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Continuous creation in the probabilistic world of the theology of Chance

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CONTINUOUS CREATION IN THE PROBABILISTIC WORLD OF THE THEOLOGY OF CHANCE

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I. Metaphysical approach

Christian theism is a *creation ex nihilo* view and is based on the view that God is the only Governor and Lord of all created and existing beings. If God the Creator is the only Lord of all creatures, it follows that he is at every moment in time the Lord of existence of all that exists (CC)¹. In theistic metaphysics, continuous governance of all existing beings is called “conservation” or “continuous creation”. If there were no conservation, then all created beings would cease to exist because they could not continue to exist by themselves. This thesis, which can be called the conservation principle (formulated in a very general way), is based – I would like to claim – on another and even more fundamental principle, which I call the principle

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¹ (CC): Necessarily for all x and t , if x is contingent and x exists at t , then God’s willing that x exists at t brings about x ’s existing at t (Based on Timothy Miller 2007, p. 27).

of divine control. The principle of divine control says that all that exists and happens is willed by God or permitted by Him².

The principle of divine control is very important in discussions concerning the relation between the Creator and His creatures. These seem to be based on two assumptions. The first assumption is that God can achieve all His purposes in the created world (divine providence) if and only if He controls every existing being. Therefore, divine control must be perfect and unrestricted (divine volitions must be determined in every respect). Maximal possible control consists in the fact that God *creates ex nihilo* every being and subsequently conserves them. The second assumption is Anselmian: God is the greatest possible being one can conceive. A perfect being has everything under its control and a perfect being controls everything in the most perfect way possible. Furthermore, the best way to control everything is to create every being out of nothing and to create it as absolutely dependent in existence and nature upon God's will. Omnipotence thus means to conserve continuously all created beings. Continuous creation is the best way to express divine perfection: perfect power and perfect will. Therefore, all contingent beings exist this or that way as long as divine power is acting and divine will wills itself to act upon a given being.

However, the justification of the principle of divine control by means of the ideas of divine providence and divine perfection is not convincing enough. The problem is that we do not know, at least when we are speculating metaphysicians, what divine creative aims are like. Nor do we know whether it is really necessary for God to control absolutely everything to achieve all the purposes He wants to achieve in the created world. Nor do we know whether divine omnipotent control is compatible with the aims He had in mind creating our universe. Therefore, we may consider yet another possible metaphysical principle, the principle of creaturely independence: Created beings (contingent things, whatever their specific metaphysical nature could be, be they simple or composed, material or immaterial) may be created as independent beings. A being is independent in relation to God if, after having been created by God *ex nihilo*, it can continue to exist by itself or by cooperation with other created beings; furthermore, it is at least possible that all of the properties of the independent being are causally independent

² "God permits something to exist or to happen" means simply that God wills something to exist or to happen.

of any direct divine action. Thus, it is at least possible that there exist beings created *ex nihilo* by God which, after having been created, continue to exist and maintain all their properties which they had at the moment of creation without continuous causal divine action. The principle of independence does not entail that God cannot control the created world in the most perfect possible way because we do not know which way of control is the best for the most perfect being.

Concluding this part of our considerations one should say that the definition (principle) of conservation (**CON**), formulated as follows:

God conserves x at $t = \text{def.}$ God's willing that x exists at t brings about x 's existence at t , and there is some t' prior to t such that x exists at t' (Quinn 1993, p. 598),³

is not obviously true (because there might be no such divine action) and it is at least metaphysically possible that another principle, the principle of independence, is true.

However, it is not only possible that the principle of creaturely independence is true: It is probable, in a sense. It is reasonable to believe that principle is true if we consider metaphysical consequences resulting from the idea of continuous conservation. It seems that the conservation principle leads, if not to occasionalism as Malebranche argued, than at least to a strong or weak concurrentism⁴.

Weak concurrentism is the view that God continuously conserves every created contingent being, that God brings about their existence at every moment of divine action, and that this type of divine causation is the only act God performs in the world, perhaps apart from special divine actions, such as miracles. Therefore, there is a room for secondary causation in the world. Secondary causes can bring about changes in other contingent beings even though they cannot be directly responsible for their existence. According to this view, God brings about the existence of sufficient causal

³ This wording of divine conservation is a slightly altered version of Quinn's first exposition of the doctrine of continuous creation presented in Quinn (1983). Quinn's first version was formulated in terms of agent causation (*God* brings about x 's existence), while the last one is elaborated in terms of 'state-state' causation (God's willing – *that x exists*), as William L. Craig has observed (Craig 1998).

⁴ Weak concurrentism has also been called "mere conservationism" by Alfred Freddoso (Freddoso 1991, pp. 554–555).

power in secondary causes. God, however, is not directly responsible for the existence of causal relations between secondary causes; they are natural causes which produce their own effects. Divine continuous conservation is compatible with the existence of secondary causes in the world.

I doubt, however, that this position is tenable. In order to demonstrate the weakness of weak concurrentism, we must have a theory of contingent beings and a theory of causation. Yet, if we could demonstrate that the very theory of contingent beings implies difficulties or perhaps is even inconsistent with other assumptions, then it would be unnecessary to consider a theory of causation.

There is only one promising metaphysics of contingent beings which could be useful in the debate over the compatibility of divine continuous conservation and secondary causation in the world: the Aristotelian theory of substance, according to which a substance is a whole composed of material and formal parts (constituents). Formal parts of a substance are responsible for the internal structure of the whole as well as the functions of particular material parts of the substance. The Aristotelian theory of substance also says that a given substance has essential constituents (parts/properties), determined by the kind to which it belongs, and accidental or non-essential constituents, which are not strictly determined by any kinds of substances (Loux 2002, pp. 96–137). Other theories of contingent beings – e.g., the bundle theory and the theory of bare substratum – cannot help us in solving the problem of divine continuous creation and secondary causation.

Now, let us suppose that x stands for a substance in the Aristotelian sense. Thus, if God brings about that x exists either at the moment t (creation) or at any subsequent moment t' (conservation), then he brings about the existence of all its parts (constituents), essential and accidental parts (qualitative, relational and quantitative properties) included. In order to be a substance, a being has to possess all its properties; it must be determined in every respect. Hence it must be the case that x is F or x is not F . Let y be an effect produced by x . Then x has the property (let it be G) of producing effect y . If God brings about G , then God brings about both the existence of y and x , since he brings about the existence of all the properties of x . Generalized to all substances, if God directly brings about the existence of all substances and all their material and formal parts (constituents), then He is the cause of all effects produced by every existent substance. Therefore, He is directly responsible for x 's being the cause of y ; however, if God is

the cause of y , then x cannot be the cause of y , or at least not the only direct cause of y (as causal overdeterminism and strong concurrentism claim)⁵.

It seems that there may be two possible ways to avoid occasionalism and strong concurrentism without rejecting the principle of conservation (CON).

1.1. The Meinongian approach

The first way is Meinongian⁶: God solely brings about the existence of x and not any of its properties. Properties are effects of secondary causes acting upon substances. This solution, however, is internally inconsistent: To be a substance means to belong to a certain kind, which entails having some essential properties or constituents. Thus, if God brings about the existence of x which belongs to a certain kind K , then He brings about the existence of all its essential properties as determined by K . What is more, God brings about the existence of the kind K itself⁷.

Perhaps we can better understand that the Meinongian way is incoherent if we restrict our consideration to *creation*: that is, to the first moment of the existence of any substance. Following the Aristotelian theory of substance, every substance (including those created by God) has to belong to a certain kind. However, it is impossible that any other contingent beings (substances) could in any way determine essential properties of any other substances, because they also have to be created *ex nihilo* by God as substances of a certain kind. Thus, if God creates every substance (meaning that he brings about

⁵ Causal overdeterminism is the view that “even though God’s causal contributions are not entirely exclusive, they are still characterized by totality – that is, God’s contributions alone are sufficient for every effect” (Miller 2007, p. 140).

⁶ Meinong’s idea is that properties of an object are independent of their existence or non-existence.

⁷ I suggest here that kinds and all abstract entities were created by God, but they could be regarded nonetheless as divine thoughts and not as external objects. For an abstract to be created by God does not entail having any exemplifications. Thus, my suggestion here is not strictly the Aristotelian doctrine of universals. It is possible, however, to maintain the Platonist theory of universals and the Aristotelian theory of substance. The Aristotelian theory of substance is neither a version of a bundle theory nor a bare substratum theory.

the existence of this and not that substance at the moment t), then he also brings about the existence of all of its essential properties at t .

1.2. Essentialist approach

The second way is more promising. It consists in the claim that divine conservation has a restricted (essential) range and concerns only the existence of x and all its essential properties, and not any of its accidental properties or constituents. All accidental parts of the substance x are produced by external agents (secondary causes). In this way, room is made for non-divine agency in the world of substances created and continuously conserved by God. Thus, God brings about the existence of x but not the existence of all its parts. At least some of them can be produced by chance in a sense (for example, via the cooperate actions of many external agents).

Let us suppose that such a scenario is true. We must at the very beginning note that God, when He brings about the existence of x and its essential parts, determines the range and kind of its possible accidental properties as well as its substantial changes. For example, a table cannot sing and a human cannot fly (like a bird can). Thus if x belongs to a kind K (x is K), then no other contingent being (substance) can bring it about that x is F , if F is incompatible with K . But if it is true for any substance x that x is F or x is not F , meaning that x is determinate in every respect and F is not essential for x , then it must be the case that if God brought about the existence of x , then he brought about that x is F or (non- F). If x has been created by God, then x must be determinate in every respect, since x is a substance. Therefore x is F or x is non- F . It is also impossible that any non-essential properties of x could be (directly and totally) caused by other created substances, because every other substance distinct from x has to have all its own properties, including all its accidental properties. It must be so because every substance to be a substance must have all its properties both essential and accidental. Thus it is not possible that any substance created by God (*ex nihilo*) could bring about the existence of any accidental properties of any other substance because all its properties (parts or constituents) are determined directly (intimately) and totally by God.

It seems that this trouble, if it is any trouble, could be easily omitted by the hypothesis that a substance x created by God at the moment t or conserved

by God at any subsequent moment t' can itself determine (“decide”) to be F or non- F at t or t' . This process of partial self-determination could concern all substances created by God *ex nihilo*. It also seems to be possible that accidental properties of x which are produced by it at the first moment of its existence can be replaced by other properties compatible with a given kind K produced by agents distinct from x and from God (say by y). But if x brings about that x is F at t , then x creates F *ex nihilo*. The reason for this is that if God creates x and God does not bring about F (or that x is F), then either x is doing it or another causal agent distinct from x and from God is doing it. Whatever that being could be, it would have to create F *ex nihilo*. This is impossible, because only God can do that. If x brings about that x is F at t' , then either the principle of divine control (at least in its unrestricted form: “all-form”) has to be rejected or x 's self-determination is an illusion.

If this line of reasoning is correct, then all substances must be totally and directly determined (created and caused) by God. They must be determined by God “from the bottom up”. Therefore, it is metaphysically impossible that God created x and conserved it at the moment t' and did not conserve all its essential and accidental properties at the moment t' .

There is of course another important aspect of the problem of divine creation and conservation. If omnipotent God wills something to exist or happen, then it must exist or happen, and if He does not will something to exist or happen, it cannot be or happen. So, if x is F , then x cannot be non- F , because God wills that x is F . Perhaps, there are some indeterminate divine volitions and therefore God wills only that (x is F or x is non- F), but by willing that (x is F or x is non- F), he wills neither that x is F nor that x is non- F (van Inwagen 1988). Thus, if there are such indeterminate divine volitions, not all properties are necessarily determined by divine will. This is an important suggestion, but it does not solve the problem discussed above: If God wills x to exist, then x must be either F or non- F , and only God can bring it about that x is F or that x is non- F . However, the idea of indeterminate or indifferent divine volitions can still be useful in a probabilistic approach to the problem of continuous creation.

Summing up our considerations in the preceding part of the paper, we should say that if God creates *ex nihilo* and continuously conserves all contingent beings, then he determines not only their existence (brings about their existence), but the existence of all their constituents (parts), both essential and accidental.

Mere conservationism – or as some people say, “weak concurrentism” (Miller 2007, p. 158) – is untenable. I do not think that strong concurrentism can be an alternative to weak concurrentism. Strong concurrentism is the view that God not only continuously conserves all contingent things created *ex nihilo*, but also has a direct (intimate) though not exclusive causal contribution in every causal action of every created contingent thing (substance). This view, in spite of some interesting advantages (primarily the explanation of *contra naturam* miracles), ultimately leads either to occasionalism or deism. The argument for the latter has been formulated by Timothy Miller in his dissertation from 2007 (Miller 2007, pp. 143–158).

1.3. Probabilistic metaphysics

There is still another option for theism left open. God creates *ex nihilo* a set of substances $\{x, y, z, \dots\}$, every element of which is completely determined from the bottom up, including all essential and accidental properties $\{P, Q, F, G, \dots\}$, and has a common and compound property: “being unconserved by God and existent” (“SS property”)⁸. There is no reason to think that it is impossible for an omnipotent God to create substances which have such a property. Substances created by God can act one upon another and bring about effects of different kinds: They can produce substantial and accidental changes, and they can even “produce” new kinds of substances and properties as a result of perhaps longstanding and numerous transformations and changes of the initially created set⁹. The substances and properties emerging in this way can be more complex and organized than the substances and properties at the very beginning of the universe. It is also possible that God did not determine in His creative volition what kinds of substances and which of them will exist (indeterminate divine volitions)¹⁰. It is also possible that at least some of the changes and transformations in the created universe are purposeless, meaning that they are not intended by any mind, divine mind

⁸ J. Kvanvig and H. McCann called such a property “a self-sustaining feature” (Kvanvig, McCann 1988).

⁹ By “production” here, I mean that contingent beings can bring about that a certain kind K which had not been exemplified before a given moment t has some exemplifications at any subsequent moment t' .

¹⁰ This claim amounts to the rejection of the principle of divine control.

included, and do not play an important role in the world. It is also possible that some of them are unpredictable even for the perfect mind¹¹. God could issue a command: Let there be something unpredictable for my mind in the universe I decide to create *ex nihilo*. Thus, it is at least possible that there is no causal explanation for some events in the world.

Such events or beings are simply chance events or chance beings. The crucial point is that chance events in the latter sense cannot exist in a world conserved by God. Divine conservation and chance exclude each other, but chance is not out of divine control and providence, because chance has a mathematical measure called probability. Chance events, which are more or less probable events, although not conserved by God, are part of His creative volition and a tool of His providence. Such a view on creation is called “theology of chance”, or “theology of risk” (Bartholomew 2008). I prefer the label “probabilistic theism” (Łukasiewicz 2014).

II. Inductive approach

Speculative metaphysics is one way of considering divine creation and conservation, but there is another way which is less speculative and more empirical in the metaphysics of God. Doing theology in this empirical way, we can think about the possibilities God had before the creation of our world. Such an empirical, say, inductive, approach to the metaphysics of God is typical for the theology of chance. The result of this empirical method is a metaphysics of God which is based on scientific knowledge of the mechanics of our world. An important assumption of this probabilistic metaphysics is that knowledge about the work (the created world) can help us better understand the nature of the Creator.

¹¹ The fact that some events are unpredictable for God does not mean that it is not logically or metaphysically possible for God to know them, but rather that God does not need to know all future events in advance to realize all his aims. Perhaps even all events are known for God, not by prediction but by a kind of divine (timeless) contemplation or eternal perception (Heller 2011).

II.1. Basic empirical data for the probabilistic approach

The most fundamental facts or scientific theories used by probabilistic theism are the following: cosmic and biological evolution, quantum mechanics, biographies of individual human beings and the known history of humankind. In regard to cosmic evolution, theologians of chance point out unintended coincidences of basic cosmological constants which have enabled the universe to develop in such a way that galaxies, stars and habitable planets could emerge (Bartholomew 2008, pp. 176–180). In regard to biological evolution, theologians of chance stress the purposelessness of many events, such as chance mutations, blind routes of evolution, large number of species, and natural catastrophes, such as the extinction of 96% of living species hundreds of million years ago (Haught 2007). In regard to quantum mechanics, theologians of chance point to the indeterminacy of some quantum objects (Polkinghorne 2007, p. 257).

The metaphysicians of chance point to the probabilistic nature of scientific laws. Such probabilistic laws assert some dependencies and enable us to predict (with a given probability) the future of aggregates or collectives, but not the future of their individual parts. We also meet this kind of unpredictability in the case of human behaviour, individual as well as social. All these data give us evidence that our universe has not been created according to a very detailed and precise plan encompassing all substances and all of their properties. Protons, electrons, and genes, but also species, kinds, and particular human beings, are not part of a divine plan and creative volition (Bartholomew 1984, p. 145). How could it be that God brings about the existence of beings which are purposeless, unpredictable and, as such, not determined by his creative volition? If our non-deterministic universe has a Creator, He does not control every substance and every property, *de facto*, he is not the Creator of all contingent entities in our world. Thus, divine action consists in the creation of the universe in its initial stage, and the world is such that God need neither act continuously upon that world nor intervene from time to time in order to achieve His aims. God created the world in such a way that His providence does not have to control absolutely every contingent substance at every moment of its existence in order to realize all that divine will wills to be realized.

Supposing that the above story told by a probabilistic theist is true, or at least neither contradictory nor fantastic, many questions arise. Let us

consider two of them. The first problem is whether probabilistic theism is not a version of radical (pure) deism. The second problem concerns the risk for which God is responsible if divine creation is without divine conservation.

II.2. The problem of deism

An answer to the first question could be that probabilistic theism is not a form of radical deism, because according to its proponents, God is continuously acting on the level of human mind and if there are any other minds in the created world, then he is acting on their minds as well. This divine continuous action manifests divine care about every sentient being in the universe. This divine action, however, is very delicate and subtle, untainted by physical or metaphysical “compulsion”. It is not even the kind of persuasion to which process theologians refer when they speak of God’s involvement in the world¹². It is rather a discreet fellowship and participation in all of our joys and sorrows. Perhaps it is sometimes inspiring illumination opening us to some unknown moral or intellectual possibilities and horizons. Acting in such a way, God is involved in the existence and fate of every being which needs divine involvement and is able to respond to it. Acting in such a way, God can directly influence individuals, groups, and all humankind, or even all existing species (by influencing the most developed species whose behaviour determines the rest of creation, or at least a part of it). The Creator can do all these things without continuous control and determination of everything and everyone. Probabilistic theism is not a radical deism and does not maintain, as the Epicurean school in ancient Greece did, that God, if he exists at all, is not interested in the world and human life.

II.3. The problem of excessive risk

If divine action in the world is so soft and minimized, then it is at least possible, if not inevitable, that God is a great risk-taker and may fail to realize His plan. The latter could undermine His omnipotence and providential care about the created universe and every being in it. If cosmic and

¹² See: Hartshorne 1984.

biological evolution, as well as the whole history of humankind and every human being, always depend on countless and uncontrolled chance events and circumstances, then the possibility of God's failure is real, and even probable. Can the most perfect and omnipotent being take such a great risk?

I think we can answer this question in the positive: Yes, He can, because He is the most perfect being and His omnipotence is absolutely unlimited. A very important premise underlying the answer to the last question is that the risk is not so great, or even that it is very small. It is so because the nature and mechanism of the created world ensure with a very high probability that all purposes intended by God will be attained without his causal action in the processes occurring in the world. The emergence of life in the universe is almost inevitable, because the universe is large and old enough, and biochemical mechanisms are very effective. The emergence of sentient beings was also almost inevitable because of longstanding and countless mutations and adaptations of living organisms to their environment. All this was very probable and hence in a sense necessary (inevitable). The great advantage of the non-deterministic world is its own creativity, which is possible because of the chance events happening in a way restricted only by the laws of nature. Thus, if one evolutionary path fails another one is opened. Perhaps a mutation suitable for the growth and development of a given species happened by chance and enabled it to survive in hard conditions and further develop. Elasticity and redundancy are very typical for the world of chance, but because of these properties, this world has a large number of possibilities and abilities to develop and regenerate after various natural catastrophes (Łukasiewicz 2006).

III.3. The problem of evil

Even if all the above scenarios are convincing or at least not incoherent, there is still another big question about whether God takes an excessive risk in a much more crucial matter: that is, in the matter of the salvation and condemnation of human beings. There remains the problem of evil and suffering in the non-deterministic and probabilistic world. All sensitive beings are at the risk of experiencing undeserved physical pain and spiritual suffering. Furthermore, there seems to be enormous, undeserved and pointless pain and suffering in the universe. How could it be that an omnipotent and morally

perfect being allows sensitive creatures to exist in the world of chance? Only God, who has absolutely everything under His divine control, is morally justified in creating and conserving a world containing seemingly pointless and horrifying evils. Yet, in answer to the last question, a proponent of the theology of chance can ask another question in return: How could it be that an omnipotent, omniscient and morally perfect being created all contingent things and states of affairs allowing all suffering and evil to happen? It is God who not only created absolutely everything, but continuously conserves absolutely everything, and thus causally contributes to every suffering and evil of our world. It seems that the way in which a probabilistic theologian could cope with the problem of evil is more promising or, to put it better, is less disgusting than any way accessible to a defender of continuous creation.

In conclusion, it is metaphysically and physically possible that probabilistic theism (a weak version of Christian deism) is right as to the true nature of divine action in our world. And even more, probabilistic theology is in a better position, because its metaphysical propositions find some empirical support in evidence provided by contemporary science and what is even more important, it finds support in our moral sensitivity.

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Summary

The aim of the paper is to present and analyse the doctrine of continuous creation typical for theism. Continuous creation is conceived of as divine causal action consisting in God's bringing about the existence of any being at every moment of its existence. Such a definition of divine action, as N. Malebranche argued, leads to occasionalism – that is, to the view that God is the only cause in the world. In the first part of the paper, an attempt is made to demonstrate that Malebranche's conclusion is valid and that two alternative views, weak and strong concurrentism, are not tenable. In the second part of the article, the idea of continuous creation is discussed, which can be formulated from the point of view of probabilistic theism.