and the like).³

³ Many philosophers accept a *thing ontology*, according to which all stuffs (e.g., water, bronze, wood, beer, etc.) reduce to primary substances or individuals. However, some accept a *stuff ontology*, according to which at least some stuffs are not reducible to primary substances or individuals. For those who accept a stuff ontology, the notion of concrete object in play should be construed so as to include stuffs as well.

The next two key terms in premise 1 are those of *originating cause* and *sustaining cause*. By the former, I mean a cause of the temporal beginning of a thing's existence⁴ (if it should have such), and by the latter, I mean a cause of a thing's continued existence. So, for example, matches and lighter fluid are at least partial originating causes of the existence of a flame, and the oxygen that surrounds it is at least a partial sustaining cause of the flame's existence.

Finally, *material cause* aims to capture (roughly) Aristotle's notion of the term, and to individuate the type of cause in play from the other three sorts of causes distinguished by Aristotle, viz., formal, efficient, and final causes. In particular, by *material cause*, I mean the temporally or ontologically prior things or stuff *from* which (though not necessarily *of* which) a thing is made. So, for example, the originating material cause of a shiny new penny is the parcel of copper from which it was made; the originating material causes of a new water molecule are the hydrogen and oxygen atoms from which it was made; and the sustaining material causes of a flame are the reacting gases and solids from which it is made.

Two points about the causal premise merit special emphasis. First, PMC is restricted to concrete objects as we've defined them. As such, it is *neutral* as to whether entities in *other* ontological categories require a material cause. Second, the requirement of a material cause is restricted further to just those concrete objects that have an originating or sustaining efficient cause. It therefore allows for the possibility of concrete objects that *lack* a material cause, namely, those that lack an originating or sustaining efficient cause.

⁴ Consider any arbitrary carving up of the stretch of time of a given object's existence into equal intervals of finite, non-zero duration, and ordered according to the "earlier than" relation. As I'm using the expression, an object has a temporal beginning of its existence just in case any such carving up includes an earliest temporal interval.

So, for example, the premise allows that the universe may lack a material cause of its existence if it is both beginningless and also lacks a sustaining efficient cause. It also allows that a universe with a temporal beginning may lack a material cause if it also lacks an originating and sustaining efficient cause. An example of the latter sort of case might be a temporally finite, four-dimensional “block” universe. As such, the causal premise is neutral as to whether all concrete objects begin to exist, and to whether all concrete objects that begin to exist have a material cause. The causal premise *only* rules out concrete objects that *have* an originating or sustaining *efficient* cause but *lack* a *material* cause.

Is PMC plausible? It certainly seems so. First, PMC enjoys abundant empirical support. This is perhaps most clearly seen in the case of the extremely well-confirmed law of the conservation of mass/energy.⁵ The law states that if there is a given quantity of mass/energy at a given time, then it must have been caused by exactly the same quantity of mass/energy at any earlier time. In general, though, our uniform experience is such that whenever we find a concrete object with an originating or sustaining efficient cause, we also find it to have an originating or sustaining material cause, respectively. Furthermore, there seem to be no clear counterexamples to the principle in our experience. What explains this? PMC is a simple, conservative hypothesis with wide explanatory scope, which, if true, would best explain this data. Experience thus provides significant abductive support for PMC.⁶

Second, consider a version of PMC with stronger modal force:

Strong PMC: Necessarily, all concrete objects that have an originating or sustaining efficient cause have an originating or sustaining material cause, respectively.

⁵ Thanks to Michael Tooley for discussion. See also Fales 2010, esp. pp. 24-27.

⁶ For those who remain unpersuaded by the case for premise 1, I will argue later that the same conclusion can be gotten whether one accepts the premise or not.

Strong PMC is supported by rational intuition or rational seemings. In particular, Strong PMC appears true on reflection, where the notion of reflection at issue is broad enough to include thought experiments or intuition pumps. Rational intuition and rational seemings have standardly been taken as evidence of metaphysically necessary truths.⁷ Perhaps such intuitions aren't enough to *demonstrate* the impossibility of an originating cause without a material cause, but we ordinarily take such seemings to be at least defeasible, *prima facie* evidence for what must be the case. Therefore, if rational intuition supports Strong PMC, then since Strong PMC entails the modally weaker PMC, then rational intuition thereby provides at least *prima facie* support for PMC as well.

To prime our intuitions in support of Strong PMC, consider the following two thought experiments from Wes Morrison⁸:

No Materials: There was no lumber, no nails, no bricks, no mortar, no building materials of any kind. But there was a builder. One day, the builder said, "Five, four, three, two, one: let there be a house!" And there was a house.

No Builder: There was no builder, but there was lumber, nails, bricks, mortar, and other necessary building materials. One day, these materials spontaneously organized themselves into the shape of a house.

No Materials depicts a scenario of an efficient cause without a material cause, while No Builder depicts a scenario of a material cause without an efficient cause. However, there seems to be epistemic parity between the two stories: Both scenarios are equally unintuitive and contrary to experience. Consistency therefore seems to require that one reject the

⁷ For recent defenses of rational intuitions and intellectual seemings as evidence, see, e.g., Huemer 2007, Tucker 2013, Chudnoff 2014, and Bengson 2015.

⁸ Morrison 2002, p. 29.

possibility of both cases just in case one rejects either one.⁹ But the theist is likely to reject the possibility of No Builder. Therefore, there is significant epistemic pressure for the theist to reject the possibility of No Materials.

A similar intuition obtains when we consider any other concrete object arising from an originating efficient cause without a corresponding material cause: Absent materials internal or external to the builder from which to create things, it seems that even the most strenuous attempt can only result in creative “dry heaves”, as it were. Furthermore, the intuition doesn’t seem to depend on whether we take the builder to have limited power: Saying that an omnipotent builder can create a house without pre-existing materials seems to be on an epistemic par with saying that an omnipotent being can throw up a lunch from a completely empty stomach with a sufficiently strenuous dry heave.

We have similar grounds for thinking that concrete objects that depend upon a *sustaining* efficient cause for their existence also have a corresponding material cause. So, for example, the continued existence of a flame depends upon an efficient sustaining cause for its continued existence. But here we find that the flame’s sustenance also crucially involves a sustaining material cause, viz., reacting gases and solids. Furthermore, our intuitions in support of the causal principle are triggered when we attempt to imagine the flame’s continued existence *without* the presence of reacting gases, solids or some other material cause; the intuition does not diminish when we imagine the flame to be past-eternal.

In addition, it doesn’t require acceptance of full-blown Aristotelian metaphysics to find the materials for a compelling thought experiment for PMC in the apparent

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30.

relationship between what actually exists and what merely has the potential to exist. Thus, the possibility of the origination or sustenance of an object requires the prior potential for its existence. But it seems that this potential must “reside” in some actually existing thing or stuff. So, for example, the potential existence of a penny “resides” in a parcel of copper. By contrast, nothingness lacks the capacity or potential for becoming anything, since nothingness, being nothing at all, has no capacities or properties whatsoever. *Prima facie*, then, concrete objects can’t come into being from nothing, but only from other concrete things or stuff.

Finally, the same conclusion can be gotten from an extremely weak version of PMC:

Weak PMC: Possibly, every concrete object that has an originating or sustaining efficient cause has an originating or sustaining material cause, respectively.

In simple terms, Weak PMC says that it is *possible* that all *made* things are made *from* other things. A bit more carefully, it says that there is *at least one possible world* in which all concrete individuals and stuffs that are made are made from other concrete individuals or stuffs.

Now my own view is of course that a much stronger version of PMC is true -- viz., that it holds of metaphysical necessity. But we’ve also seen that there are strong grounds for thinking PMC holds in at least the *actual* world: it's intuitive, it has no uncontroversial exceptions, and it's encoded in the well-confirmed conservation laws of physics. *A fortiori*, then, there is intuitive evidence to warrant the claim that there is *at least one possible world W* in which such a principle is non-vacuously true. But if so, then in *W*, some things or stuffs are made, and all made things or stuffs are made from other things or stuff. And if so, then no things or stuffs in *W* that are made are made *ex nihilo*, in which case no god

or gods made them *ex nihilo* in *W*. But on classical theism_{cvc}, for any world that contains concrete things or stuffs distinct from God, at least some of those things or stuffs were made *ex nihilo*. It follows that the god of classical theism_{cvc} doesn't exist in *W*. But if so, then by (i) the fact that classical theism_{cvc} entails that God is a metaphysically necessary being, and (ii) Axiom S5 of S5 modal logic, it follows that such a God doesn't exist in *any* possible world, and therefore, *a fortiori*, such a God doesn't exist in the *actual* world. Therefore, the same conclusion can be gotten from even a very weak version of PMC.¹⁰

All that remains is to defend premise 2. Why should we accept it? Premise 2 follows from our partial stipulative definition of 'classical theism_{cvc}'. It is therefore a conceptual truth. This causes no trouble for the argument's significance, for the partial definition captures several theses that are *prima facie* constitutive of classical theism. Such theses are among those that individuate classical theism from neighboring views about God, such as pantheism, panentheism, demiurgic theism, Berkeleyan idealism, and Spinozistic monism. They are also among the theses about God that have been accepted and defended by most prominent philosophers within the theistic tradition, including Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, (and, more recently) William Alston, Alvin Plantinga, and Richard Swinburne. Indeed, it is safe to say that most contemporary analytic philosophers, both inside and outside the theistic tradition, would consider them essential theses of any account of classical theism worthy of the name. I therefore think it's safe to say that the stipulative truth of the premise won't undermine its relevance for evaluating classical theism's epistemic merits.

¹⁰ The primary aim of the present chapter is of course to defend an argument against classical theism_{cvc} that relies on a stronger version of PMC. However, for those who read the present chapter and remain unpersuaded by the argument from PMC and from Strong PMC, I refer them to the argument from Weak PMC sketched above.

We've seen that the argument is valid. We've also seen that premise 1 -- the principle of material causality -- is well supported from both *a priori* and empirical sources, and that premise 2 is a conceptual truth. It therefore looks as though the argument poses a formidable problem for classical theism_{cvc}.

How might the classical theist_{cvc} respond? Premise 2 is non-negotiable, as we've seen that it is a stipulative, conceptual truth. That leaves open only two types of response for the classical theist_{cvc}: a non-concessive response, which would require providing a defeater for premise 1, and a concessive response, which grants the soundness of the argument, but rejects classical theism_{cvc}. In the next two sections, I will consider and criticize both sorts of response. Briefly, I will argue that (i) the non-concessive responses are unsuccessful, (ii) most of the concessive responses require rejecting classical theism, and (iii) the remaining theism-friendly concessive responses are of dubious religious significance and epistemic merit.

3. Non-Concessive Responses

As mentioned above, the only sort of non-concessive response to the argument is to provide principled grounds for rejecting or resisting premise 1. This would require principled grounds for thinking the principle of material causality is false or without adequate justification -- that is, to undercut or rebut the claim that all concrete objects that have an originating or sustaining efficient cause have an originating or sustaining material cause, respectively. I can think of seven ways in which one might attempt to do so, which I shall consider below.

First, one might appeal to God's omnipotence as a way of defeating premise 1. Thus, one might argue that omnipotence is also constitutive of classical theism_{cvc}, that

omnipotence entails the ability to do anything metaphysically possible, and thus that God can create the universe *ex nihilo*. The problem is that the argument is missing a crucial premise, viz. that creation of the universe *ex nihilo* is metaphysically possible. But we've already seen that there are burden-shifting epistemic grounds against it. As such, even when the enthymemic premise is added to avoid invalidity, the objection begs the question at issue.

Second, one might object that it's conceivable that a god creates the universe *ex nihilo*, that conceivability is *prima facie* evidence for metaphysical possibility, and thus that divine creation *ex nihilo* is metaphysically possible. However, this line of reasoning would seem to prove too much. For by the same token, one could argue that it's conceivable that a universe pops into existence *ex nihilo* without any cause *whatsoever*, that conceivability is *prima facie* evidence for metaphysical possibility, and thus that a universe popping into existence *ex nihilo* without any cause whatsoever is likewise metaphysically possible. But then we have a new argument against classical theism_{cvc}. For it's also constitutive of classical theism_{cvc} that for any possible world, if there is a universe distinct from God in that world, then God created it. Therefore, the conceivability of an uncreated world that pops into existence *ex nihilo* without any cause whatsoever provides equally compelling grounds against classical theism_{cvc} as the *prima facie* impossibility of creation *ex nihilo*.

A third response is related to the second and goes back to Hume. To get at the response, consider the following gloss on Strong PMC:

Strong PMC: Necessarily, no concrete object is originated or sustained by an efficient cause without a corresponding material cause.

We've seen that Strong PMC is intuitive and that the actual world conforms to it with no clear counterexamples. However, despite these considerations, some philosophers remain skeptical. Some philosophers in this camp agree with Hume that the only necessary truths are analytic truths, and that no proposition that can be denied without contradiction is analytic. Others in this camp might stop short of this but hold that anything that can be conceived without contradiction is at least epistemically possible. Philosophers in this camp might therefore argue that since there is no contradiction in denying Strong PMC, or since one can consistently conceive of God creating the universe out of nothing, that is enough to reject (or withhold believing) Strong PMC.

At least three things can be said in reply to this objection. First, at best, it would be grounds for rejecting (or withholding belief regarding) Strong PMC (for those with the particular Humean bent at issue), which is just one of the two lines of support offered for PMC. As such, it leaves the abductive support for PMC unscathed.

Second, and more importantly, rejecting (or withholding belief regarding) Strong PMC is just as problematic for classical theism_{evc} as accepting it. To see this, consider the following principle, which I'll call *the Strong Principle of No Uncaused Concrete Objects* (Strong NUC):

Strong NUC: Necessarily, no concrete object originates out of nothing without a cause.

Strong NUC is just an instance of the more general principle, *ex nihilo nihil fit*. And as far as widely accepted metaphysical principles go, the latter is about as good as it gets. For not only is it intuitive, but the actual world conforms to it with no clear counterexamples. However, since Strong NUC can be denied without contradiction, and since one can consistently conceive of (for example) a quark—or even the whole universe—popping into

existence uncaused out of nothing, those with a Humean bent think that that's enough to reject (or withhold belief regarding) the principle.

Strong NUC therefore looks to be on an epistemic par with Strong PMC: Both principles are intuitive, and the actual world conforms to both with no clear counterexamples. However, neither principle is analytic, and so one can deploy the Humean gambit above to resist them if one is so inclined. Given that Strong NUC and Strong PMC are in the same epistemological boat, therefore, it seems unprincipled and arbitrarily selective to accept one while rejecting the other. One should thus treat them similarly: either accept both or use the Humean gambit to reject (or withhold belief regarding) both.

Here's the rub. Both options entail a defeater for classical theism_{cvc}. For consider the first option: accept both principles. If you do that, then you accept Strong PMC, in which case you accept something that entails that God can't create concrete objects *ex nihilo*, in which case you accept something that entails that classical theism_{cvc} is false. On the other hand, suppose you reject both principles. Then you reject (or withhold belief regarding) Strong NUC, in which case you accept that there is a metaphysically or epistemically possible world in which concrete objects pop into existence uncaused, out of nothing. But since classical theism_{cvc} entails that God is the ultimate creator or sustainer of all concrete objects outside himself in all possible worlds, you thereby accept something that entails a rebutting (or undercutting) defeater classical theism_{cvc}. Therefore, either way, you accept something that entails a defeater for classical theism_{cvc}. In short, rejecting Strong PMC is just as problematic for classical theism_{cvc} as accepting it.

Finally, even waiving the previous two replies, the objection leaves Weak PMC intact. As such, the argument from Weak PMC against classical theism_{cvc} remains unscathed.

A fourth response one might raise against premise 1 is one suggested by some who work in the field of quantum cosmology, viz., that the universe arose from nothing without any cause whatsoever.¹¹ One might reasonably worry that upon closer inspection, the claim supported by the scientific evidence is not that the universe popped into existence uncaused *ex nihilo*, but rather much weaker claims, such as that it arose from a random fluctuation in a quantum vacuum.¹² I will not pursue this worry here, however. For strictly speaking, the possibility of concrete objects popping into existence *ex nihilo* without any cause whatsoever is *compatible* with PMC. For recall that PMC does not require that all concrete objects have an originating and sustaining material cause. Rather, it only requires that they do if they have an originating or sustaining *efficient* cause. In this regard, PMC treats universes that pop into existence out of nothing without an efficient cause as on a par with past-eternal universes and four-dimensional block universes.

In any case, and perhaps most saliently for our purposes, the truth of the current objection would provide no relief for the classical theist_{cvc}. For such evidence would likewise provide a defeater for classical theism_{cvc} as well. For again, classical theism_{cvc} entails that for any world in which there are concrete objects distinct from God, God created them. But if the present objection is correct, then there are possible worlds where concrete objects pop into existence out of nothing without a cause, in which case God does not create them in that world, in which case classical theism_{cvc} is false.

¹¹ See, for example, Krauss 2013.

¹² See, for example, Albert 2012.

Fifth, the theist might resist premise 1 by appeal to agent causal views of the self. Thus, they might argue that there are good reasons to think that (i) humans possess libertarian free will, that (ii) this is best explained on the assumption that the physical realm isn't causally closed, that (iii) the agent can thus cause things via energy from "outside" the natural causal order¹³, and that (iv) this is sufficient justification for the existence of genuine creation *ex nihilo*, in which case premise 1 is false. This reply won't work, however. For even if (i)-(iii) could be adequately supported – contrary to the opinion of the majority of analytic philosophers¹⁴ – the falsity of the causal closure of the physical wouldn't require positing the creation of concrete objects *ex nihilo*. Rather, at most, it would require the transfer of pre-existing energy from the agent (who acts from "outside" of the natural causal order) to the physical realm.

Sixth, one might object that (i) our intuitions and experience regarding material causes have been conditioned by our experience of causation *within* the physical universe; (ii) the case of the origin of the physical universe *itself* is quite different from such cases; and therefore that (iii) such evidence is insufficient to support PMC when applied to the origin of the universe. But this objection is of little help to the classical theist_{cvc}. For if it's sufficient to undercut our intuitive and empirical evidence for the requirement of a *material* cause, then it also seems sufficient to undercut our intuitive and empirical evidence for the requirement of an *efficient* cause. But then we have an equally powerful defeater for classical theism_{cvc}. For as we've seen in responses to previous objections, it's likewise

¹³ An argument in this vicinity is broached in (e.g) Moreland 2013.

¹⁴ According to a recent poll (<http://philpapers.org/surveys/results.pl>), only 13.7% of philosophers answered with "accepting or leaning toward libertarianism". At least 71.3% of philosophers polled stated that they think we don't have libertarian free will, with 59.1% answering with "accepting or leaning toward compatibilism", and 12.2% answering with "accepting or leaning toward no free will" (14.9% answered with "accepting or leaning toward 'other'").

constitutive of classical theism_{cvc} that for any possible world in which God exists, if there is a universe distinct from God in that world, then God is its efficient cause. Therefore, the epistemic possibility of a universe that pops into existence *ex nihilo* without an efficient cause provides equally persuasive grounds against classical theism_{cvc} as the *prima facie* impossibility of creation *ex nihilo*.

Finally, one might reject premise 1 via an appeal to theoretical cost-benefit analysis. In particular, one might argue that while denying PMC is a theoretical cost for classical theism_{cvc}, it can compensate for that cost if it turns out that classical theism_{cvc} embodies the theoretical virtues (e.g., simplicity, scope, conservatism, etc.) better than other competing hypotheses (e.g., naturalism, cosmopsychism, pantheism, panentheism, deism, demiurgism, etc.). And if that should turn out to be so, then the classical theist_{cvc} would then be warranted in rejecting PMC in favor of a *qualified* version of it — say, one that asserts that all things with an efficient cause *besides* the creation of the universe require a material cause.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to assess whether classical theism_{cvc} wins out over competing large-scale hypotheses in terms of a comprehensive theoretical cost-benefit analysis.¹⁵ But for the purposes of this paper, it is enough to note that to respond in this way is just to grant that the argument is an undefeated defeater for classical theism_{cvc} unless or until it can be shown that the explanatory merits of the latter warrant rejecting PMC. But that is all that the argument aims to do.

4. Concessive Responses

¹⁵ For a case for theism on this score, see Swinburne 2004. For cases against theism on this score, see Oppy 2013, and Leon in Rasmussen and Leon 2019.

If one finds the non-concessive responses implausible, one might finally turn to a concessive response; that is, one might accept a view of God that denies the classical view of creation. There are three basic versions of such a response, each one corresponding to a rejection of one of the three clauses of the classical view of creation as we have defined it. I will briefly consider each sort of response below.

The first type of concessive response is to reject thesis (i) of the classical view of creation as we've defined it, thereby denying that God is wholly distinct from the natural world. According to this sort of response, one allows that the world is either (a) identical to God, (b) made from the stuff of God's being, (c) a mere feature or mode of God's being, or (d) an idea in the mind of God. Unfortunately, options (a)-(c) come at the high cost of abandoning classical theism altogether, as embracing one of these options amounts to embracing something in the neighborhood of pantheism, panentheism, or Spinozistic monism, respectively. And while (d) is arguably a version of theism, it requires embracing something on the order of Berkeleyan idealism. It would take us too far afield to evaluate the case for such a view, but it's enough for our purposes to note that few have found the case for Berkeleyan idealism persuasive, in which case it seems unlikely that many will accept a concessive response of this sort.

The second type of concessive response is to reject thesis (ii) of the classical view of creation. According to this sort of response, God may or may not be omnipotent¹⁶,

¹⁶ Perhaps one will object that a god of this sort cannot be omnipotent if he cannot create or sustain the natural world. However, there is a long and established tradition of theists who claim that there are lots of things that an omnipotent god cannot do (e.g., make a round square, change the past, act contrary to his nature, know future free acts, etc.). One standard justification for such restrictions is to say that such things are metaphysically impossible, and that omnipotence does not include the power to do what is metaphysically impossible. But the same sort of justification seems available here. For the hands-off theist can say that creating or sustaining the universe without a material cause is metaphysically impossible, and thus his inability to create or sustain a universe *ex nihilo* does not count against his omnipotence.

omniscient, and morally perfect. However, he does not play the role of creator of the universe in any sense. Call this sort of view *hands-off theism*.

It seems antecedently unlikely that there will be many takers for hands-off theism. This is for at least two reasons. First, hands-off theism looks epistemically unmotivated. For many standard lines of evidence for theism depend upon inferences from the natural world to God. Examples include design arguments from the fine-tuning of the universe to a cosmic designer, as well as cosmological arguments for a first cause, ground of being, and sufficient reason for the existence of contingent concrete reality. But the god of hands-off theism plays none of these roles with respect to the universe. As such, accepting hands-off theism commits one to rejecting many of the core arguments of natural theology. It's also arguable that it causes trouble for religious experience. For example, in his widely influential account of the evidential force of religious experience, William Alston¹⁷ grants that awareness of certain phenomena (e.g., religious diversity) can undercut a good deal of the epistemic force of religious experience, and thus that the justification of theistic belief requires further buttressing with the help of other evidence, such as cosmological and design arguments. But again, the hands-off theist is committed to rejecting many such buttressing arguments as evidence for her belief. Now perhaps an adequate case for hands-off theism can be made that does not depend on these lines of evidence. But for our purposes, it's enough to note that the hands-off theist seems to have their work cut out for them.

Second, the god of hands-off theism seems to be of much less religious significance than the God of classical theism_{cvc}. For on such a view, God is not responsible for the

¹⁷ Alston 1993.

existence and order of the natural world. He is therefore not the first cause or ground of being upon which all else depends, let alone Anselm's greatest conceivable being. Rather, he exists as just one among the many uncreated concrete objects within the universe, having a creative and providential power comparable to Plato's demiurge. On such a view, then, the grandeur, preeminence, and otherness of God would seem to be non-trivially diminished. There is also a corresponding loss of the awe that comes from a sense of ultimate dependence upon a Creator on such a hypothesis.

The third and final type of concessive response is to reject thesis (iii) of the classical view of creation. According to this sort of response, God plays the role of creator and designer. However, he did not create the world out of nothing, but rather from pre-existing materials. For obvious reasons, let's call this sort of view *demiurgic theism*. Now it seems that demiurgic theism is an improvement over hands-off theism in terms of epistemic motivation, since on such a view god plays at least a diminished role *qua* creator and designer of the universe, fashioning the universe out of primordial matter/stuff. Therefore, while standard cosmological arguments cannot be marshaled in support of demiurgic theism¹⁸, perhaps an argument from design can be made on behalf of such a view, as well as (perhaps) religious experience and other sorts of evidence that don't appeal to an inference from the sheer existence of the universe to God.

However, whatever the epistemic merits of demiurgic theism, many of the drawbacks of hands-off theism apply here as well with respect to religious significance. For as with the latter view, the god of demiurgic theism is not the preeminent first cause

¹⁸ I suppose a cosmological argument for an *unmoved mover* is still a possibility, although few have found arguments of this sort convincing since at least the dawn of Newtonian physics. Perhaps, though, the argument can be revitalized. We'll see.

and ground of being for the fundamental stuff of the natural world; nor does he provide the sufficient reason for its existence. He is therefore not responsible for the existence of the natural world in the ultimate sense that is ascribed to the god of classical theism_{cvc}. Rather, he exists alongside of it as another uncreated concrete object. Therefore, such a view entails a much weaker view of divine preeminence and uniqueness than what has been historically attributed to the God of classical theism. For at least these reasons, then, it is doubtful that many classical theists will be happy with this route to resisting the argument.

5. Conclusion

A powerful argument against classical theism can be constructed from two simple elements: (i) classical theism's doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, and (ii) the well-supported principle of material causality. The prospects for the only non-concessive reply to the argument – rejecting the principle of material causality – seem less than promising. Furthermore, the concessive replies leave the classical theist with a picture of God and creation that they are likely to find costly and unattractive. Little attention has been paid to the argument to date, but our brief exploration suggests that it is worthy of serious investigation.¹⁹

References

¹⁹ Thanks to Savannah Leon, Michael Tooley, Dustin Crummett, Randy Ramal, Bob Fischer, Scott Hill, Wes Morriston, Robert Bass, Jason Thibodeau, and two anonymous referees for helpful comments and discussion of a previous draft of this paper. Thanks also to the audiences at the 2015 Pacific Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association and the 2015 annual meeting of the Society for Philosophy of Religion for helpful discussion.

- Albert, David. 2012. 'On the Origin of Everything: Review of 'A Universe From Nothing', by Lawrence M. Krauss'. New York Times 23 Mar 2012. Web. 18 Aug 2017.
- Alston, William. 1993. *Perceiving God*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Bengson, John. 2015. "The Intellectual Given", *Mind* 124: 207-760.
- Chudnoff, Elijah. 2014. *Intuition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fales, Evan. 2010. *Divine Intervention: Metaphysical and Epistemological Puzzles*. Routledge.
- Huemer, Michael. 2007. "Compassionate Phenomenal Conservatism", *Philosophy & Phenomenological Research* 74: 30-55.
- Krauss, Lawrence. 2013. *A Universe From Nothing: Why There is Something Rather Than Nothing*. New York: Atria.
- Moreland, J.P. 2008. *Consciousness and the Existence of God: A Theistic Argument*. New York: Routledge.
- Morrison, Wes. 2002. "Creation *Ex Nihilo* and the Big Bang", *Philo* 5 (1): 23-33.
- Oppy, Graham. 2013. *The Best Argument Against God*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Plantinga, Alvin. 1980. *Does God Have a Nature?* Milwaukee: Marquette University Press.
- Rasmussen, Joshua and Leon, Felipe. 2019. *Is God the Best Explanation of Things? A Dialogue*. Palgrave MacMillan.
- Swinburne, Richard. 2004. *The Existence of God*, 2nd edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- .2016. *The Coherence of Theism*, 2nd edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tucker, Christopher, ed. 2013. *Seemings and Justification: New Essays on Dogmatism and Phenomenal Conservatism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.