

# Open Theism and Perfect Rationality: An Examination of Dean Zimmerman's Views on God, Time, and Creation

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**Abstract:** Dean Zimmerman has made significant contributions to metaphysics, philosophy of time, and philosophy of religion. In this paper, I set my focus on Zimmerman's approach to God, time, and creation. Zimmerman has defended a model of God called open theism on which God is essentially temporal. In this paper, I will first articulate open theism. Then I will explore a series of puzzles related to God's perfect rationality and creation. These can be stated as the following three questions. Why didn't God create sooner? Why did God create anything at all? Why did God create this universe in particular?

**Abstract:** God, Time, Eternity, Creation, Open theism

## What is Open Theism?

The concept of God is that of a perfect being who is the single, ultimate foundation of reality. A model of God is a unique articulation of that concept. A model of God will identify the great-making attributes that explain why God is perfect, or the greatest possible being. A model of God will also articulate what it means for God to be the single, ultimate foundation of reality.

I will start with the nature of God. Like most models of God, open theism affirms that God is a necessarily existent being with attributes like aseity, eternity, omnipotence, omniscience, perfect moral goodness, perfect rationality, and perfect freedom. There are several things that make open theism unique. First, open theists reject the classical attributes of divine timelessness, immutability, impassibility, and simplicity. Second, open theists deny that God has exhaustive foreknowledge.

For some philosophers, the denial of divine timelessness sounds like a denial of divine eternity, but this is a mistake. Throughout the history of Western

philosophy, eternity has been predicated of both timeless and temporal things.<sup>1</sup> To be eternal is to exist without beginning and without end. Given God's necessary existence, it follows that God exists without beginning and without end. Thus, the God of open theism is an eternal being. If one wants to say that God is timeless, one must add some additional claims to eternality. In particular, one must add that God necessarily exists without succession and without temporal location. The lack of succession and temporal location entails that God cannot stand in any temporal relations to the temporal world such as earlier-than, simultaneous-with, or later-than. A timeless God does not exist now nor henceforth. When open theists reject that God is timeless, they are instead affirming that God is temporal. A temporal God is one who can undergo succession and have temporal location. When God performs a free action, God undergoes a succession from *not performing an action* to *performing an action*. God does one thing, and then does something else.

Open theists are split among themselves as to whether or not God is essentially temporal. Some say that God is timeless sans creation and temporal with creation. On Dean Zimmerman's view, God is temporal prior to creation.<sup>2</sup> This appears to be an affirmation that God is essentially temporal. This is something that I will return to in the next section. For now, it is important to note that most who affirm Zimmerman's view claim that time is dependent on God. Time is in some sense a necessary concomitant of God's essence. Others might make a stronger claim and say that time is an essential attribute of God.

Since open theists think that God is temporal and undergoes succession, they must deny that God is immutable. The doctrine of immutability states that God cannot undergo intrinsic nor extrinsic change.<sup>3</sup> Sometimes open theists will claim that they affirm a *weak immutability* on which God's essential nature cannot change, but God can change in non-essential respects. For example, God is essentially good, and thus God cannot cease to be good. Personally, I think the use of *immutability* is unnecessary here since essential attributes are not the sort of things that a being can gain or lose. God is essentially omnipotent, and thus cannot cease to be omnipotent. Nothing about immutability adds anything here. All of the work is being done by the very notion of essential attributes.

God can change in various respects, both intrinsically and extrinsically. When God freely exercises His essential power, He changes intrinsically by performing a new action. When God forgives a repentant sinner, God changes both intrinsically and extrinsically. God changes extrinsically in that God comes to stand in a new relation to a creature. Namely, being the one to whom a sinner is

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Melamed (2016).

<sup>2</sup> Zimmerman (2002).

<sup>3</sup> Lombard (2007, Distinction VIII and XXXVII.7); Helm (2010, 19–20, 81–87); Moreland and Craig (2017, 526–527). Cf. Zimmerman and Chisholm, (1997).

repenting of her sins. Yet, God also changes intrinsically in that God's knowledge will perfectly track the changes in reality. God now knows that He is being prayed to, and God now knows that He is forgiving the sinner.

There are other ways that God changes as well, such as God's emotions. This brings us to the open theist's rejection of impassibility and her affirmation of passibility. A passible God is a being who can be moved or influenced by external considerations, and will thus have a wide range of emotions. An emotion is a felt evaluation of a situation. An emotion has a hedonic valence of positive or negative. God's emotions will always be consistent with His perfect moral goodness and perfect rationality. His felt evaluations will always perfectly track the values in the situation. When an egregious act is committed, God will have emotions such as anger and sadness. People who perform such egregious acts are rightly called children of God's wrath until they repent. When sinners repent, God will have emotions like happiness because this is an event that is worth celebrating.<sup>4</sup>

Open theists reject simplicity, and instead affirm divine unity. Divine simplicity forces one to say that all of God's actions and attributes are somehow identical to each other and identical to God's necessary existence. Further, a simple God cannot have any accidental properties like *creator*, *lord*, or *redeemer of humanity*. Many contemporary philosophers find this to be befuddling to say the least. The open theist affirms divine unity on which all of God's essential attributes are co-extensive and compossible. God's free and contingent actions are not identical to each other, nor identical to God's necessary existence. God can have accidental properties like *creator* if God freely decides to create a universe.

Now that I have described the open theist rejection of the four classical attributes, it is time to discuss the rejection of exhaustive foreknowledge. Many critics of open theism say that the denial of God's foreknowledge is a denial that God is omniscient.<sup>5</sup> Open theists like Zimmerman disagree.<sup>6</sup> I think there is a better way to explain why the open theist is not denying that God is omniscient.

God is omniscient in that God knows the sum total facts of reality. Here is a fun fact that is often glossed over. On theological determinism, Molinism, and open theism, God initially faces an open future.<sup>7</sup> At least that is the way it appears before one starts putting incompatible states of affairs into God's timeless moment.<sup>8</sup> But I shall ignore the timeless moment here, and instead focus on

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<sup>4</sup> For more on this, see Mullins (2020a).

<sup>5</sup> Kvanvig (2021, 193).

<sup>6</sup> Zimmerman (2010, 801).

<sup>7</sup> Tiessen (2019, 181); Feinberg (2001, 313); Flint (1998, 46, and 55–57); Rhoda (2011).

<sup>8</sup> For more details on temporal moments, logical moments, and the different theories of divine providence, see Mullins (2021a).

divine temporality. Determinists and Molinists say that, prior to God's decision to create, there are no facts about what God would or will do. There just is no fact of the matter as to whether or not God will create anything at all. Is God omniscient in this state? The determinist and Molinist both say yes because God knows the sum total facts of reality. The sum total facts of reality do not contain any facts about what God will do. On determinism and Molinism, there is a subsequent state of affairs when God freely decides to create a particular universe with a particular timeline. On both of these views, God has freely decided to create a world where the facts about what will happen in the future are settled. On the basis of what God has freely determined to do, God knows the future.

The open theist can say that God is omniscient in that God knows the sum total facts of reality. Prior to God's decision to create a universe, God does not know what He will or would do. This is because the sum total facts of reality do not include any facts about what God will or would do. Subsequently, God decides to create a universe with an open future. God decides to create a universe in which the facts about what will happen are not settled. God knows the sum total facts of reality, and is thus omniscient. There just are not many facts about what will happen in the future, so God cannot be said to have exhaustive foreknowledge. He knows of all the facts about the kind of universe that He has created.<sup>9</sup>

Viewed in this way, the criticism of open theism is not really about whether or not God is omniscient. On any view, God knows the sum total facts about reality, and is thus omniscient. What is going on is what kind of universe did God create, and if God created a universe where the facts about the future are settled. That is not an issue about omniscience, but rather a debate about what kind of universe God chose to create. The open theist says that God created a universe with an open future, whereas theological determinists and Molinists say that God created a universe with a future that is in some sense settled.

Speaking of creation, it is time to say a bit about how God is the ultimate foundation of reality. Open theists maintain that God freely creates the universe *ex nihilo*.<sup>10</sup> They are in agreement with classical theism on this point. According to Samuel Lebens, creation *ex nihilo* can be understood as the affirmation that, "The universe was created by God at some point in time (perhaps the *first* moment in time), before which there was nothing (except God)."<sup>11</sup> The doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* states that the universe has an absolute beginning some finite amount of time ago. The universe is not coeternal with God for there is a prior state of affairs where God exists all alone.<sup>12</sup> In this prior state of affairs, God is

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<sup>9</sup> Zimmerman (2010, 792).

<sup>10</sup> Hasker (2004, 166).

<sup>11</sup> Lebens (2020, 31).

<sup>12</sup> Broadie (2010, 53), Burrell (1993, 7), Brunner (1952, 14–15), Fergusson (2014, 40).

free to create or not create. Once God creates, He does not create out of any pre-existing material. This is because prior to creation, there is just God and nothing else.<sup>13</sup> So there is no pre-existing material from which God could create a universe from.

The open theist has certain commitments on the nature of God and the kind of universe that God created. In the remainder of this paper, I wish to explore some questions and problems that arise from this view of God and creation. I will do my best to address these questions in a way that is deeply inspired by the work of Dean Zimmerman.

### **What Was God Doing Before He Created the Universe?**

As I stated previously, classical theists and open theists both agree that God created the universe out of nothing. Again, the doctrine of creation ex nihilo states that there is a prior state of affairs in which God exists alone. Call this the precreation moment. For example, consider the following statement from the classical theist Boethius.

Now this our religion which is called Christian and Catholic is founded chiefly on the following assertions. From all eternity, that is, before the world was established, and so before all that is meant by time began, there has existed one divine substance of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in such wise that we confess the Father God, the Son God, and the Holy Spirit God, and yet not three Gods but one God [. . .] The divine nature then, abiding from all eternity and unto all eternity without any change, by the exercise of a will known only to Himself, determined of Himself to form the world, and brought it into being when it was absolutely naught, nor did He produce it from His own substance, lest it should be thought divine by nature, nor did He form it after any model, lest it should be thought that anything had already come into being which helped His will by the existence of an independent nature, and that there should exist something that had not been made by Him and yet existed.<sup>14</sup>

On classical theism, God is timeless without creation and timeless with creation. The doctrine of creation ex nihilo and its affirmation of a precreation moment immediately gives rise to a particular conundrum. The commitment to timelessness makes it difficult to state the precreation moment. This is because a timeless God cannot literally be *before* anything. *Before* is a temporal relation and a timeless God cannot stand in any temporal relations. David Fergusson explains the doctrine as follows:

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<sup>13</sup> Hasker (2022, 216).

<sup>14</sup> Boethius (1918).

Nor can the world be described as eternal. The life of God is prior to the life of the world, even if this cannot be expressed as a temporal priority. We cannot set the world as co-eternal alongside the triune being.<sup>15</sup>

At the precreation moment, God is all alone. It seems natural to say that this is temporally before God creates a universe. Yet the classical theist cannot say this. What can the classical theist say? Thomas M. Ward offers a common reply. He agrees that prior to creation there is “God and nothing else.”<sup>16</sup> He says that since God is timeless, this “before” must be understood as logical or explanatory priority.<sup>17</sup>

Such statements are a fudge because logical priority only obtains between compossibly realized states of affairs.<sup>18</sup> For example, the premises of a valid deductive argument are logically prior to the conclusion. Another example is God and the singleton set {God}. God and {God} are coeternal, but God is logically prior to {God} because God grounds {God}. Logical priority is insufficient to capture one of the important claims from the doctrine of creation ex nihilo—prior to the existence of the universe God was all alone. If God is merely logically prior to creation, then God and the universe are coeternal. A panentheist who explicitly rejects the doctrine of creation out of nothing will be happy with this result.<sup>19</sup> This is because pantheists affirm a doctrine of eternal creation on which God and creation are coeternal.<sup>20</sup> Yet this will not work for a doctrine of creation ex nihilo. Merely logical or explanatory priority cannot capture incompatible states of affairs such as <God exists all alone> and <God exists with a universe>. Given this, it seems like classical theism has a problem in reconciling its notion of a timeless God with its commitment to the doctrine of creation ex nihilo.

Zimmerman’s version of open theism avoids this problem. Given Zimmerman’s affirmation that God is essentially temporal, he can literally say that God existed before the universe began. Zimmerman does not have to fudge and say things like, “God only existed logically prior to the universe.” If God is essentially temporal, then he can easily affirm the exact details of the doctrine of creation ex nihilo without any fudging. Once upon a time, God existed all alone. There was God and nothing else. Then, God freely decided to create a universe of contingent substances that are causally, temporally, and spatially connected to one another.

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<sup>15</sup> Fergusson (2014, 40); cf. T. M. Ward (2020, 5).

<sup>16</sup> T. M. Ward (2020, 15).

<sup>17</sup> T. M. Ward (2020, 5).

<sup>18</sup> Rhoda (2014, 265–266).

<sup>19</sup> E.g. Gocke (2017).

<sup>20</sup> Oord (2022, 187).

Since Zimmerman can affirm the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* literally, a particular question arises for Zimmerman's view. What was God doing before He created the universe? Zimmerman has several options at this point. He could joke with Augustine that God was creating hell for people who ask those kinds of questions.<sup>21</sup> He could follow the apostle Paul and claim that God was plotting to take over the world. (Ephesians 1) One popular option among Christians is to say that the three divine persons of the Trinity were enjoying a state of blessed love and fellowship. (John 17) Zimmerman can affirm any of these options.

Yet another question arises. Why didn't God create the universe sooner? This might seem like a trivial question, but it has the potential to be a problem for divine rationality. God is perfectly rational. God always acts for a good reason, unless He has a good reason not to. If God is perfectly rational, then God had a good reason to create when He did. But it is difficult to see what that good reason could be. In fact, one might argue that there could not possibly be a good reason, which would conflict with God's perfect rationality.

The assumption in the argument is the so-called absolute theory of time. On the standard understanding of the absolute theory of time, time is said to necessarily move forward from moment to moment. To see this, consider Isaac Newton's distinction between absolute and relative time. He says,

Absolute, true, and mathematical time, of itself, and from its own nature, flows equably without relation to anything external, and by another name is called duration: relative, apparent, and common time, is some sensible and external (whether accurate or unequal) measure of duration by the means of motion, which is commonly used instead of true time; such as an hour, a day, a month, a year.<sup>22</sup>

The Islamic philosopher al-Razi says that this absolute view of time is so obvious that one would only reject it because she had been corrupted by theology.<sup>23</sup>

Yet a problem could arise at this point. If time necessarily flows from moment to moment, God is faced with a constant succession of moments that are potential candidates to create. Why is God waiting so long to create? Any of those moments is just as good as any other. It would seem utterly arbitrary for God to pick one of those moments to create over any other. A perfectly rational being cannot perform an arbitrary action. Given this, it might seem like a perfectly rational being cannot create a universe *ex nihilo*! Call this the Sooner Objection. I will develop a version of the objection that is inspired by G.W. Leibniz's critique of Samuele Clarke and Newton.

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<sup>21</sup> Augustine (2019, 12.14).

<sup>22</sup> Alexander (1956, 152).

<sup>23</sup> Adamson (2021, 104–106).

The Sooner Objection starts with two premises that Leibniz thinks Clarke and Newton will accept.

SO1) God is perfectly rational=def. (i) God always performs an action for a reason, and (ii) in the absence of a reason, God will not perform an action.

SO2) God could have created the universe sooner.

In several places, Clarke affirms that God is perfectly rational though the exact meaning may differ from Leibniz's definition.<sup>24</sup> In Zimmerman's discussion of the Sooner Objection, he seems to grant (SO1).<sup>25</sup> Clarke certainly does accept (SO2), so Leibniz's argument is off to a good start.<sup>26</sup> With a bit more precision, one can derive a contradiction from the assumptions that are built into (SO2). In saying that God could have created the universe sooner, one is assuming that God created the universe at some particular moment of time. Call this moment of time  $t^x$ , and assume that  $t^x$  is later than some earlier moment of time  $t^y$ . In affirming (SO2), one is also assuming that it is possible for God to have created the universe at this earlier moment of time  $t^y$ . If God could not have created the universe at  $t^y$ , then God could not have created the universe sooner than  $t^x$ . Hence, in affirming (SO2), one will also affirm the following.

SO3) God creates the universe at time  $t^x$ .

SO4) God could have created the universe at time  $t^y$  instead of  $t^x$ .

SO5) God cannot create the universe at both  $t^y$  and  $t^x$ .

With this more precise statement, the argument can continue.

SO6) If time  $t^y$  and time  $t^x$  are equally good moments for God to create the universe, then God does not have a reason to choose either  $t^y$  or  $t^x$  over the other at which to create the universe.

SO7) Time  $t^y$  and time  $t^x$  are equally good moments for God to create the universe.

SO8) Thus, God does not have a reason to choose either  $t^y$  or  $t^x$  over the other at which to create the universe.

SO9) If God does not have a reason to choose either  $t^y$  or  $t^x$  over the other at which to create the universe, then God does not create the universe at either  $t^y$  or  $t^x$ .

SO10) Thus, God does not create the universe at either  $t^y$  or  $t^x$ .

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<sup>24</sup> For an examination of Clarke's views, see Rowe (2004, chapter 2).

<sup>25</sup> Zimmerman (2002, 75).

<sup>26</sup> Alexander (1956, 49).



From (SO10), one can derive,

SO11) God does not create the universe at  $t^x$ .

From (SO11) and (SO3), one can derive,

SO12) God does not create the universe at time  $t^x$  and God creates the universe at time  $t^x$ .

This is a contradiction that must be avoided. How can one go about avoiding this contradiction? Here is one option—reject (SO3) by denying that God created at all. On al-Razi’s view, God cannot create the universe *ex nihilo* because God is perfectly rational. Selecting to create the universe at any given moment would be utterly arbitrary. Al-Razi says that this is not a problem because God is not the only eternal being in existence. He also affirms the eternal existence of a foolish world soul. This foolish world soul is less than perfectly rational, and is able to perform arbitrary actions. This foolish world soul arbitrarily selects a random moment to create, and God must come along and providentially clean up the mess that the soul has made.<sup>27</sup>

My guess is that readers will feel unmotivated to adopt al-Razi’s position, yet he will insist that there are good reasons to consider this view. When you look at the universe that we are living in, can you honestly say that this is the product of a perfectly rational being? Al-Razi will contend that the answer is no. He thinks it is much more plausible that we are living in a universe that is the product of a foolish soul, and God is providentially trying to clean up the mess. Al-Razi thinks this makes much more sense of the existence of evil and suffering than any theodicy that says that God is the rational agent who produced the universe.<sup>28</sup>

Of course, no open theist will be able to adopt al-Razi’s position. This is because open theism says that God is the sole creator of the universe. So the open theist needs to explain how a perfectly rational God created the universe when He did. One option explored by Zimmerman and others is to appeal to metric conventionalism.<sup>29</sup> This is the view that time is not essentially metricated or measurable. The measurability of time is a contingent feature of time that obtains only if certain other conditions obtain, such as uniform laws of nature and consistent intrinsic change. Zimmerman says that prior to creation, God is not undergoing any intrinsic change. Since God is all alone, there are no uniform laws of nature to provide the basis for developing a clock. There are no consistent

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<sup>27</sup> Adamson (2021, 30–32).

<sup>28</sup> Adamson (2021, 32–35).

<sup>29</sup> Zimmerman (2002, 82).

intrinsic changes taking place that could provide the *tick tick* for a clock. What this means is that God is dwelling in an unmetricated time prior to creation.<sup>30</sup> Here is the payoff for this stance. The objection I am considering asks, “Why didn’t God create the universe sooner?” The answer from Zimmerman is that there is no sooner. Hence, a rejection of (SO2). Prior to creation, time is unmetricated. You cannot measure how much time has passed, nor meaningfully talk about how long God waited to create.

I think this is an interesting response, but I fear that it does not sufficiently solve the problem because it does not really reject (SO2). As Zimmerman points out, this particular appeal to unmetricated time prior to creation is still thinking in terms of an interval. On the view sketched above, the unmetricated time is an interval or extensive continuum made up of instants.<sup>31</sup> In which case, someone like Leibniz can reassert (SO2) and the rest of the Sooner Objection. Though it is impossible to develop a clock, there is the real possibility that God could have created at an instant sooner than the one He did. The flow from one instant to the next marches on. Why did God pick that instant to create instead of any other instant? We still don’t have an answer to that question.

Another option explored by Zimmerman fully rejects (SO2) in a more radical way, and thus avoids the contradiction of the Sooner Objection. This option says that the precreation period of time is not an interval or continuum of instants. Zimmerman describes this as follows.

There may be an initial state in the series of times, a state that ended a finite number of years ago, without the whole of past time qualifying as finite in any sense that puts limitations on how long God has existed [. . .] In this pre-creation, pre-laws-of-nature period, there is temporal duration but no way of dividing it up into periods with lengths that can be compared—so you cannot take some portion of the event and say that there must be either finitely many or infinitely many discrete parts of the event of comparable length in the whole period. And since the state is initial there is no beginning to time, no earlier “first moment” distinct from this state.<sup>32</sup>

This is similar to a view that I have defended elsewhere.<sup>33</sup> This view denies that the moments of time necessarily flow from moment to moment, and thus rejects (SO2). A moment of time is the way things are but could be subsequently otherwise. The transition from one moment to the next depends upon actual intrinsic changes taking place. Prior to creation, there is only one moment of time. The moments do not necessarily flow one after the other. A moment of time is

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<sup>30</sup> Zimmerman (2002, 82–84).

<sup>31</sup> Zimmerman (2002, 84).

<sup>32</sup> Zimmerman (2002, 88–89).

<sup>33</sup> Mullins (2020b).

the way things are but could be subsequently otherwise. Prior to the universe, there is God all alone. That is a way things are. Given that God is omnipotent and free, things can be subsequently otherwise if God decides to freely exercise His power. On this view, God cannot create the universe sooner because there is no sooner. God can only create at the next moment. If God has good reason to create, His only option for creation is the next subsequent moment.

### **Why Create Anything at All?**

Thus far, it seems like Zimmerman is able to maintain that God is perfectly rational. This brings me to the next question that I wish to consider. Why would God create anything at all? Open theism is able to provide several different kinds of answers that are not available to other models of God like classical theism. On classical theism, God essentially realizes all possible values within Himself. Further, an impassible God cannot be moved or influenced by any external considerations for His beliefs, emotions, and actions. What this means is that God cannot create a universe in order to bring about the value of creatures. This is so for two reasons. First, external considerations, like the value of creatures, cannot influence the impassible God's actions. Second, there is no more value that God could bring into existence since God essentially realizes all possible values within Himself.<sup>34</sup>

Open theism can say that this is incoherent. An open theist can argue that it is impossible for God to essentially realize all possible values within Himself. This is because the value of creator-creature friendships cannot possibly be realized in God all by Himself. The realization of that obvious value can only obtain if God creates beings that are capable of entering into loving relationships.<sup>35</sup>

An open theist can say that God has many reasons to create in general, but that the value of friendship is one of God's most central reasons for creating.<sup>36</sup> To be sure, there are other values that give God reasons to create. Perhaps the aesthetic value of a vast universe. Maybe the intrinsic value of physical objects. Those, and many other reasons, could factor into God's decision to create in general. Yet the open theist says that a central reason is that God desires to have friendship with creatures.

### **Why Create This Particular Universe?**

God's central reason to create in general sets parameters for the particular kind of universe that God could create in order to satisfy that desire. Not just any old

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<sup>34</sup> For a full exploration of this problem, see my (Mullins 2020c).

<sup>35</sup> K. Ward (1982, 85), Holtzen (2019, 6–13).

<sup>36</sup> Rice (2020, 230).

universe will do. It needs to be a universe with the right conditions to produce particular kinds of creatures.

What are some of God's options? One option is for God to create a fully deterministic universe with a settled future. In this universe, God causally determines all that shall come to pass. Open theists typically say that God is free to create a universe like that if He wants, but that such a universe will not satisfy God's desire to enter into friendship with creatures. Open theists say that these creatures need to have libertarian freedom in order to genuinely enter into friendship with God. Open theists say that this entails an open future. One might say that if beings have libertarian freedom, then there are no settled facts about what they will do in the future. Most open theists seem to take a weaker stance. They will say that there are some settled facts about the future. Zimmerman, William Hasker, and Thomas Jay Oord write that, "The future is not open in an absolute, unqualified sense, because God retains ultimate control and his designs for his creation will not in the end be thwarted."<sup>37</sup>

There is a sense in which the open theist can affirm a doctrine of predestination. God is a being with libertarian freedom who has created a universe for a reason or set of reasons. One of those reasons is to enter into friendship with as many creatures as possible. In this sense, God has a destiny in mind for His creatures when He creates the universe. The open theist Richard Rice says that predestination is "the guaranteed fulfilment of God's purposes."<sup>38</sup> Rice states that it is practically certain that God's efforts will not end until His most central purposes are satisfied.<sup>39</sup> That is a settled fact about the future. There might be other settled facts about the future that depend on what God has decreed, or that are the logical consequences of previous actions and events. Yet the open theist maintains that there are a great many unsettled facts about the future, but not so many that God could be thwarted in bringing about His ultimate purposes for creation.

Open theists give a variety of reasons for why God would create an open universe instead of a deterministic universe. Typical reasons are things like the value of creatures with libertarian freedom, the value of potential friendship, the value of creativity, and so on. But notice that this only rules out deterministic universes. There might be many possible open universes that God could create. So why create this particular open universe instead of another one?

Zimmerman does not tackle this question directly, but he addresses a problem in the neighbourhood. William Rowe has a famous argument concerning God's freedom and creation.<sup>40</sup> In brief, the argument goes a little

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<sup>37</sup> Hasker (2011, 2).

<sup>38</sup> Rice (2020, 47).

<sup>39</sup> Rice (2020, 231).

<sup>40</sup> Rowe (2004).

something like this. If there is a best possible world, then God must create it. If God must create it, then God does not have free will. Open theists like Zimmerman affirm that God and humans have libertarian freedom, so this is not an acceptable result. Open theists like Zimmerman can just deny that there is a best possible world. But Rowe points out a problem if one denies that there is a best possible world. If there is no best possible world, then God faces a series of ever increasingly better worlds that He could create. For any good world that God could create, there is a better world. Here are the key premises of Rowe's argument.<sup>41</sup>

A) If S is a logically impossible state of affairs, then the fact that a being does not bring about S does not entail that the being in question lacks power or perfect goodness.

B) If an omniscient being creates a world when there is a better world that it could have created, then it is possible that there exists a being morally better than it.

C) If a being is essentially perfectly good then it is not possible that there exist a being morally better than it.

Rowe thinks that theists will affirm all three of these premises. He then discusses several problems that can arise from these three premises. For example, Rowe points out one troubling conclusion that is pertinent to our conversation. Rowe says, "if it is true that for any creatable world there is another creatable world better than it, it is also true that no omnipotent, omniscient being who creates a world is essentially perfectly good."<sup>42</sup> This is because (B) and a no best world scenario apparently imply that there would always be a better being. Since God is said to be essentially perfectly good, one can easily infer that God does not exist.

Most open theists attack premise (B).<sup>43</sup> Zimmerman also takes aim at (B). Before discussing Zimmerman's critique of (B), I must make a confession. I have never felt the intuitive pull of (B). (B) is meant to be an expression principle. The idea is that the goodness of an agent's actions expresses the goodness of the agent herself.<sup>44</sup> As Zimmerman explains, an expression principle "links a psychological state or character trait that comes in degrees, on the one hand, with its expression in behavior under idealized circumstances, on the other hand."<sup>45</sup> That seems plausible to me. But what does not seem plausible to me is that if the agent could

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<sup>41</sup> Rowe (2004, 91).

<sup>42</sup> Rowe (2004, 91).

<sup>43</sup> Hasker (2008, 89).

<sup>44</sup> Rowe (2004, 100).

<sup>45</sup> Zimmerman (2018, 409).

have performed some better action, then she could be morally better. Nor does it seem plausible to me that the mere fact that the agent could have done better, and she knew she could have done better, that there is some possibly better agent than her. This seems to make several jumps that I cannot quite follow.

Start with what seems to be an underlying idea in (B). Call this (B\*).

B\*) If an agent performs a good action when she knew she could have performed a better action, then it is possible that there is a morally better agent than her.

I find (B\*) to be puzzling. I think that this is the underlying idea of (B). This new premise just removes omniscience from the story, and speaks more generically of performing actions instead of creating possible worlds. What I find puzzling about this is that I don't understand the connection between the antecedent and the consequence. They don't really seem connected to me. Consider an everyday case to illustrate this. I learn that your birthday is coming up on Saturday. We are not close friends, so there is no grounds for me having an obligation to give you a birthday present. If I decide to give you a birthday present, my action will be purely supererogatory. Say that I do decide to give you a birthday present. Since we are not that close, it is a small gift. I heard that you like Italian food, so I got you a gift card for a dinner for two at a local Italian restaurant. Imagine that upon receiving this gift, you utter the following to me. "You know you could have gotten me a dinner for three, but you didn't. From this I infer that it is possible for there to be better moral agents than you." There are lots of things that I might say in response to this reply. The word "ungrateful" immediately comes to mind. I'm also tempted to say, "Posa il fiasco!", but that is not the point I wish to press. I just find it utterly bizarre that this is the inference you make. I don't see the connection between my good action, and the possibility of better moral agents. I agree that there are better moral agents than myself, but I infer this from *other* factors about myself. The relevant factors have to do with my moral failings, and not my performance of supererogatory acts.

Consider a closely related principle.

B\*\*) If an agent performs a supererogatory act A, but she knows that she could have performed a better supererogatory act B, then it is possible that there exists a being morally better than the agent.

I think that this is relevantly similar to Rowe's (B) because Rowe grants the theist that God is under no obligation to create anything at all. Any creative act

that God performs is supererogatory.<sup>46</sup> The only difference with (B\*\*) is the absence of omniscience. With this in mind, consider another everyday example. I am walking through the streets of Helsinki. A man asks me a question in Finnish. In response I utterly mispronounce, "Puhutko englantia?" Most people will fail to understand what I have said, but this man understands that I intend to ask if he speaks English. He replies by asking, "Can I have 1 euro?" I am under no obligation to give him any money, but I perform the supererogatory act of giving him 1 euro. Yet the man replies, "You know that you could have given me 1 euro and 1 cent instead. From this I infer that it is possible for there to be a better moral agent than you." Once again, there are several things I could say in response. There are certain Finnish cuss words that I could badly mispronounce, but that is not the point that I want to press. I just find it utterly bizarre that this is the inference that this man would make. There are lots of things that could rationally ground an inference that there are better moral agents than me, but this does not seem to be one of them. What would rationally ground such an inference is the fact that I have a particular moral character. My moral character is such that it is possible for me to morally fail. I also have a history of moral failure. That is a rational basis for inferring that there are better moral agents than myself. Nothing about my performing a supererogatory act seems relevant. Nor the fact that I could have given one cent more seems relevant. This is because there is no moral failure in performing a supererogatory act when you know you could have performed a slightly better supererogatory act. There is also no moral failure in performing a supererogatory act when you know that you could have performed a significantly better supererogatory act. Supererogatory acts are, by definition, good actions that one is not obligated to perform. There simply can be no moral failure in performing good actions. So I don't see any rational connection between performing supererogatory acts and the inference to possible better moral agents. Something just seems off about (B\*\*).

With that in mind, consider (B) again. Also consider the setup of Rowe's argument. God exists all alone and is faced with a vast assortment of possible worlds that He could create. Given that God is perfectly good, God only considers the possible worlds that are creation worthy. These are worlds in which the overall balance of good outweighs the balance of evil. Perhaps these good worlds contain some sort of organic unity between the evils and goods in the worlds. Rowe can allow the theist to nuance what makes a world creation worthy as she sees fit. Among the creation worthy worlds, there is no best. There is an ever increasing number of better worlds. Rowe grants that God may be under no obligation to create anything at all. He grants that God's decision to create in

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<sup>46</sup> Rowe (2004, 82).

general, and which world to create in particular, are supererogatory acts.<sup>47</sup> This is certainly going to be acceptable to the theist. If God decides to create, He must select from one of the creation worthy worlds. For any choice that God makes, there could have been a better world. Say that God chooses to create world number 1,238. Sure, there are better possible worlds, but number 1,238 is pretty great. From this, Rowe asks us to infer that it is possible that there exists a morally better being than God.

Why on earth should I infer that it is possible that there exists a morally better being than God? I am not sure. As with the everyday case, nothing about performing a supererogatory act seems connected to the possibility of there being a better moral agent. That just seems irrelevant. With the everyday cases, the inference is grounded in my own moral failings, and the possibility of moral failure. That does not seem relevant to this situation. If God is as the theist describes, then God is not subject to any moral failings. God always fulfils His obligations, and exhibits a perfectly virtuous moral character. In the case of performing the supererogatory act of creating a universe, there is no obligation to perform any creative act. Nor is there the possibility of God being subject to moral failure. I just don't see how to make Rowe's inference go through. Something just seems wrong about (B).

According to Zimmerman, most theistic philosophers reject (B). They will say that when God is faced with ever better options, choosing less than the best is compatible with moral unsurpassibility. In ever better situations, the value of God's choices won't precisely express the goodness of God's motives or character.<sup>48</sup> Someone like Rowe will see this as a problem, but Zimmerman disagrees. In fact, Zimmerman points out that there are two popular positions among moral philosophers that the theist can adopt. The first is called *satisficing*. This is when one chooses a good enough option when one could do better. Most philosophers think that satisficing does not undermine rationality when one is choosing from an endless series of options.<sup>49</sup> The other position is called *motivated submaximization*. This is when one aims at as many goods as possible, yet settles for less than one could because of countervailing considerations.<sup>50</sup> In light of the popularity of these positions, the theist is in good company in thinking that she can reject expression principles like (B). Expression principles like (B) just give us counterintuitive results.

I think that this gets the open theist out of Rowe's argument, but Rowe can and has pushed the main question of this section. Why create this particular world? Zimmerman's rejection of principle (B) does not answer this question, but

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<sup>47</sup> Rowe (2004, 82).

<sup>48</sup> Zimmerman (2018, 409).

<sup>49</sup> Zimmerman (2018, 409).

<sup>50</sup> Zimmerman (2018, 410).



his discussion can help one develop an answer. In the next section, I will develop an open theist answer to the particular problem of creation.

### **Open Theism and The Particular Problem of Creation**

The open theist can say several things in order to reject Rowe's argument, and these claims can serve as the basis for answering the particular problem of creation. To start, the open theist should not simply reject principle (B). She should reject the entire set up of Rowe's argument. Rowe's argument is cast in terms of possible worlds. Possible worlds are maximally consistent propositions that describe the entire way things are and could be. A possible world describes a complete ontological inventory, plus the relationships that obtain between these objects. Possible worlds also contain a complete, settled timeline. As Benjamin H. Arbour points out, open theists who are committed to an open future cannot consistently speak of possible worlds.<sup>51</sup> A commitment to an open future rules out a settled timeline. So here is what the open theist should say instead.

God's precreation moment is the initial segment of all possible timelines. From God's precreation moment, branch all possible timelines. Some of these possible timelines are quite terrible, so God cannot act to bring them about. Other timelines are good, and God could potentially act to bring them about. But which timeline? There are so many good timelines to choose from, and God cannot bring them all about. Why would God select any given timeline over any other? The open theist maintains that God desires to create a universe with creatures who have libertarian freedom that are capable of entering into everlasting friendship with God. The open theist maintains that this requires that God create a universe with an open future. The choice to create a universe with an open future eliminates a large number of timelines, but it does not eliminate them all. So God is still left with a range of choices.

One option for the open theist is to reject the notion that there is a unique best creative act. Perhaps there are many good kinds of universes that could establish a set of potentially good timelines.<sup>52</sup> Maybe some universes would provide the possibility of better creatures than us. If that is correct, then open theists might face something in the neighbourhood of Rowe's objection. Why would God create this universe and its potential creatures instead of a different universe with better creatures? It seems to me that the open theist can say lots of things. She can start by reminding everyone that God is under no obligation to create anything at all, nor any particular kind of universe. Further, she could say that God is a

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<sup>51</sup> Arbour (2019, 54–58).

<sup>52</sup> Hasker (2022, 209).

gracious being. God could say, "I deem these potential creatures worthy of giving a chance at life and happiness." That certainly sounds like something a perfectly good being would say. Can we fault God for creating us when He could have created better creatures? That seems difficult to maintain, unless you think that God is mistaken in deeming us worthy of giving a chance at life and happiness.

Here is another thing that an open theist might say. She might say that God cannot initially create creatures that are better than humans. Perhaps this is not an option at all. Perhaps the conditions for getting creatures better than humans are the same conditions required for getting humans. The open theist might say that there is a best possible creative action for God to perform in this situation. Perhaps creating a universe with uniform laws of nature and sophisticated risk-management systems is the best possible action for God to perform.<sup>53</sup> Uniform laws of nature provide the necessary conditions for autonomous life to evolve. Sophisticated risk-management systems provide the needed balance of stability and flexibility required for autonomous life to not simply survive but also thrive. Risk-management systems also prevent the universe from going down a dark timeline in which God's purposes for creation fail.

Notice something interesting here. It might seem like the open theist is saying that there is a best possible world. If so, then she will be subject to Rowe's objection that God is not free. This is not quite right since the open theist rejects the notion of God creating worlds. The open theist is saying that God is free to create or not create. God has freely chosen to create a particular kind of universe in order to bring about the value of creator-creature friendships. This is a justifying, not a requiring, reason to create a universe. Thus God is perfectly rational, and not necessitated, to create a universe for this reason. Further, since God wants to create for this reason, there is a best action to perform to satisfy this particular reason. That best act is to create a universe with uniform laws of nature and sophisticated risk-management systems because those are the conditions required to make possible the kinds of creatures that God would like to give a chance at life and happiness. Notice, something further. This is a best action for bringing about a particular kind of universe. This action only takes God so far. Once God has successfully completed this action, this only takes God to some time after the Big Bang. From this moment on, there are multiple possible branching futures. Which future will come about? That is uncertain because God wants creatures to have a significant role in bringing about the future.

This open theist story completely dismantles Rowe's argument. There are no possible worlds. There may be best actions for God to perform sometimes, but these do not undermine God's freedom. Nor does the fact that God faces an open future seem to undermine God's perfect goodness. God has lots of options at any

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<sup>53</sup> For more details see Mullins and Sani (2021).

given moment about what to do, and God selects from any number of good actions. There does not seem to be anything irrational or immoral about that. Certainly nothing that could lead us to rationally infer the possibility of a better being than God.

### Concluding Thoughts

In this paper, I have considered several puzzles related to divine rationality and creation from an open theistic perspective. I have taken much inspiration from Dean Zimmerman's work on these topics over the years. I hope that I have done him an honour by trying to develop his thought in some new and interesting ways.

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