

# God's Perfect Will

## Remarks on Johnston and O'Connor\*

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... that you may discern what is  
the good, pleasing, and perfect  
will of God.

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Romans 12:2, HCSB

According to classical theism, contingent reality exists because of the free and rational choice of a necessary, perfect being. On the one hand, this appears to be a very promising explanation of contingent reality, since free choice can explain outcomes without taking away contingency. On the other hand, given that a perfect being would not lack or want or need anything of value, it is hard to understand how such a being could have a reason to act (as a being who acts rationally must). It is even harder to understand how or why such a being would create a world *like this one* with all of its evils.

This *aporia* at the heart of classical theism has recently been addressed by Mark Johnston (2019) and Timothy O'Connor ([this volume](#)).

Central to Johnston's treatment is the classical suggestion, developed perhaps most clearly by Aquinas (*Summa Contra Gentiles* 1.74–88), that God's will consists in the affirmation of God's own goodness. According to Johnston, following Aquinas, any creative act God could have performed would have been a different way of affirming God's own goodness. Furthermore, since God's goodness is infinite, the addition of a finite created world does not increase the total amount of goodness in existence. As a result, the total quantity of goodness in the created world is, in a sense, irrelevant to God's decision.

According to Johnston, this approach secures a very wide scope for divine freedom. O'Connor disagrees, arguing that even on this approach divine perfection will significantly restrict the scope of contingency. For instance, "fundamentally and ultimately unjust" worlds will be impossible (O'Connor, [this volume](#), §3). I argue that O'Connor does not go far enough. Although Johnston's strategy can explain why God would create rather than 'remaining within Godself', it makes no progress toward explaining how it is possible that God should not create the best of all possible worlds.

The difficulties faced by Johnston's approach are internal to the Neoplatonic framework he adopts. One of the most famous and influential doctrines of Plato

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is that *all* willing is directed at the good (Plato, *Gorgias* 466d–468e). Neoplatonists identify God with the good. Thus, the fact that God wills (affirms) Godself, and this is the motive of God's action, does not differentiate God from us. Even our sinful actions are, in a sense, ways of affirming God's goodness: what we pursue, even in sinful actions, is the good which (perhaps unbeknownst to us) is God. This same idea is at the root of the Thomistic doctrine that what is chosen is always chosen 'under the guise of the good' (see Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-IIq1a6).

It is not enough, then, to say that God's willing is an affirmation of God's own goodness. We must say that God's willing is a *perfect* affirmation of God's own goodness, in contrast to our deficient willings.

We thus reach by a different route one of the central points of O'Connor's reply to Johnston (O'Connor, [this volume](#), §3): there are better and worse ways of affirming the divine goodness. Not only is God's willing an affirmation of God's own goodness, but it is a *perfect* affirmation. Although Johnston recognizes this point in passing (Johnston 2019, 158), he supposes that, since the result of God's willing makes no difference to the total quantity of value that exists, the necessary perfection of God's willing places few or no constraints on its results. This assumption is far from evident.

According to Plato, perfection in willing the good resides in the intellect. When we act wrongly, our action is deficient because we do what we *think* to be best. Since such opinions are often mistaken, doing what we think best does not allow us to obtain the true object of our will, the good (Plato, *Gorgias* 466e–467a).

This approach is applied to God by ibn Sina (*Metaphysica*, ch. 33). According to ibn Sina, the very fact that our will is distinct from our intellect is a defect. Because our will is distinct from our intellect and our intellect is limited and fallible, we often will what is not in fact the greatest good. (Compare Descartes's doctrine, in the Fourth Meditation, that we err because the scope of our intellect is more limited than the scope of our will.) Since God is perfectly simple, God's will and God's intellect are one and the same. For a perfect being, there is no distinction between knowing a thing to be best and willing that thing. Thus, ibn Sina concludes, "[God's] will is no other than [God's] knowledge of the best order for all things" (68).

On ibn Sina's view, the perfection of God's willing implies that, necessarily, God's willing results in the best of all possible worlds. Although the Neoplatonic framework is less explicit in Leibniz, his argument is essentially the same. Leibniz agrees that the fundamental principle here is that "God... *acts* in the most perfect manner" (Leibniz [1686] 1989, §1, emphasis added). He claims, however, that the perfection of God's act implies the perfection of God's product (§3). If God's product were improvable, God would be dissatisfied with God's own creative activity (Leibniz [1710] 1985, §201). Hence, the Neoplatonic thesis that God's willing is the affirmation of God's own goodness does not, by itself, solve the problem of divine freedom in creation or the problem of evil. God must affirm God's own goodness *perfectly*. This would seem to limit God's possibilities for willing, just as O'Connor says.

The central point of Johnston's argument is that, since God's own value is unsurpassably infinite, God's creative activity does not—and cannot—change the total quantity of value that exists. What follows from this observation is that the perfection of God's creative activity cannot be judged in a consequentialist

fashion by the total amount of goodness that results. Rather, as our discussion of the nature of God's willing also suggests, it must be *the willing itself* that is perfect (Johnston 2019, 158).

Ibn Sina and Leibniz suppose that perfect willing must have a perfect product. Note that this brand of optimism does not fall prey to Johnston's worries about 'meliorism'. We do not suppose that God is motivated to increase the total amount of goodness in existence (an impossible task). Rather, God perfectly affirms God's own goodness, and the perfection of this affirmation is seen in the perfection of the world that is thereby created. This yields a principled reason for attending only to the goodness of the created world, excluding the infinite divine goodness. (This may also provide a reply to Johnston's objections to meliorism in the human case, since we may rationally desire to affirm the divine goodness by participating in the perfection of God's creative product.)

At the same time, the focus on the perfection of God's *activity* shows that this supposition made by Ibn Sina and Leibniz—that perfect activity must have a perfect product—is contestable. Indeed, Leibniz was forced to defend this supposition explicitly because it had been challenged by Malebranche ([1680] 1992, §§1.13–14).

Theists who endorse the broadly Neoplatonic framework, whether they accept or reject optimism, are committed to the claim that God's *willing*, God's *creative activity*, is perfect. A defense of contingency in divine creation, then, must show that any of a wide variety of worlds—or perhaps none at all—might have resulted from God's perfect willing. Similarly, a solution to the problem of evil would make it plausible that *this* world could have been produced by God's perfect willing. To see whether such solutions are available, we would need to understand in what the perfection of God's activity consists.

One answer might be that God's activity is perfect precisely insofar as it is a wholehearted affirmation of the highest good (i.e., Godself), rooted in the most complete knowledge of that good (i.e., Godself). This, however, still leaves us with what I take to be O'Connor's deepest questions: what are the possible results of such activity? Do they include the existence of anything distinct from God? Do they include worlds like this one that contain enormous quantities of evil? This is closely connected to the disagreement between Leibniz and Malebranche: must perfect creative activity have a perfect product?

It is worth noting that certain common analogies for divine creation tend to focus our attention on God's product rather than God's activity, favoring Leibniz over Malebranche. For instance, it is very natural to suppose that the excellence of an act of carpentry or painting is judged primarily, if not exclusively, by the excellence of its product.<sup>1</sup> If it is the perfection of God's activity with which we are concerned, then God might be better analogized to a storyteller (Lebens 2015, 2017; Goldschmidt and Lebens 2020) or a dancer (Pearce 2017b, 250). I have argued elsewhere that these kinds of analogies also provide a better model for the metaphysics of divine creation: as the dance is nothing over and above the activity of the dancers, so also God's creation is nothing over and above God's creative activity (Pearce 2017a, 2017b).

The storyteller analogy, however, suggests a rather shocking answer to our question about the product of God's creative activity. The suffering of the char-

1. Malebranche thus does himself no favors by comparing God to a craftsman in this very context! (Malebranche [1680] 1992, §1.13)

acters in a story in no way detracts from the excellence of the act of storytelling. A storyteller is under no obligation to ensure that the characters 'live happily ever after', since there are distinctive aesthetic values to be found in the genre of tragedy. Indeed, some neo-Thomists have explicitly held that, as a storyteller has no moral obligations to the characters in her story, so God has no moral obligations to us and the problem of evil therefore dissolves (see Ross 1969, ch. 6).

This conception of God is clearly *religiously* inadequate. The Abrahamic religions (at least on most interpretations) are committed to the idea that God cares for us and wills our good. This religious commitment is independent of the controversial philosophical question of whether God has a moral obligation to care for us (and, indeed, whether God has any moral obligations at all). But is there *philosophical* reason to reject this conception?

Progress can be made by combining the storyteller analogy with the observation that God's willing must be an affirmation of God's own goodness. This gives us a distinctive way of understanding an idea discussed by both Johnston and O'Connor, that God creates to 'show forth God's glory'. The story God tells should be a story that expresses God's own character and values, and not only God's excellence as a storyteller. Such a performance would be an appropriate way of *expressing* God's affirmation of God's own goodness, as the Neoplatonic tradition has it, and such a story would involve God's care for the story's characters.

This is, admittedly, more of a picture than a theory. Nevertheless, it does seem to provide an explanation of God's motivation for creating and God's motivation for caring about the wellbeing of creatures. One worries, however, that we may have arrived back at the optimism of ibn Sina and Leibniz. If there is a unique best creative act for expressing God's goodness, then it seems that, necessarily, God chooses this act. On the other hand, if there is not a unique best act, then we must explain how God's choice is not merely random or capricious. In other words, shifting our attention to the goodness of God's act makes little or no difference in our struggle to understand how God's choice can simultaneously exhibit perfect freedom, perfect goodness, and perfect rationality. Furthermore, by recovering God's care for creatures we also revive the problem of evil.

I conclude that, while the Neoplatonic framework discussed by Johnston and O'Connor provides a promising answer to the question of why God would create at all, it makes very little difference to the problem of divine freedom or the problem of evil. We cannot avoid acknowledging that some acts available to God are better than others and, once we have acknowledged this point, it is difficult to see how we avoid the (deeply implausible) conclusion of ibn Sina and Leibniz that, necessarily, God creates the best of all possible worlds.<sup>2</sup>

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2. I thank Timothy O'Connor for helpful comments on a previous draft.

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