




The incoherence of divine possibility constructivism

Walter J. Schultz¹ 

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Abstract

Before God created did God have ideas in mind for particular things, kinds of things, properties of things, particular events, and laws of nature? At least since Augustine, theists have proposed differing answers. This paper is about a relatively recent theory, which holds that God constructs them when he creates the universe. James Ross, Brian Leftow, and Hugh McCann are its primary advocates. Since the shared features of their views do not pertain to the so-called “abstract objects” or to the “necessary truths” of mathematics and logic, let us call this “divine possibility constructivism” (DPC), differentiating it from the theistic activism of Christopher Menzel and Thomas Morris and from the voluntarism of René Descartes—both of which could otherwise be construed as “constructivist”. According to Ross, Leftow, and McCann, God had nothing in mind before he created—which is to say that, before God created, God was not aware of possibilities for a universe. Rather, God’s being aware of any such possibilities is grounded only in God’s having constructed them *ex nihilo*. This paper shows that DPC is incoherent.

Keywords Origin of possibility · Divine ideas · James Ross · Brian Leftow · Hugh McCann

Introduction

Before God created did God have ideas in mind *for* individual *things*, *kinds* of things, *properties* of things, particular *events*, and *laws of nature*? Moreover, did God have *purposes* and *plans* in mind before he created the world? These questions can be summarized as one:

Before God created did God have ideas *for* what would become the actualities of creation, providence, and redemption?

✉ Walter J. Schultz
wjschultz@unwsp.edu

¹ University of Northwestern St. Paul, 3003 Snelling Avenue North, St. Paul, MN 55113, USA

Over the nearly sixteen centuries since Augustine (354–430), theists have pondered and proposed differing answers to aspects of this question and what those aspects presuppose. St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) asserts in his *Summa Theologica* that

all creatures, before they existed... were possible beings... only through the divine power, in as much as God was able to produce them in being (1947, Ia 9, 2, 47a49–b5).

But he also writes in his *Summa Contra Gentiles* that,

For those things that are not, nor will be, nor ever were, are known by God as possible to His power. Hence, God does not know them as in some way existing in themselves, but as existing only in the divine power (1923, I 66.8).

According to Aquinas, before creation God knew possibilities “as existing in the divine power”. In other words, before God created the world God knew what *could* be created by knowing his ability to create, even if some such things never are created. God’s power is the ultimate source or locus of possibility, and what God had in mind in knowing his power were ideas or *rationes* (Wippel 1981; Jordan 1984; Boland 1996). Of those, only some serve as patterns *for* creating—as “ways his essence can be imitated”—and are called “exemplars” (Doolan 2008; Knuuttilla 1988, 2015). Only some of the possibilities God knows become reality in creation. In short, for theories like Aquinas’, God’s having ideas—possibilities in mind—for created things is a *precondition* of God’s creating, and these ideas are grounded in God’s power or nature.

Ross (1986), Leftow (2012), and McCann (2012) reject this.¹ Brian Leftow (2009) calls such theories “deity theories”, because they ground God’s ideas for created things in God’s power or nature, which means that “God’s nature [i.e., deity] makes necessary truths true or gives rise to their truthmakers” (Leftow 2014b, p. 435). Leftow thinks that “deity theories commit us to the claim that God’s existence depends on there being truthmakers for particular necessary truths about creatures”, arguing, for example, that *if it is untrue that water = H₂O, then God does not exist*, and judging that this conditional “reflects a substantive, objectionable dependence that would exist were a deity theory true” (Leftow 2012, pp. 209–212, 2014a, pp. 1, 2, 2014b, p. 439, 2015, p. 257). James Ross says that such theories are “Neo-Platonic” in holding that “God’s prismatic self-knowledge ‘refracts’ a universal domain, the divine ideas of all the kinds of things there might be and of all the things of those kinds there might be” (1986, p. 315). The first problem that Ross raises is that the universal domain of modal Neoplatonism is invariably set-theoretic and formally inconsistent. The second is that it is inconsistent to postulate an external *real relation* of participation or “exemplification” [imitation] to account for what makes a thing to be of its kind or to be the individual that it is. Hugh McCann says this type of theory is “deliberative” because it entails that God chooses what to create from among alternatives, rendering God “inferior” (2012, pp. 171, 173).² Instead, Ross,

¹ Other advocates of DPC include Jaeger (2012) and McIntosh (2017).

² For a deity theory that overcomes these objections see Schultz (2014, 2017).

Leftow, and McCann hold that God constructs all such possibilities in creating the universe. Their view can be termed “Divine Possibility Constructivism” (DPC).

Since the focus of this paper does not include the problems of how God is related to the so-called “abstract objects” or to the necessary truths of mathematics and logic (except incidentally as contingent creation may entail them), calling this *divine possibility constructivism* differentiates it from the *theistic activism* of Menzel (1987, 2001) and Morris and Menzel (1987) and from the *voluntarism* of René Descartes—both of which could otherwise be construed as “constructivist”. Furthermore, my aim does not require a review of how the various sorts of possibility and necessity such as *logical*, *nomological*, *metaphysical*, *alethic*, and so on may be thought to relate to God. Nor does my aim require me to recount the history of the various ways a concept of possibility such as *potency*, *frequency*, *diachronicity*, *logical consistency*, *being non-repugnant to God’s nature*, *conceivability*, or *alternativity* (*synchronicity*) (Knuuttila 1988, 2015; Gendler and Hawthorne 2002; Chalmers 2002) has been explicated. The point of this paper is simply to show that divine possibility constructivism is incoherent.

Divine possibility constructivism

Divine possibility constructivism (DPC) may be characterized by an affirmation and a denial. The *affirmation* is that all possibilities (i.e., God’s ideas for the contingencies constituting creation) are constructed spontaneously and simultaneously along with the things themselves—actual individuals, their dispositional properties, laws of nature, and the range of possible states of things, which are the manifestations of these dispositions and laws. DPC’s characterizing *denial* is that God’s ideas for these contingent actualities are *not* in God’s mind in the sense of God’s being aware of his own nature *nor* in the sense of God’s being aware of an independent realm of platonic *abstracta*.³ In other words, according to DPC, God’s being aware of all possibilities—God’s having all the ideas he has for created things—is solely a matter of God’s constructing them. Ross expresses the affirmation and denial as follows:

What is possible *ad extra* is a result of what God does. God’s power has no exemplar objects [...] God creates the kinds, the natures of things, along with things. [...] God creates the possibility, impossibility, and counterfactuality that has content (real situations) involving being other than God. [...] There is not a universal domain of kinds and a universal domain of things of the kind (or a universal domain of exemplar ideas) determined by God’s nature, from which God must choose what to create. We have to deny that God’s self-knowledge is by finite REPRESENTATION to himself (1986, pp. 318, 319).

³ There seem to be two versions of this ungrounded, independent realm, which Wolfson (1961) calls “extra-deical” and “intra-deical”. The first version is standard Platonism; the second is Duns Scotus’ view. “According to [Scotus], when God as an omniscient being knows all possibilities, he does not know them by turning first to his essence. Possibilities can be known in themselves... In fact, they would be what they are even if there were no God” (Knuuttila 1988, p. viii).

As Brian Leftow puts it,

[God] thinks up all He thinks up at once, in the Biggest Bang of all. [...] God invents the very natures of things (2012, pp. 272, 278).

Hugh McCann claims that

Real creation is quite different. It is spontaneous, exuberant, unfettered by prior beliefs and conceptualizations. Above all, it does not follow a plan. [...] it is integral to the greatness of God that he gets things perfectly right with complete spontaneity: there is no deliberation or forethought in advance of creation [...]. [...] prior to the creation of what is real there are no possibilities either (2012, pp. 172, 201, 212).

In other words, not only does DPC reject Platonism, but it also rejects every theory which grounds divine ideas for contingent things in God's nature as Aquinas does. Instead, God "creates the natures of things" (Ross 1986, p. 318), "invents the natures of things" (Leftow 2012, p. 278), and "there is no forethought" since [God] "gets things perfectly right with complete spontaneity" (McCann 2012, pp. 212, 201). God creates without planning, but the spontaneous result is perfect.

In sum, DPC's characterizing *denial* is that God had nothing in mind before he created the world, where "before" indicates an ontological rather than a temporal precondition. That is, God's creating did not require God's having ideas in mind for what he created. No divine plans, no divine ideas for things (or for kinds of things), no purposes in mind inform or serve as preconditions of God's willingly creating the world. DPC's characterizing *affirmation* is that God's being aware of all possibilities—God's having all the ideas he has for created things—is solely a matter of God's constructing them simultaneous with creating. My aim in this paper is to demonstrate that this view is incoherent.⁴

Preliminary considerations

To accurately and fairly exhibit the incoherence of divine possibility constructivism, three preliminary issues must be addressed. The first is that we may use gerund nominalizations to represent metaphysical states of affairs understood henceforth as atemporal divine states of being. Examples are [A] *God's being aware of all possibilities* and [B] *God's constructing possibilities ex nihilo* (each gerund nominalization is indexed with a capitalized letter in brackets for ease of reference). Even though they are atemporal—existing without relation to time—some divine states of being have ontological preconditions, which is to say that they are "grounded" in other divine states of being.

This brings us to the second preliminary issue, which is to define the expression, "*is grounded in*". A survey of current analytical metaphysics indicates that there is

⁴ This demonstration holds also for any version of DPC that takes God to be temporal, treating the word "before" to indicate a temporal precedence.

no single notion corresponding to the term *grounding* (Correia 2008; Koslicki 2012; Tahko and Lowe 2015), primarily due to the various types of things involved. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this paper, to say that x is *grounded in* y is to say that y is an *ontological precondition of* x .

The third preliminary issue to note is that such *grounding* is an *irreflexive*, *asymmetric*, and *transitive* relation (Correia and Schnieder 2012, pp. 10, 11; Tahko 2015, pp. 109–110). In other words, for any metaphysical states of affairs, x , y , and z ,

- x is not grounded in itself (irreflexive),
- if x is grounded in y , then y is not grounded in x (asymmetric), and
- if x is grounded in y , and y is grounded in z , then x is grounded in z (transitive)

where the transitivity property of the grounding relation holds for three states, x is grounded *immediately* in y , but *ultimately* in z . In some cases, there may be several mediate grounds. These three properties of the grounding relation are crucial in revealing the inconsistencies of DPC.

The incoherence of divine possibility constructivism

Divine possibility constructivism includes four theses. The primary core thesis is that

- (1) God constructed all possibilities ex nihilo.

The assertions made by Ross, Leftow, and McCann quoted above entail that God's constructing possibilities is an achievement, as opposed to some sort of divine accident, involuntary reflex, or determined emanation. God willingly created. Because of this,

- (2) God is aware of all possibilities.

Reiterating for the sake of emphasis, DPC theorists hold that God's having ideas for things—God's having the concepts he has regarding creation—is grounded only in and simultaneously with God's "creating" them (Ross 1986, p. 318), God's "thinking them up" or "inventing" them (Leftow 2012, pp. 272, 278), or God's "conceiving" them (McCann 2012, p. 201). God is aware of possibilities only because he creates them. In other words,

- (3) [A] *God's being aware of all possibilities* is grounded only in [B] *God's constructing possibilities ex nihilo*.

Notice that [B] *God's constructing possibilities ex nihilo* is the precondition of [A] *God's being aware of all possibilities*. It bears restating that, if it were otherwise, God's awareness must be grounded also or only in God's nature (e.g., "ways God's

essence can be imitated”) or in an independently existing realm of possibilities since these are assumed to be the only alternatives. Notice also that given standard views of truth and truthmakers, the divine state of being, [A] *God’s being aware of all possibilities*, “makes true” (i.e., is the truthmaker for) the proposition (2) God is aware of all possibilities. Likewise, [B] *God’s constructing possibilities ex nihilo* is the truthmaker for (1) God constructed all possibilities ex nihilo. Let every numbered proposition be understood as being made true by some atemporal divine state of being.

There is also a fourth thesis. Leftow writes, “God is by nature omniscient. So, He is naturally aware of Himself” (2012, p. 281). McCann asserts that “God fully comprehends... all that he is” (2012, p. 229). Thus, since omniscience entails perfect awareness, we have

(4) God is, by nature, perfectly aware of himself.

These four theses are foundational for the rest of this argument. From now on, each subsequent numbered proposition—i.e., (5) through (18) below—either will be a logical consequence of these, cannot be denied given the *concepts* entailed by the propositions, or will be required by DPC’s commitment to perfect being theology which will be described later (Leftow 2011, p. 108, 2012, pp. 3–12; McCann 2012).⁵

With the foundation of these four propositions in mind, one may now ask a question:

Q1. For God to construct possibilities ex nihilo (as proposition (1) asserts) must God be *able* to construct possibilities ex nihilo?

While the answer may seem obvious, for the purposes of this paper it is worth considering and clarifying the reasons for thinking so. One reason is that our concept of *achievement* entails a concept of *ability*, *intention*, and *action*. To assert in general that some person *S* achieves *X* and is not able to do so is patently incoherent. Accordingly, to say “God achieves the creation of kinds and possibilities but was not able” is nonsense. His being able of course is a precondition of his achieving.

Not surprisingly, then, does Leftow write: “I agree [that if] it is up to God to invent whatever secular states of affairs there are... He had the power to do so, that is, a power to conceive creatively per se” (2014b, p. 447). And in his book, *God and Necessity*, he writes that “[God’s] having his full natural endowment is a precondition of doing anything He does not do by nature [...]” (2012, p. 281).

The question posed earlier was this: “For God to construct possibilities ex nihilo must God be *able* to construct possibilities ex nihilo?” We have two separate reasons for an affirmative answer: the concept of *achievement* and Leftow’s own statements. Therefore, DPC includes the following general principle:

⁵ McCann writes, “This book is a study of the concept of God as creator and of the problems that attend that concept, [...] More importantly, it is an exercise in what is often called perfect being theology” (2012, p. 1).

God's being able ad extra (i.e., God's capacity to take actions whose effects are "outside" God) is an atemporal ontological precondition or ground of *God's achievements ad extra*.

In short,

- (5) [B] *God's constructing possibilities ex nihilo* is grounded only in [C] *God's being able to construct possibilities ex nihilo*.

The term "only" as it appears in (5) tacitly includes *God's intending to construct possibilities* as a precondition of [B] since God's constructing possibilities is achievement, which presupposes both ability and intention. Bearing this in mind, since grounding is transitive and since (3) [A] is grounded in [B], and (5) [B] is grounded in [C], it follows that [A] is grounded in [C]. In other words,

- (6) [A] *God's being aware of all possibilities* is grounded only in [C] *God's being able to construct possibilities ex nihilo*.

To reiterate, according to DPC, [A] *God's being aware of all possibilities* is grounded neither in God's nature nor in an independently existing realm of possibilities since these are assumed to be the only alternatives to [B] *God's constructing possibilities ex nihilo*.

All we have done so far is to identify two of the logical and conceptual consequences of the theses of DPC. One may now ask a second question:

Q2. Is God *aware of his ability ad extra*?

The answer is "Yes, for three reasons". First, perfect being theology requires it; second, proposition (4) *God is, by nature, fully aware of himself* entails it; and third, the concept of divine achievement contained in (1) entails it.

Let's discuss the first reason. Leftow, arguing convincingly for the legitimacy of what he calls "Scriptural Perfect Being Theology (S-PBT) [which, as he says] simply tries to show what authoritative statements about God's perfection entail", writes,

We begin from the claim, warranted by Scripture, that God is perfect in all respects. Suppose now that Scripture says that God is G, where G is or falls under one of these respects. Add that God can be F, and would be a greater G (or greater in G) were He F than were He not F, precisely because He would be F, not because of anything being F would bring with it. Then *prima facie*, God would not be perfect or maximal in the respect mentioned unless He were F. So we infer that, *prima facie*, God is F (2011, p. 108, 2012, pp. 3–12).

Using Leftow's schema and letting G be *able ad extra*, which is one of God's scripturally-given perfections, let F be *aware of one's ability ad extra*. Thus, by making the appropriate substitutions, we have it that *God can be aware of his ability ad extra* and would be greater in being *able ad extra* were He *aware of his*

ability ad extra than were He not *aware*, precisely because He would be *aware*, not because of anything being *aware* would bring with it. God would not be perfect or maximal in the respect G unless he were *aware of his ability ad extra*. If God were not also aware of his ability, God would be less perfect than creatures who are at least somewhat aware of *what* they can do in being aware of their abilities. Moreover, God would not be perfect or maximal in the respect G (i.e., being able *ad extra*) unless he were *perfectly* aware of his ability *ad extra*.

In addition to this reason, there is a second. Given (4), which is that *God is, by nature, fully aware of himself*, it follows that God is aware of his ability *ad extra*—completely and perfectly so. Thus, given (4) and assuming that God is timeless and strongly immutable, he could not “become” aware. On the other hand, being “by nature omniscient” and “fully comprehending himself”, even if God were metaphysically temporal in his self-existence and weakly immutable, he could not “become” aware. Either way, God is eternally, “omnisciently” aware of his own ability.

The third reason that DPC must hold that God is aware of his ability *ad extra* is that the concept of *divine achievement* entails it, and proposition (1) includes the concept of *divine achievement*. The *achievements* of an agent are *intentional*, brought about by *taking action*, and taking action requires an *ability* to do so. Achievements are not accidental, nor are they matters of some sort of involuntary “reflex” or anything of the like. Accidents are not brought about by “taking action”. Say, for instance, that Melba tripped and fell, breaking her arm. Even though this is something Melba “did” in one sense of the term, it would be a misuse of the term to say, “Melba achieved the breaking of her arm”. Melba had no *intention* of doing so. Melba’s tripping, falling, and breaking her arm did not require an ability. Similarly, an involuntary reflex, such as Ralph’s coughing in his sleep, is not an achievement; he may have the *ability* to cough, and coughing was an *action*, but it was not *intentional*. Therefore, by definition, everything God achieves *ad extra* is intentional, brought about by *taking action*, of which *having the ability* to do so is a precondition. Moreover, God does not fail—indeed, cannot fail to accomplish whatever he intends. God is aware of all of this, given (4) and perfect being theology. Taking these elements together, we reach our point: God’s not failing to achieve what he intends to achieve and being aware of what he intends requires *God’s being aware of his ability ad extra*. Otherwise, it would be more like trying and hoping.

Given the three reasons of perfect being theology, proposition (4) *God is, by nature, fully aware of himself*, and proposition (3) that God’s creation of all possibilities is an achievement, it follows that

(7) God is perfectly aware of God’s ability *ad extra*.

So far, we have listed DPC’s four fundamental theses, have explicated the concept of *achievement* which they express, and have deduced some of their entailments. Based on this, DPC as expressed in propositions (1) through (7) is *explicitly* consistent. Let us probe more deeply. Since (7) is the answer to Q2, one may now ask:

Q3. *What is God aware of in being aware of his ability ad extra?*

Of course, given (4) that *God is perfectly aware of himself*, God would be aware of *what* an ability is in general and *that* God possesses such a thing. Neither of these answers, however, addresses the point of the question. The point is whether there is any other *representational content* in his awareness of his ability.

There are at least three distinct reasons to hold that, in being perfectly aware of his ability *ad extra*, God is aware of *all* possibilities, which are representations *for* created things. First, perfect being theology applied to the concept of *God's being aware of God's ability* expressed in (7) entails it. The general concept of *being aware of one's ability* involves awareness of at least some *action* that can be performed that would result in *something* achieved or produced. That is, the very concept involves at least some *representation* for at least one achievement no matter how approximate it might be. Consider an analogy. If asked what he was aware of in being aware of his ability to play the violin, the classical violinist Itzhak Perlman would be aware of the types of actions involved and would list all the pieces he could remember and has memorized. If he were a perfect violinist, omniscient regarding himself, he would have in mind every specific action involved in playing the violin and every aspect of every piece all at once—and he would be justified in such an assessment, never overestimating his abilities. As it is, DPC's commitment to perfect-being theology requires that, in being perfectly aware of his ability *ad extra*, God—who is maximally superior to Itzhak Perlman—not only has *some* representation for at least one achievement in mind but has *all* of them in mind.

Second, perfect being theology applied to the synonymous concept of *God's being aware of God's capacity for achievement* entails it. This second reason, while similar to the first, helps to clarify the point. Given that “capacity for achievement” is a synonym for “ability”, it follows from (7) that God is *perfectly* aware of God's capacity for achievement. God possesses a concept of *God's achievement*. An *achievement* is some intentionally-realized state of affairs *X*. Applied to God, it entails *God's having X in mind before—and as—God acts*. The point is that understanding *perfect awareness of one's capacity for achievement* and filling it out in terms of perfect being theology means that *God's being aware of God's capacity for achievement* cannot be merely approximate, much less empty with respect to specific things. God is *perfectly* aware of all that he can achieve—all possibilities.

Third, *achievements ad extra* are intentional by definition, and intentions are pre-conditions of actions. Since God cannot misestimate his ability and he cannot fail to achieve whatever he intends, he is also aware of everything that could prevent God from accomplishing what he intends. God is aware of every factor and consequence, which before being actualized are possibilities. God is aware of anything that could inhibit or prevent success, including states of affairs that are not mutually possible or involve mutually-eradicating natures. But this is simply being aware of all possibilities. Thus, God's achieving anything presupposes his awareness of all possibilities, not merely those he chooses to actualize.⁶

⁶ The apparent randomness of the physical world is at least *epistemic*. We can't perfectly predict every event. Whether or not the randomness is also *ontological* is a separate issue. Nevertheless, even if physical randomness is ontological, all that is being asserted in deducing these three reasons from DPC for holding that *in being perfectly aware of his ability ad extra, God is aware of all possibilities* is simply that God is aware of all possibilities.

In sum, based on the concepts contained in and entailed by propositions (1) through (4), namely the concept of an *ability* applied to God, the concept of *God's being perfectly aware of his ability*, and the concept of *achievement* applied to God, the answer to *Question 3* is this:

- (8) In being perfectly aware of his ability *ad extra*, God is *perfectly* aware of all that he can achieve—all possibilities.

From (7) and (8) it follows that—regarding representational content—

- (9) [D] *God's being perfectly aware of his ability ad extra* is [A] *God's being aware of all possibilities*.

The referent of what God is aware of is the same object in both expressions [D] and [A] when considering the representational content, which is *all possibilities* (understood as representations *for* achievement, creation, or realization *ad extra*). Hence, in *Fregean* terms, while the *senses* of the expressions are different, the *referents* are identical. *Sally's being aware of The Morning Star* is identical to *Sally's being aware of The Evening Star*, because the object of awareness in both cases is the same planet, Venus. This holds regardless of whether she also *knows* the relevant astronomical facts. The content of her awareness is identical. Likewise, the divine states of being named by [D] and [A] in (9) are identical because the *content* of God's awareness in both cases is identical.

Since (8) is an identity statement, it follows that, if God were *not* aware of his ability *ad extra*, God would *not* be aware of *any* possibilities. But then, if God were not aware of any possibilities—given the concept of *God's achievement*, which includes both *God's intending* the realization of the thing achieved and *God's not failing in his intentions*—God would have no ideas for achievement in mind and would not be aware of potential incompatible or countervailing states of affairs or mutually-eradicating natures, and thus God would not achieve anything. God's achieving anything presupposes his awareness of all possibilities, not merely those he chooses to actualize. Thus, given (9) it follows that

- (10) If God were not aware of his ability *ad extra*, God would not achieve anything.

Conversely,

- (11) [E] *God's achieving anything* is grounded in [D] *God's being aware of his ability ad extra*.

Since [B] *God's constructing possibilities ex nihilo* is an instance of [E] *God's achieving anything*, [B] may be substituted for [E] in (11). Furthermore, given (9), that [D] *God's being perfectly aware of his ability ad extra* is [A] *God's being aware of all possibilities*,

[A] may be substituted for [D] in (11). Making these two substitutions gives us this proposition:

- (12) [B] *God's constructing possibilities ex nihilo* is grounded in [A] *God's being aware of all possibilities*.

Therefore, divine possibility constructivists are logically committed to both (3) and (12), which is this: (3) [A] *God's being aware of all possibilities* is grounded only in [B] *God's constructing possibilities ex nihilo* and (12) [B] *God's constructing possibilities ex nihilo* is grounded in [A] *God's being aware of all possibilities*. In short, we have this:

- (13) [A] is grounded in [B], and [B] is grounded in [A].

However, (13) is false because ontological grounding is *asymmetric*. In other words, by the asymmetric property of the grounding relation, [A] and [B] cannot be grounded in each other. Thus, this is one reason why divine possibility constructivism is incoherent.

DPC's second incoherence

Divine Possibility Constructivism is incoherent for a second reason. Since (9) [D] *God's being perfectly aware of his ability ad extra* is [A] *God's being aware of all possibilities* is an identity claim, [D] may be substituted for [A] in (3) [A] *God's being aware of all possibilities* is grounded only in [B] *God's constructing possibilities ex nihilo*, giving us:

- (14) [D] *God's being aware of his ability* is grounded in [B] *God's constructing possibilities ex nihilo*.

Given (5) [B] *God's constructing possibilities ex nihilo* is grounded only in [C] *God's being able to construct possibilities ex nihilo*, it follows from (14), by the transitivity of the grounding relation, that

- (15) [D] *God's being aware of his ability* is grounded in [C] *God's being able to construct possibilities ex nihilo*.

God's being able ad extra is the object of God's awareness in this case.

Now consider this: given that [D] *God's being perfectly aware of his ability ad extra* is [A] *God's being aware of all possibilities*, if God were *not* aware of his ability *ad extra*, God would not be aware of *any* possibilities; God would not have any representations *for* things. Since the concept of *God's achievement* requires *God's intending that some X obtains*, if God did not have any representations *for* things, God would not be able to *achieve* anything. God would lack a necessary condition, which is an idea *for* the thing that is to be created. This means that if God were not

able to achieve *anything*, then *God would not be able to construct possibilities ex nihilo*. Putting this all together, if God were not aware of his ability *ad extra* (i.e., the denial of [D]), God would not be able to construct possibilities *ex nihilo* (i.e., the denial of [C]). Thus,

- (16) [C] *God's being able to construct possibilities ex nihilo* is grounded in [D] *God's being perfectly aware of his ability ad extra*.

From (15) and (16), by the transitivity of the grounding relation, it must be that

- (17) [D] *God's being aware of his ability ad extra* is grounded in [D] *God's being aware of his ability ad extra*.

However, this is impossible because ontological grounding is *irreflexive*. [D] cannot be grounded in itself. Because proposition (17) violates this truth, DPC is incoherent in a second respect.

DPC's third incoherence

Divine possibility constructivism is incoherent on a third count. As was noted, one of its core theses is expressed in (3) [A] *God's being aware of all possibilities* is grounded *only* in [B] *God's constructing possibilities ex nihilo*. Proposition (3) reflects Leftow's rejection of "deity theories" (which ground possibilities in God's nature) and Ross's argument against the idea that "God's prismatic self-knowledge 'refracts' a universal domain (of divine ideas)". DPC theorists reject *God's being aware of all possibilities* as being grounded in God's nature or as arising from God's *knowledge* of himself. In short, (3) entails and reflects an implicit denial in DPC:

- (18) [A] *God's being aware of all possibilities* is not identical to [D] *God's being aware of his ability ad extra*.

However, (18) contradicts (9) [D] *God's being aware of his ability ad extra* is [A] *God's being aware of all possibilities*, which is a logical consequence of (1) through (8). We have demonstrated that divine possibility constructivism is incoherent in at least three respects.

Objection

The following objection might be raised. One may deny (12), which is that [B] *God's constructing possibilities ex nihilo* is grounded in [A] *God's being aware of all possibilities*, holding instead that creation is "completely spontaneous" as McCann asserts. In other words, one may deny (12) by reasserting (5) which is [B] *God's constructing possibilities ex nihilo* is grounded only in [C] *God's being able to construct possibilities ex nihilo*.

Rejoinder

First, (12) is a logical consequence of (1) through (5) and the concepts they entail. The objection itself entails an incoherence. Second, it follows from the core theses of DPC that (7) *God is perfectly aware of God's ability ad extra*. To reiterate what was established earlier, (7) holds whether God is temporal or atemporal and holds in the sense of the order of conditions. Hence, it is absurd to hold (7) and to assert that *God's constructing his ideas is completely spontaneous*, which means that God has nothing in mind before constructing. It is incoherent in general to say that “*S knows that he can produce something (call it A), but has no idea of what A is or of what actions are involved in producing A, what producing is, and what A is*”.

One might counter by referring to the improvisational jazz musician. That analogy does not work either, because the claim at stake means that the musician can have absolutely nothing in mind. The jazz musician cannot really *intend* any musical result because what occurs must be—to quote McCann—“completely spontaneous”. Applying the analogy, it is incoherent to claim that “*God is, by nature, perfectly aware of himself, God is perfectly aware of his ability ad extra—that he has a capacity for achievement and what a capacity for achievement is in general—but has no idea of what could be achieved*”. This is contrary to perfect being theology.

McCann's position is inconsistent in a separate respect because he claims in one place that creation is “completely spontaneous” and in another place that God had a reason to create (2012, pp. 201, 173). Denying the inconsistency by asserting that the reason itself was simultaneous with the act of creation is contrary to the very concept of *having a reason to act*.

Objection

A second objection might be raised against these results. The charges against DPC depend on (8) *In being perfectly aware of his ability ad extra, God is perfectly aware of all that he can achieve—all possibilities*, which entails the identity claim (9) [D] *God's being perfectly aware of his ability ad extra is [A] God's being aware of all possibilities*. What the charges overlook is that while both (8) and (9) are consistent with the core theses of DPC, they are so because (3) [A] *God's being aware of all possibilities* is grounded only in [B] *God's constructing possibilities ex nihilo*. The issue is *when* in the order of preconditions God is aware of his ability. DPC holds that God's awareness of both his ability and of all possibilities is grounded only in God's constructing possibilities. In other words (8) holds on different grounds than those presented in the argument. As Leftow himself writes,

in what I will call the order of preconditions, [God] is aware of Himself before He thinks up creatures. When He is aware of only himself, God has not yet thought up other states of knowledge that He Himself has. Thinking about these would constitute turning away from Himself, so to speak (2012, p. 281).

In other words, while God fully understands his productive power and what it is a power to produce, God understands these only on the precondition of constructing possibilities.

Rejoinder

The objection asserts that, in the order of preconditions, God “became” aware of his ability “when” he created possibilities. Holding that God did not understand his productive power at all—was oblivious to it—until *after* he exercised it to create is inconsistent with all four of the arguments supporting (8) *In being perfectly aware of his ability ad extra, God is perfectly aware of all that he can achieve—all possibilities*. Each of these arguments are entailed by the concepts constituting the core propositions of DPC. Thus, none of these can be denied without abandoning some core thesis of DPC.

Second, the idea that God’s perfect awareness of his ability *ad extra* is grounded in God’s constructing possibilities is inconsistent with (3) [A] *God’s being aware of all possibilities* is grounded only in [B] *God’s constructing possibilities ex nihilo*, (4), and (7). Given (4) *God is, by nature, perfectly aware of himself*, and (7) *God is perfectly aware of God’s ability ad extra* and, since God is, by nature, eternal, God must be *eternally* perfectly aware of his ability. But this eternal perfect awareness, according to the objection, entails that God’s eternal awareness is in virtue of creating. Therefore, creation must be temporally co-extensive with God’s eternity, contrary to (3), which entails that creation is an achievement. It does not matter whether God is atemporal or whether God is from everlasting to everlasting (sempiternally or temporally). Since creation is not eternal and is an achievement, the conjunction of (4) and (7) requires (in the order of preconditions) God’s being perfectly aware of his ability *ad extra* “before” creating. Creation’s being an achievement also entails that the representational content of *God’s being perfectly aware of his ability ad extra* must be eternally identical to the representational content of *God’s being perfectly aware of all possibilities*, which is proposition (9).

Given the reasons above and the rejoinders discussed, divine possibility constructivism is incoherent.

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