

# “God’s Acting upon the World” – A Meta-metaphysical Perspective

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**Abstract:** There may be good theological reasons for adopting one or the other of the two “God-world”-relations: “God’s acting upon the world” vs. “God’s not acting upon the world”, from a philosophical/metaphysical point of view, these options pose a “decision-problem”. The article is in search for *metaphysical* criteria that support any decision on behalf of “God’s acting vs. His not acting upon the world”. In this, it is meta-metaphysical in character.

**Keywords:** classical theism, alternative theisms, acting, coherence, meta-metaphysics

“How is it possible that God acts upon the world?” For Christians that are faithful to the biblical narratives, to God’s revelation, to their religious practices and traditions, the question presumably sounds pointless.<sup>1</sup> As is well-known, the question has two different, inconsistent and extreme answers: One answer is: He cannot act. The other answer is: What else could He do? Both answers are not better than the embedding theoretical, better: metaphysical, frameworks. Inconsistent as the answers are, so are the embedding frameworks and by this their different notions of God: roughly, His being *transcendent* vs. His being *immanent*. This has as consequence that the answers are rooted in fundamentally different *relations* of God and “world”. Theories that conceive of God as being *transcendent* are called *classical theisms* here. *Anselm of Canterbury’s Monologion* is taken as a point of reference. Theories that regard God as being *immanent* are called *alternative theisms* here. As a proto-type for them, A. N. Whitehead’s *Process and Reality* is taken.

May be that there are good theological reasons for adopting one or the other of the two “God-world”-relations, it is not a philosophy’s or metaphysic’s task to decide upon. Philosophy, however, can address the aforementioned impasse: “God’s acting upon the world” vs. “God’s not acting upon the world”, from a meta-theoretical or methodological perspective. The meta-metaphysical or methodological task concerning the impasse may be called, for better or worse, “metaphysical decision-problem” (henceforth, “decision-problem”). There is no decision without *criteria* – if

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1 When using the words “God”, “theology”, “religious practice” and so forth in this article, it is always the Christian tradition that is referred to.

it should be “rational”. Moreover, applying the criteria to the different answers must make a difference. And here, the problem shows up: Are their *metaphysical* criteria that support any decision on behalf of “God’s acting vs. His not acting upon the world”? Trying an answer to this question is the main task of the present article. So, the article is neither about screening the various theories of “God’s acting upon the world” taking argued side with one or another answer, nor about proposing a resolution of its own.<sup>2</sup> The article can be regarded as a specific exercise in what is today called meta-metaphysics.<sup>3</sup>

In metaphysical respects, the phrase: “God’s acting upon the world?” is a borderline-case: It contains three notions – God, world, acting/action -, each of which indicates a philosophical problem of its own. The border is marked by the word(s) *acting/action*. In section I a minimalist notion of acting/action is formulated and by this the meta-theoretical role of “world” has to be considered.

Since the impasse shows up as a conflict between different theoretical frameworks, the *general architectural* sources of the impasse must be scrutinized. To fix ideas, two frameworks are taken as platforms – *Anselm’s* and *Whitehead’s*. Both are elaborate and variegated theological and metaphysical worlds. Due to restrictions of space, the presentation will be rather tight. This is the task of section II.

The problem of *criteria* is taken up in section III. Of course, theology is a discipline of its own; it is not drowned in metaphysics. The decision-problem here is seen as metaphysical/philosophical decision-problem and not a decision-problem for theology. Conceived of as a theological decision-problem, the criteria are different. So, the criteria to be formulated are meta-metaphysical in character and not special for certain applications of metaphysical theories; one may call them – for better or worse – formal criteria.

Finally, section IV, formulates the consequence of the preceding reflections: The issue of God’s acting vs. God’s not acting upon the world is *metaphysically* undecidable.

## I. Acting and World

The word “acting” in the phrase “God’s acting upon the world” indicates the aforementioned borderline character of the problem. The word “acting” (and cognates) tends to be a trouble-maker in metaphysical contexts.<sup>4</sup> Irrespective of that, it is a core-notion of the issue at hand. Therefore, the understanding of the word must be clarified for the present purpose in a way that is as minimalistic and neutral as possible.

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2 A great part of the *European Journal of Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 7, (4), 2015 is devoted to this topic.

3 The relation of Philosophy and Theology is dealt in depth in Puntel (2010: 279), specifically in 285-290.

4 The word “upon” is also a trouble-maker– but this topic is not the focus the present article.

### I. (i) Acting – Local, Direct and Creative

Intuitively, *human beings* “act in the world”. They act, if they intervene intentionally, with control and reflection in the world at a specific time and at a specific place. That is, they *bring about* changes in the world - *at a specific time and at a specific place*. This feature of acting may be called *locality* and an action of this kind a *local action*. The consequences of such an action are – at least in principle – public and often physical. Moreover, if a human being acts in this sense, it *brings about* a state of affairs (at a specific time and at a specific place) of the world that would not have been obtained or happened without that action. That means, in acting a human being is somehow creative for the state of affairs that it brings about – it is not only a medium of sorts for change or for “law-like” propagation. Of course, acting in this sense is restricted but not determined by the “physical laws”. An action in this sense can be called *direct action*. This is a characterization of a very *strong* version of *agent-causation*.<sup>5</sup>

In acting, humans are usually *aware* of acting *now*. An act, being intentional and controlled, presupposes that the acting human being is *responsive* to the world he is up to change. A human action temporarily separates the states (or phases) of the world in those obtaining before the action and those that come after the action as well as temporal internal states (phases) of human beings.

Analogously, God is acting upon the world, if He *brings about* a state of affairs within the world - at a specific time and at a specific place - that would have *not* obtained *without* His action and that is *not* mediated by otherwise worldly circumstances, including human actions. It is *creative, local and direct* and He is *responsive* to the world. Note that the word “*responsive*” (and cognates) is understood in a very minimalistic and sparse fashion. In that sense, also a machine can be *responsive*: It can control another machine and stop it, if it registers a malfunctioning of it. In stopping the controlled machine, the controlling machine can stop also. But of course, there can be more about responsiveness. But for the present purpose, a minimal reading of “*responsive*” is sufficient.

In passing by, it is to be noticed that this *strong agent-causal* understanding God’s acting in the world is not God’s creation (*ex nihilo*) of the world. That is a topic of genuine importance. Just to indicate the difference: *creation ex nihilo* does *not* presuppose a world – the world is up to be created. “God’s acting in the world” presupposes a (*created*) world. A world that has had a history *before* God’s creative, local and direct takes place. Also *conservatio*, God’s conservation of the world (and associated with this, God as *actus purus*) cannot be understood in the sense relevant here. *Conservation* may be an effect of God’s being, but it is of a *general* and *not* of a *local* nature. In the same vein, the *concursus dei* is *not* an action in the relevant sense, since it is a mediated and not a direct acting of God’s.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> A possibility to formulate coherently strong agent-causation, can be found in Schneider (2009: 134) .

<sup>6</sup> *Conservatio* as well as *concursus dei* can be regarded as theoretical notions (within the framework of *classical theisms*), weakening a strong reading of “acting” to keep the tension between God’s great-

A metaphysical theory that articulates *agency as creative, local and direct* - on behalf of mundane entities or of God - has to respect some minimalistic assumptions concerning its articulation of the "world". These are: The notion of world must allow either for *agency as a creative, local and direct intervention* in the temporal course of the world.<sup>7</sup>

### I. (ii) In Need of Ontology

Acting as intervening locally and direct in the course of the "world" is inherently bound to ontology. So, any metaphysical theory that endorses that its "God acts upon the world" must include or presuppose a rather elaborate ontology – for its sub-theory of "world", if not for its God – to grant and to show that its theoretical interpretation of the phrase "God's acting upon the world" is coherent and not of the kind of a squared circle.<sup>8</sup> As a consequence, only metaphysical theories that endorse a responsive God, who acts locally, directly and creative upon the world, and formulate or presuppose an ontology, are at stake here. Metaphysical theories, as *classical theisms*, that regard their God as being *transcendent* and by this as not acting locally and directly upon the world can be more liberal about the ontologies of their metaphysical frameworks. *Classical theisms*, including *Anselm's* approach that is taken as point of reference here, tend to endorse a *substance-ontology*.

Superfluous to mention that *Whitehead's* theory comes with a very elaborate ontology – an ontology which includes changing entities *and* endorses a God who changes responsively in or with the world and with the changing entities. As it

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making attributes and the biblical testimony of His engagement with His creation, His responsiveness, His great doings, under control.

<sup>7</sup> Contemporary analytic philosophy would count any intervention in the law-full propagation of the world by non-physical agents as wrongheaded. Reading the word "world" as including whatever physics is talking and theorizing about, it faces a problem – if not *the* problem for *analytic theology* in this context: the assumption of the *causal closure of the physical world*. If it is held to be a non-revisable corollary of sorts of the physical sciences, there is no way for God to intervene from "the outside into the physical domain", since whatever he is to bring about in "the world" is generally (also) physical. Moreover, the assumption of the *causal closure of the physical* also prevents any *agency as creative, local and direct*. That means, adopting this principle is adopting a "world" that is simply not made for being acted-upon by humans and by God. The assumption of *the causal closure* itself is problematic and an intricate topic that cannot be argued here.

<sup>8</sup> Ontologies may be characterized by Campbell's *Axiom of Uniformity*: "Fundamental to the ontological impulse is what we might call the *Axiom of Uniformity*, the conviction that someone basic pattern pervades the universe; the proper ontological assay of any one region or sub-part of the whole will mirror the assay elsewhere. There are pervasive basic constituents and pervasive basic structures in which they play always the same roles. At the ultimate level, the universe has a common structure throughout. The pervasive elements, the constantly recurring items in ontological assays, are the categories." (Campbell 1990: 1). An ontology is a theory that is up to make the *pervasive basic constituents* or *structures* "in which they play always the same roles" as well as their interplay explicit. It should be kept in mind: An ontology is not necessarily only a theory about "the world".

seems, it is the strongest and most elaborate theory/ontology available. This is the reason to take it as a proto-type for further investigation.

## II. Two Theoretical Families of Frameworks

So far, nearly nothing has been said about “God” or “the concept of God”. That may seem astonishing, not least because *agency* does not take place without an agent. But here, in the first place, it is a theory’s relation of God and “world” – *transcendence* vs. *immanence* – at stake, not primarily a concept of God. Nevertheless, a concept of God may induce a specific “God-world”-relation, but it may also be the other way round. Theories that endorse *transcendence* as their “God-world”-relation, and with this a God, who is not responsive – whatever they may say else about Him, are called *classical theisms* here. For historical investigations, this classification is clearly too coarse-grained. But for the reflections to follow, it is adequate – provided “*transcendence*” is clarified.

Things change for theories that regard God as acting upon the world – i.e.: as an *agent* -, as *bringing about* a state of affairs (states of affairs) within the world - at a specific time and at a specific place - that would have *not* obtained *without* His action and that is *not* mediated by otherwise worldly circumstances, then their God has, at least, temporal aspects (before acting – after acting). By acting, He is not only correlated to the world – “performing” smoothly with the “world”. To preserve the specific relation that is indicated by acting locally, directly and creatively upon the world, God must be regarded as being *responsive* to the world, i.e.: *any strict asymmetry* between God and the “world” must be avoided. The avoidance of strict asymmetry and with this of God’s being *responsive* to the world can be called *immanence*. Theisms that conceive of their God as *immanent* (and responsive) are called *alternative theisms* here.

So, the difference between God as *transcendent* and God as being *immanent*, is basically whether a theory exploits any of its God-world-relations as being strictly asymmetric or not. In this abstract manner, the difference on behalf of God is only whether He is responsive to the world or not. *Classical* and *alternative theisms* are the two families of theisms at stake here.

### II. (i) Classical Theisms

*Classical Theisms’* God is transcendent. That is, there is one and only one specific relation from God to the world: His *creatio ex nihilo* of the “world”. Generally, *classical theisms’* God – speaking in a coarse grained manner – is characterized as almighty, all-good, omniscient, immutable – He has all the *great-making attributes*, all perfections, He is the *ens perfectissimum*. *Classical theisms’* God is an “*omniGod*”. By this, He is impassible and a-temporal and so on. Generally, He is *one* in the strongest sense: He has no internal differentiation, no “parts” of any sort – this is His *simplicity*.

By this, He is a-temporal, eternal and transcendent. His transcendence is a *consequence* of His simplicity. But that must not be the case, as will be seen later.

If any of His great-making attributes should indicate a “God-world”- relation – as, e.g. omniscience –, this relation is not specific for the world and is completely *a-symmetric*, i.e.: If His creatures have any relation to Him, this relation too is completely a-symmetric and has *no impact of any sort* on Him. Any symmetric relations are either internal to God or internal to the world. Conceiving the “God-world”-relation that way – i.e.: completely asymmetric –, will be called *transcendent/transcendence* in what follows.

*Anselm of Canterbury's* great systematic theological (and philosophical) work – the *Monologion* – reflects the architecture hinted at above and is both: one of the most radical, elaborate and stringent expositions of *classical theism* and an impressive combination of thematic complexity, theoretical simplicity (in the best sense of the word) and argumentative and logical rigor. It drives God's *aseity* and *simplicity* to its extreme. Explaining and defending God's *aseity* is the source of the thematic complexity whereas the work's theoretical simplicity is rooted in God's simplicity. This is the reason, why it is taken here as a proto-type for *classical theisms*.

Some features of the over-all architecture of *Anselm's* concept of God and its implications that are relevant for the present purpose should be addressed: Superfluous to mention, the basic framework of *Anselm's* theory has neo-platonic and Augustinian roots as well as an adoption of Aristotelian substance-ontology – at least for mundane purposes. Concerning this ontology, especially the category of substance, however, *Anselm* sees that his God cannot be captured by this framework (“*Quod non contineatur in communi tractatu substantiarum, et tamen sit substantia et individuus spiritus*” (*Anselm, Monologion*: ch. 27)). But he uses this expression, for his God is an individual with an essence. Due to being supreme, He is “spirit”.

At the beginning in chapter 1 – 4 of the *Monologion* the platonic framework – dwelling on *participation* - is used to prove that there is one and only one supreme good (*summum bonum*), one and only one *summum magnum* (ch. 1, 2), one and only one *esse per se ipsum* (ch. 3) and one and only one “highest nature” (*Es igitur ex necessitate aliqua natura, quae sic est alicui vel aliquibus superior, et null sit cui ordinetur inferior*, ch. 4) By way of proving existence and uniqueness, *Anselm* purports to prove also that these maxima are *one* – the highest being.<sup>9</sup> This, however, is not enough to show the *simplicity* of this highest being. This is taken up in the chs. 16 and 17. The reflections in ch. 16 may be interpreted as saying that the highest goods that are to be said of the *summa natura* are not (most perfect or “positive”) attributes (in modern terms: predicates) to be attached to it. The *summa natura* is identical to all these *perfections* – it is the justice, or: ... the *summa sapientia, summa veritas, sum incorruptibilitas, summa immutabilitas, ..., summa aeternitas, ... summe ens, summe vivens, et alia similiter*. In ch. 17 *Anselm* identifies these *summa*. In other words: the *summa*

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<sup>9</sup> Here, his inferences are problematic, to say the least. But the problems are healed in *Proslogion*, ch. 5 with the help of *Proslogion*, ch. 2. To enter into this problem and its solution is not the present concern.

*natura* cannot be a “bundle” of these “perfections”, this would make it a compound thing and with this, everything that must be said about compound things – as being compound – must be said about it: “... haec omnia quae omni composito insunt, in illam incidere necesse est.” For *Anselm*, this is absurd (*nefas falsitas*). Simplicity plays an important role to infer that this *summa natura* is a-temporal and neither at nor in places. It is not in space and time, it is “with” space and time (ch. 22), it cannot be affected by accidents (but it can be in relation to something else, provided that this relatedness does not induce any change in God), (ch. 25). That is *transcendence* at its best – inferred from simplicity.

A theoretical framework that conceives of God in that way, faces a bulk of problems, if this notion should be, one way or another, co-referential with the biblical notion of God. Of course, also the biblical God and the God of religious practices is everlasting, omniscient and all-mighty, He is *the* supreme being, beyond human understanding. But, the biblical God is also responsive to the world, to human fate, to good and bad actions of humans, to human prayers and so on. These features, not least His responsiveness, make Him - *prima facie* - mutable, make Him revising his creation. By human freedom, His knowledge seems somehow reduced, He learns, and so on. An impressive example for the consequences *Anselm*’s notion of God has for the biblical God or the God of religious practices is the following passage:

“*Quomodo ergo es et non es misericors, Domine, nisi quia es misericors secundum nos, et non secundum te? Es quippe secundum nostrum sensum, et non es secundum tuum. Etenim cum respicis nos miseros, nos sentimus misericordis effectum, tu non sentis affectum.*” (*Anselm Anselm, Proslogion: chap. 8*).

*Classical theisms* have their problems to apply their concept of God to the biblical and religious pre-theoretic, non-theoretic, notion of God, to the religious beliefs and practices of Christian tradition. Is it not the case that God responds to human actions, especially free human actions? Is His responding to prayers not a sign of His Goodness? His responding, however, contradicts His *impassibility*. *Classical theisms* are in tension with “human freedom” and with “the evil in the world”. Without a severe reinterpretation, these data are hardly to be harmonized with *classical theisms*’ notion of God.<sup>10</sup> The ways to resolve these tensions are numerous in the tradition of *classical theism*, theodicies, interpreting miracles and so on are points in case.<sup>11</sup> Finally, for *classical theisms*, the answer to the question “How is it possible that God acts upon the world?” simply is: It is not possible at all. And so, it is rather natural, that *Anselm*

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10 E.g.: In his book *Time and Eternity* (1991), Brian Leftow tries to resolve - by revision of the notion of time - the tensions that ensue by “God’s eternity”.

11 Similarly, in making sense of “human freedom”, God’s omniscience or God’s knowledge of future contingents is plagued with tensions that are rooted in *classical theisms*’ notion of God. For a possible resolution, see Brüntrup, G. and Schneider, R. (2016).

does not address God's agency as direct and local in his *Monologion*. Agency with respect to Good is *creatio ex nihilo* (chs. 6 - 15).

## II. (ii) Whitehead's Ontology an Elaborate Example

*Classical theisms'* God is hardly to be conceived of as being worth of worship, praise or obedience, so it is said. Charles Hartshorne – a, if not the, founder of process-theology - writes in answering *Anselm's* aforementioned proposal to reconcile God's impassibility with His *miseriordia*: *Anselm* can give us: "everything except the right to believe that there is one who, [...], rejoices in all our joys and sorrows in all our sorrows" (Hartshorn 1948: S. 54d)<sup>12</sup>. This is clearly and emphatically against God's *impassibility* and with this against an important feature of the *classical theisms'* God. *Impassibility*, so the implicit message of Hartshorn's, disparages religious beliefs and practices – it turns them senseless. Consequently, if impassibility of the aforementioned sort should be avoided, then, since they are rooted in *classical theisms'* concept of God, a different concept of God enters the agenda. And there are different alternative concepts of God.<sup>13</sup>

Since "God's acting upon the world" as local and direct is theoretically at stake, alternatives are in need of both: a "God-world"-relation that avoids strict asymmetry and an ontology that is adequate for being acted upon and coherent with God's responsiveness. In short, it must make explicit God's *immanence*. *Immanence*, in a very *abstract* manner, means here that there are symmetric "God-world"-relations, coming in general with an index for "time" and indicate "God influences the world at  $t$  and the world (or some of its inhabitants) influences God at  $t$  (or  $\partial t$ )".

A framework different from *classical theisms'* is needed. Fortunately, there is one: *Whitehead's philosophy of organism* as it is most famously formulated in *Process and Reality*. It can serve as the theoretical reference-frame for different theisms that - different as the motives may be - conceive of their God as being responsive to "the world", being *immanent*. Variants of *open theisms* or *process-theisms* are points in case. As a metaphysical framework, *Whitehead's philosophy of organisms*, has something to offer: There is an elaborate, albeit abstract, notion of God in *Process and Reality*. This notion is embedded in an elaborate and coherent metaphysical framework. It comes with a refined ontology.

*Whitehead's* intention was *not* to formulate a "theory of God" or a metaphysical theory in order to resolve theoretical problems concerning theology. According to L. S. Ford, *Whitehead* himself has been astonished that during the progress of his *philosophy of organism*, he was driven to a "(sub)-theory" of God.<sup>14</sup> *Whitehead's* philosophy of organism comes with – or is? - a general *ontology*. Concerning the concept of *Whitehead's* God, ontology is in the driver's seat. The most important

12 Hartshorne (1948). The citation alludes to the above mentioned passage of the *Proslogion*.

13 A good overview and classification of those concepts can be found in Schärfl (2016: 6).

14 See Ford (1977: 27).



players of this ontology are *actual entities* and *eternal objects*.<sup>15</sup> Actual entities enjoy a remarkable amount of autonomy: they determine themselves “how to become” and with that, by mutual cooperation, they determine how “the world” becomes. The self-determination depends on the actual entity’s *prehension* of *eternal entities* (that are, roughly, ideal possibilities of how to become). Due to this prehension they form (or choose) their *initial aims*. An actual entity’s initial aim must fit its past, its *physical pole*. The actual entities themselves determine the aim of their becoming and it is their activity to reach their aim. By this, they co-create their world.

In order that the world – a world of a multitude of actual entities, each of which being rather autonomous - evolves orderly *as a whole*, the actual entities’ *physical poles* (making up the past of evolving world) and initial aims (their possibilities how to become) must mutually fit. Here, imbedded in this *ontology*, *Whitehead’s* God has a twofold role: as, to use *Whitehead’s* technical terms, *primordial nature of God* and as *consequent nature of God*.<sup>16</sup> The interplay of these two *functions* grant that *Whitehead’s* world or universe evolves in an ordered way: by the *consequent nature*, the whole past is recorded, by the *primordial nature*, the *eternal entities* are recorded. By God, as the co-functioning of the *primordial* and the *consequent nature* of God, the eternal entities that are adequate for co-framing a future in continuity to the past are presented to the actual entities. By choosing among *them*, the actual entities not only choose their individual futures – in continuity with their individual pasts -, their individual choices lead also to an ordered evolution of the whole. *Whitehead’s* God is the “moderator” of the individual actual entities’ choices and co-creator of the world’s evolution. By this, He grants the orderly – if not law-like – evolution of the world. He presents to the actual entities the appropriate eternal entities and with this’ appropriate (candidates for) the initial aims to realize.

Viewed from a structural and *architectonic* perspective, *Whitehead’s* ontology has everything, a world, for being *acted upon locally and directly* by a God must have: Robust individuals that change and, moreover, they are the *individual* sources of their changes. These changes, local events, take place within an overall framework and render the whole somehow “temporal”. Actual entities are spontaneous and autonomous with respect to their evolution. The “world” can harbor these acts of spontaneity and autonomy. These are minimal conditions which for an ontology to allow for local and direct acting from within. How it explains these minimal conditions, how it makes them coherent, may vary from theory to theory. *Whitehead’s* ontology is a rather strong and elaborate theory that meets these requirements. Due

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15 The ontological interplay of *Whitehead’s* *actual entities* or *actual occasions* is described by Griffin 2002 [1998], p. 138 as follows: “Whitehead portrayed each enduring individual from a human mind to an electron, as a rapidly repeating series of ‘occasions of experience’, each of which begins as an open window (the actual entity, CS), into which rush influences from the past world. Once this efficient causation has constituted the occasion’s ‘physical pole’, the occasion makes its own self-determined response, which is its ‘mental pole’. When the occasion’s self-determination is completed, it becomes an object for subsequent occasions, exerting efficient causation on them” (2002: 138).

16 Whitehead (1978: 46).

to its strength, it is taken as the ontological, *mundane*, platform for theisms that conceive of their God as responsive to the “world”.

*Whitehead's* God is an *actual entity* among others.<sup>17</sup> But He is set apart from other actual entities by the special role He plays with respect to the whole.<sup>18</sup>

Concerning “God’s acting upon the world”, *Whitehead's* theory may also serve as a platform. By his consequent nature He is responsive to the world but this responsiveness ensues in presenting the (candidates for) initial aims to the other actual entities. In this, to coin a slogan, He is acting by attracting. This way of acting is *local and direct*.<sup>19</sup> By functioning as initial aims, the eternal objects “forming” the initial aim must be given relevance and with this an “existent character”. This is achieved by God’s “conceptually realizing” them, by His primordial nature: “It is God’s conceptual realization performing an efficacious rôle in multiple unifications of the universe, [...]”<sup>20</sup> This way of acting is also *local and direct*. *Whitehead's* God acts upon the world in two different ways. Within this theoretical framework, the answer to the question “How is it possible that God acts upon the world?” simply is: What else could he do?

### III. How to Decide? – A Metaphysical Perspective

Any decision on behalf of God’s acting vs. not acting upon the world is at once a decision on behalf of the presupposed “God-world”-relation, *transcendent* vs. *immanent*. By this, it is also a decision between different metaphysical, theoretical frameworks - coming with different ontologies and with different concepts of God. How to decide the issue? On what basis – or “criteria” - should one decide? Before this question is taken up, some methodological preliminaries to sharpen the issue should be considered.

#### III. (i) Deciding and Criteria

Deciding, as a theoretical procedure, is based on *criteria*. A warning is appropriate: “Criteria” is not to be understood in a narrowly empirical sense, as e.g. observations and measurement with respect to empirical theories. This would neither fit metaphysical theories nor theological theories. Generally, *criteria* are encoded within the respective methodologies. This is a topic of its own and may be left to one side here. Criteria for deciding, however, must make a difference if they are applied to the “decision-problem”. There are two different sorts of criteria, internal and external ones. The internal criteria do not make a difference with respect to the decision-

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<sup>17</sup> “The actual world must always mean the community of all actual entities, including the primordial actual entity called ‘God’ and the temporal actual entities.” Whitehead (1978: 65).

<sup>18</sup> Griffin (2002: 136).

<sup>19</sup> Here some similarities with Bishop’s and Perszyk’s euteleological concept of God. (Bishop and Perszyk 2016: 119). But their acting by attracting is not local. For interpretation, cf. Löffler (2014).

<sup>20</sup> Whitehead (1978: 349).

problem, the external criteria do, since they give an answer, how the theories fare with *data*. In the present context, there are two kinds of data: data relevant for theology, as are biblical roots, religious practices, etc. and non-theological data. Since the decision-problem here is seen from a metaphysical point of view, non-theological data will be relevant. The passages to come will be more explicit about this.

### III. (ii) Coherence – An Internal Criterion

An important criterion for metaphysical theories is *coherence*. It is *the* internal criterion. Coherence has three important aspects which cannot be separated from each other: a methodological<sup>21</sup> one – guiding the process of theorizing -, an architectural one and a semantic one. The architectural and semantic reading is at stake here. It is taken from *Whitehead*: “ ‘Coherence’, as here employed, means that the fundamental ideas, in terms of which the scheme is developed, presuppose each other so that in isolation they are meaningless.”<sup>22</sup> It should be read in context with his characterization metaphysics of his “*speculative philosophy*”:

“Speculative Philosophy is the endeavour to frame a coherent, logical, necessary system of general ideas in terms of which every element of our experience can be interpreted. By this notion of ‘interpretation’ I mean that everything of which we are conscious, as enjoyed, perceived, willed, or thought, shall have the character of a particular instance of the general scheme.” (Whitehead 1978: 3).

From an architectural point of view, *coherence* points to the assumption that the “universe of discourse” is one - that it has no gaps. This has important semantic consequences: Each “proposition”, each “phrase”, each “notion” of a metaphysical theory gets its semantic value only within the metaphysical theory whose member it is, irrespective of the use of the words or phrases with respect to the (natural) language that serves for formulating theory, e.g. English; the same words may have – and generally have if they are important - different semantic values with respect to different theories. Leaning on Puntel’s characterization of the „context-principle“, the semantic consequences of<sup>23</sup> *coherence* can be expressed as follows: “Only within the *framework* of a theory, ‘propositions’, ‘phrases’, ‘words’, and so on, have meaning.” Coherence is a condition *sine qua non* for theories submitted for decision, as are other internal criteria: clarity, argumentative strength and transparency, obeying the

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21 Puntel calls the methodological character of his *structural-systematic Philosophy* coherentist and sets it decisively apart from *foundationalist* methodological ideals: “[...] the project pursued here is not foundationalist, but instead coherentist, which means that there is *no reliance* on *putatively fundamental truths* that are presented at the *outset as true*, that hold throughout and that, [...], would establish as true, as they emerged, all of the additional theses or theories that were components of the ultimate system.” (emph. CS) (2008: 51).

22 Whitehead (1978: 3).

23 “Only within the context of a sentence do linguistic terms have semantic value” (Puntel 2008: 200).

presupposed logic, etc. By this, coherence and internal criteria in general cannot make any difference with respect to “God’s acting” vs. “God’s not acting”. Theories embedding either of these options should be coherent.

### III. (iii) Data – External Criteria

Coherence points crucially to the circumstance that metaphysical theories – during theory-building - have to incorporate “data” that are – initially – external. In principle data are “everything of which we are conscious, as enjoyed, perceived, willed, or thought”. By incorporation, and so unavoidably by interpretation, they are conceived from within the framework while contributing to “enlarge” the framework. By this, *external data* get their *theoretical* formulation and by this a *modification*. That is, data are not fundamental truths that are starters of a theory, remaining unaffected during the process of theorizing.

Incorporating, and by this, respecting data points to another criterion for metaphysical theories, their *adequacy*, i. e.: how good or bad theories fare with data. With adequacy, one faces an “external criterion”. This poses methodological problems of its own for metaphysical theories in general: on an appropriate level of generality everything is a datum. Fortunately, this topic must not be addressed here, since the relevant data are neither general nor unlimited in number: the relevant data are the biblical narratives, religious practices, traditions and beliefs.<sup>24</sup> Here is a twofold point of departure: [1] Whereas *classical theisms* integrate the data emphasizing those, which point to God’s *transcendence*, aseity and perfection, *alternative theisms* emphasize data that point to His responsiveness, His *immanence*. This leads to different concepts of God and with this to different theories about His acting or not acting upon the world. Deciding on behalf of the question concerning God’s acting is at once deciding which data are more and which are less relevant for theorizing and, *a fortiori*, a deciding on behalf of both, the “God-world”-relation and the concept of God adequate for theological purposes. The impasse remains: Given that the frameworks at stake are coherent, clear and share any virtue a (metaphysical) theory can have, the point of decision for *theology* is how they fare with the data and new data – i.e. the biblical roots, the religious practices and the tradition - are not to be expected. By this, theology has also to decide which of the data are more and which are less important. Theology has also to decide how much revision concerning the reading of the data, it is inclined to accept. Adherents of *classical theisms*, on the one hand, and of *alternative theisms*, on the other, simply disagree in that respect. Both families of theoretical frameworks are revisionary with respect to the reading of the data. *Classical theisms* revise data concerning religious

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24 Catholic theology counts also its (theoretical) ecclesial tradition, especially its dogmatic presuppositions as data of great importance. But, during the course of history, these data themselves became theory-laden by *classical theism*. If *classical theism(s)* is (are) at stake, as it is here, then from a philosophical point of view, theoretical ecclesial tradition and its dogmatic presuppositions cannot count as data.

practices and attitudes, *alternative theisms* are more revisionary with respect to the *ecclesial* tradition. Both, however, conceive of their theoretical notion of God as expressing the God of the bible and paint a rather specific and elaborate picture of Him. Deciding the issue based on these theological data is a *theological* decision-problem, not a metaphysical or philosophical one.

[2] In theorizing about “God” in general and in deciding on behalf of its “acting upon the world”, there is a difference between metaphysics and theoretical theology, even if theology avails itself of metaphysics. The difference does not concern the methodological demands and virtues – as are clarity, coherence, inferential correctness and cognates. It concerns the pre-theoretic data to be respected by the theory and with this a decision which of the data are revisable and which are not – whose pre-theoretic notions should be preserved as far as possible. For theology important data are, as mentioned above, documents of revelation, biblical narratives, religious practices and beliefs, etc. Metaphysics, in contrast, is not committed to these data – there is no pre-theoretic notion of God that is to be accommodated for. If it develops a notion of God and this metaphysical God must not be “co-referential” with the theological or any pre-theoretic notion of God.

Metaphysic’s God is self-made and so his notion cannot serve as an external criterion for the *metaphysical* decision-problem on behalf of God’s acting vs. His not acting upon the world. Any metaphysical theory that is coherent and incorporates “God”, “acting”, “world” and their interplay (leading to acting locally and directly or not), however, includes a sub-theory of “world”. “World” is not metaphysically self-made, and so, hopefully, how the theories fare with incorporating “world” may serve as an indirect *external* criterion for deciding the issue. Basically, the decision is based on an answer to the question: which ontology fares better with the *non-theological* data. Unfortunately, this move does not work.

### III. (iv) Leibniz – the Basics of his Metaphysical Framework

At first sight, comparing *classical theisms’* presupposed theory of the “world” – a substance-ontology, basically an ancient or medieval ontology – with *Whitehead’s* ontology, a 20<sup>th</sup>-century-theory that is up to respect scientific theories of its time, seems utterly unfair. *Whitehead’s* approach and with this, “God’s acting upon the world” would be favoured. Fortunately, there is a brand of classical theism whose “God-world”-relation is *transcendent, unique as indicating creation ex nihilo*, and whose God is an *omniGod*, impassible, a-temporal, etc., who *does not act locally and directly* upon the world: *Leibniz’* late theory. This theory comes with a strong ontology, as the short presentation to follow will indicate.<sup>25</sup>

The first thing to notice is that *Leibniz’* God is a *transcendent* God (and He is the *ens perfectissimum*). But He is not simple – His “mind” is internally variegated, He contemplates different alternatives, He has “will”, different from His “mind”. *Leibniz*

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25 For details see for monads (Schneider 2001: 17) and for *conceptus completi* (2001: 150).

is a *classical theist* in the liberal sense presupposed here. The *perfections*, making up *Leibniz'* God's nature are simple but different from each other. *Transcendence* is basic for his concept of God, not inferred from other "attributes" of His God. *Leibniz* was struggling to preserve God's *transcendence* in his metaphysics and he thought that he has won the fight by "inventing" his *monads*, the *monadic* world. *Monads* and the *monadic world* are created by God *ex nihilo*. A citation of C. Wilson may be instructive:

"Spinoza was in a sense *Leibniz'* ghost. He was what *Leibniz* was afraid of being and saw himself of dangerously; the doctrine that God was in some way related to creatures as as a whole to its parts, not as an extra item, was one which obsessed him. "If there has been no monads", he wrote to Bourguet once, "Spinoza would have been right."" (Wilson 1989: 89).

What are the monads, the core of *Leibniz'* ontology? Monads are "soul-like" entities. Monads are mutually aware of each other, but this awareness is not necessarily conscious. *Leibniz* calls it *perception*. They change in striving from one of their perceptual web to "the next". This is their *appetitus*. They are the sources of their changes. In his *Discours de la Metaphysique*, *Leibniz* characterizes a monad also as a *vis activa*. Moreover, monads have no efficient-causal impact on each other.

There are three classes of Monads: Simple monads: They have only (simple, i.e. completely unconscious) perception and appetite. Souls: They have also awareness or „memory“. Spirits: They have also apperception and access to the ideas in the mind of God. This access is a strictly asymmetric relation.

Perceptions are unified internally variegated representations of the monadic world; they come with different degrees of clarity and distinctness. Monads are individuated by their perceptions and there is not anything over and above than monads, their perceptions and their appetites in the world. The world is a web mutually perceiving monads, striving – by their appetites - harmoniously to their "next" perceptions and with this to the "next" perceptual-monadic web – the next state of the "world".

This is basically *Leibniz'* ontology and it has strong similarities with *Whitehead's*. For both, their world is made up of entities that are their own source of change (monad/*vis activa* - actual entity). These are mutually "aware" of each other (perception – physical prehension). By this, they make up the respective "worlds" (perceptual-monadic world - nexus).

For *Whitehead* eternal entities, platonic forms<sup>26</sup> are the model of them, play an important role. By His primordial nature, *Whitehead's* God "thinks" them. They express what actual entities strive for to become, the actual entities' *initial aims*. *Whitehead's* God presents to each *actual entity* the *eternal entities* that are adequate for

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26 Cf. *Whitehead* (1978: 44), but he is aware of the problematic connected with "form": "any entity whose conceptual recognition does not involve a necessary reference to any definite actual entity of the temporal world is called an 'eternal object'."

*initial aims*. They are grasped by *conceptual prehension*. This corresponds to *Leibniz’ appetite*, as *Whitehead* himself admits (cf. 1978: 32).

*Eternal objects/initial aims* play a similar role as the *ideas/concepts* in *Leibniz’ God’s* mind. *Ideas/concepts* are not necessarily universal, they express also singular and “contingent” possible facts; they can be regarded as semantic values. They serve to regulate and harmonize the appetites and the evolving of the monadic world; they are also responsible for the “law-likeness” of the monadic world. Ideas are in *Leibniz’ God’s* mind and form different *possible worlds* there. Each of the *possible worlds* can be regarded as a maximally consistent set of ideas. Each *possible world* has its intrinsic “degree” of “goodness”. One and only one of them is the “best”. *Leibniz’ God* “sees” which *possible world* is the best one and creates the monadic world *ex nihilo* accordingly. The *best of all possible worlds*, as an ideal construct, remains as it is in *God’s* mind and is somehow a blue-print for creation:

“[...] il est visible que ce decret (to create the world, CS)] ne change rien dans la constitution des choses, et qu’il les laisse telles qu’elles étoient dans l’état de pure possibilité, c’est à dire qu’il ne change rien, ny dans leur essence ou nature, ny même dans leur accidens, représentés déjà parfaitement dans l’idée de ce monde possible.”<sup>27</sup>

*Leibniz’ God* is transcendent.

The best of all possible worlds contains *conceptus completi*. These encode whatever may truly be said about a monad – during its history, including its relations to the rest of the monadic world. The relation of a *conceptus completus* to its monad can be compared to the program of a software for a computer (*conceptus completus*) to its hardware (monad) – with a crucial difference for any hardware there is one and only one software and vice versa. *Leibniz’ conceptus completi* play a similar role as *Whitehead’s* initial aims: they present to the monad how to become. God is their host and by thinking (and willing) them, they become relevant for the becoming of the monadic world.

### III. (v) Summing Up

*Leibniz’ and Whitehead’s* ontologies are very similar.<sup>28</sup> From an architectural point of view, *Leibniz’ God* and *Whitehead’s God* plays the same role: They are the hosts of ideas/eternal entities, present them to the (different) inhabitants (monads – actual entities) of their worlds, to “show” them how to become (*conceptus completus*, initial aim) at each instant of their history. *Leibniz’ theism* and *Whitehead’s* approach,

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<sup>27</sup> *Leibniz, Theodizee*, GP IV, p. 131.

<sup>28</sup> There is a difference, however: *Leibniz* is a determinist, whereas *Whitehead* can be interpreted as allowing the actual entities to choose their initial aims among different possible ones. One may, however, go beyond *Leibniz*, preserving his basic ontology and allowing for *libertarian freedom*. An approach, albeit in different material contexts, can be found in: (Schneider 2009) and (Brüntrup and Schneider 2016). This can be done coherently with *God’s* transcendence, cf. Schneider (2013).

however, are different in an important respect: *Leibniz'* God is *transcendent* and so, his God does not act upon the world, directly, locally and creative. *Whitehead's* God is *immanent*, responsive, and so, his God acts upon the world, directly, locally and creative. In this case, due to the extremely similar ontology, from a metaphysical/philosophical point of view, there is no methodologically corroborated decision between God's acting and God's not acting or between His *transcendence* and His *immanence*. If *Leibniz'* ontology fares good/bad with the non-theological data, then, *Whitehead's* ontology also does and *vice versa*. This is not a coincidence germane to *Leibniz* and *Whitehead*.

#### IV *Classical Theisms' Ontological Neutrality and a Consequence*

*Classical theisms'* notions of God are *in principle neutral* with respect to their worlds' (or philosophies') *ontologies*. Of course, the *use* of notions, categories and their interplay of a basically Aristotelian ontology to interpret and to explain important articles of faith is rooted in the historic predominance *classical theism(s)*. But, metaphysically, it is not committed to a special ontology, as *Leibniz'* metaphysical framework shows. Characterizing *classical theisms* as theisms whose God is *transcendent* (and an *omniGod*), then there is, as mentioned above, basically one and only one relation from God to the world that makes a difference: God's *creatio ex nihilo*. All other relations of God to the world – if there should be any – neither affect the *created* world nor God's internal structure (if there is any). Relations from the world (or their inhabitants) to God may affect mundane affairs, but never God. Creating *ex nihilo* has as consequence that there is no restriction "*external* to God" of how the world up for creation should be. This implies that any ontology – provided it fits the mundane affairs at an appropriate level of generality - can be regarded as expressing a *creatio ex nihilo* of a *classical theisms'* God.

*Metaphysical frameworks*, in contrast, that conceive of their God as being *immanent* – not least to make sense of His responsiveness to the "world" - depend crucially on formulating a (or presupposing) a refined *ontology*. Otherwise, to exhibit coherence as well as adequacy with respect to mundane data would be idle. By this, their ontology – as a theory about the "world" – can be also a classical theism's ontology (about the "world"). *Leibniz'* and *Whitehead's* ontologies are points in case. Consequently, "God's *not* acting upon the world" vs. "His acting upon the world", of God being *transcendent* vs. His being *immanent*, *cannot* be decided by *metaphysics* – irrespective of the specific metaphysical framework that incorporates a God who acts directly, locally and creatively upon the world. It is theology's decision.

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