

Possible Worlds and God's Creative Process: How a Classical Doctrine of Divine Creation Can Understand Divine Creativity

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Abstract

In this article we will argue this thesis: even with classical theism and meticulous providence, one can properly say *God exercises creativity*. This is not merely to say that God is creative – which is perhaps tautologous given that God is the Creator – but further, it is to say that God's activity in relation to the cosmos displays *creativity*. We will examine open theism, which resides at the other end of the spectrum, in order to provide contrast with the position defended in this article. There are three aspects we intend to affirm in saying *God exercises creativity*. First, the *product* (the cosmos which God made) exhibits creativity. This should not be particularly contentious and we will not pursue this aspect here. Second, the *agent* (God) exhibits creativity. Third, the *process* exhibits creativity. Both of these latter aspects will be defended. In this article we argue that God's freedom, creation's contingency, creation's reality and actuality, and considerations from the incarnation all enable meaningful ways in which one can speak of divine creativity while still affirming classical theism and meticulous providence. First, in support of our thesis we will use possible world talk as a heuristic device. Possible world talk involves modal claims, modal logic and counterfactuals. We use this conceptual device, operating within a theistic framework, to approach with clarity theological issues such as the divine decree, creation *ex nihilo* and providence. Second, we will utilise a two-nature christology to speak meaningfully about divine creativity. Against those who describe God's creativity in terms of divine attributes, we suggest that it is possible to understand God's creativity in terms of the incarnation. Drawing upon the work of Thomas Weinandy, we suggest that it is possible to speak about God experiencing something genuinely new in the person of Christ. As such, one can hold to a classical doctrine of divine creation and use language associated with human creativity, such as 'risk', 'process' and 'discovery', to speak about God. We hope to demonstrate that the affirmation of divine creativity need not be exclusive to positions such as open theism.

Keywords: Classic theism, creation, divine freedom, incarnation, possible worlds, providence.

Divine creativity

In this article we will argue that, even with classical theism and meticulous providence, one can properly say *God exercises creativity*. By 'language of creativity' we are referring to those words commonly associated with human creative activity such as 'process', 'risk' and 'discovery'. We will compare this view with open theism¹ in order to contrast two positions which reside on opposite ends of the continuum; we acknowledge that mediating views not mentioned in this article might well be possible.

A working definition for human creativity could be: an activity which is novel, valuable and surprising.² Our argument acknowledges that there is an analogy between divine and human creativity, but that divine and human creativity are not identical. The asymmetrical nature of this analogy follows from the assumption that human creativity presupposes or is derived from divine creativity. Divine creativity, on the other hand, derives solely from God's being and is determined by his love, goodness and freedom. Furthermore, this analogy does not attempt to discern *how* God is creative, as if one could understand the processes or mechanisms by which he works,³ but this analogy is employed simply to point out that God exercises creativity. Our knowledge of divine creativity, as well as the analogy between divine and human creativity, is justified only by God's revelation of himself as a God who exhibits creativity. More will be said about this later, but for now it is enough to say that divine creativity is revealed most fully in the incarnation and resurrection of Christ.

In the contemporary theological scene it is commonly argued⁴ that the language of human creativity cannot be used to speak about a classical model

¹ By the term 'open theism' we mean theologies which insist that God has left the future open, that the future is not fixed and, even for God, elements of what will happen are genuinely unknown and yet-to-be determined. Clark Pinnock is representative: see his *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001).

² This is Margaret Boden's definition of creativity and, though she emphasises the surprising element of creativity, it is very similar to other attempts within the discipline of psychology to define creativity. Her term 'surprising' must be understood against the background of what she calls a 'generative system': a set of rules, ideas and constraints which make creativity possible. Creativity, therefore, is not defined as freedom from constraints, but as working within constraints. That creativity should be surprising emphasises the relative freedom of the personal agent with respect to a specific generative system. Margaret Boden, 'What is Creativity?', in Boden (ed.), *Dimensions of Creativity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), pp. 75–117.

³ Eccl 11:4–6.

⁴ See e.g. Paul Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), p. 56; W. H. Vanstone, *Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense: The Response of Being to the Love of God* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1977), pp. 65–6; Daniel Day Williams, *The Spirit and Forms of Love* (Welwyn, Herts: James Nisbet & Co, 1968).

of God, and that it is more appropriately used in reference to co-creative models of the interaction between God and creation which emphasise openness and precariousness in divine providence. A co-creative model seems to solve problems which arise when trying to attribute the language of human creativity to God. First, it provides a conceptual framework wherein one can speak meaningfully about God discovering something new because there is an epistemic gap between Creator and creature. Second, it presents reality as fundamentally dialogic, so that God's choice to create and to be continually creative contains elements of 'process', 'risk' and 'discovery'.

We think, however, that it is possible to use the language of human creativity in meaningful ways when speaking about classical divine creativity. Our task is to work within a commitment to a classical understanding of divine attributes (impassibility, immutability, etc.) and to a 'meticulous providence' model of divine providence. By 'meticulous providence' we mean the idea that 'God orders all things that come to pass, such that no event occurs without his concurrently bringing it about in conjunction with mundane creaturely causes'.⁵ Viewing the issue through the lens of possible world talk is a helpful way to preserve the meticulous providence model and to make room for the language of human creativity as applied to God.⁶ Seen in the light of our discussion of possible worlds, we argue that the incarnation, as God's creative activities entering his creation, is the proper location and centre for divine creativity within a meticulous providence model of divine providence and creation. To put it as concisely as possible, we offer four reasons why meticulous providence and classical theism are compatible with a God who exercises creativity. God's activity in relation to creation exhibits creativity because:

1. God acts freely.
2. Creation could have been otherwise.
3. Creation exists in actuality, and not merely as a possibility.
4. God discovers something new in creation.

Meticulous providence and creativity

The idea that God is the cause of all events in creation is often referred to as 'meticulous providence'. The last three chapters of book I of John Calvin's

⁵ Oliver Crisp, 'Calvin on Creation and Providence', in *John Calvin and Evangelical Theology*, (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2009), p. 53.

⁶ We are not the first to use possible world talk in this manner; e.g. see James F. Ross, 'Creation', *Journal of Philosophy* 77/10 (1980), pp. 614–29.

Institutes are commonly cited⁷ as a prime example of this view of providence. Calvin writes, 'the providence we mean is not one by which the Deity, sitting idly in heaven, looks on at what is taking place in the world, but one by which he, as it were, holds the helms and overrules all events'.⁸ He pursues a view of providence which emphasises God's special action. Those who argue that God oversees creation without acting in specific events, argues Calvin, have misunderstood the God of scripture. For Calvin, 'providence extends not less to the hand than to the eye'.⁹ More recently, Vernon White, in his book *The Fall of a Sparrow*, defends the notion that 'whatever happens is caught up to serve God's intention'.¹⁰ He argues that, though God has an intended end for all of creation, each specific event in creation is, itself, intended as an end by God. As Calvin and White seem to imply, there can be no chance or accident in creation. Furthermore, there is no sense in which God can be frustrated by creation. For God, there is no 'class of events in the world which forces the relation of the divine intention into a relation of means'.¹¹ In other words, God is never frustrated by creation because there are no events which he regards simply as a means to some other end. This is what we mean by meticulous providence: all events in creation are the end of God's intention and action.

To understand both the difficulty of the problem which faces a model of meticulous providence, as well as to anticipate potential solutions, it is valuable to place providence within the context of creation. Possible world talk is the tool that we will use.¹²

Clarity is required with several key terms, for their usage here is somewhat technical. By 'actualise' we mean 'God exercising his will in such a way that X is brought about'. By 'create' we mean 'to bring about the existence of something other'. By 'providence' we mean 'God's activity in the world in time'. By 'world' we mean an entire possible world, in other words, 'a

⁷ E.g. see Crisp, 'Calvin on Creation and Providence'; Paul Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas* (Oxford: OUP, 2004).

⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes*, I.xvi.4.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Vernon White, *The Fall of a Sparrow* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1985), p. 133.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

¹² Possible world talk is a conceptual tool, a heuristic, and our usage in this article ought not to be regarded as offering a literal description of how God creates or decides to do so. We deem the invoking of possible world talk for creation and providence to be warranted by such theological concepts as God's freedom and creaturely contingency. Further, to cast God's creation in possible world terms is not to mechanise or depersonalise it, in fact we would argue that envisaging it as we do can allow for God's relationship to possible worlds to be highly personal and imaginative.

maximal description of reality or a way reality might be'. Every possible world is actualised by God's will but God only creates in some possible worlds.

Given the possible world schema, it seems that the decision to actualise this world aligns with what is fundamentally intended by talk of the divine decree: the exhaustive details of everything that ever happened/existed, happens/exists or will happen/will exist are chosen by God, fully known to God and are fixed by the divine will. God not only knows the details, he chooses what will be actual and he chooses and actualises this possible world on the whole and as a whole. God's creation *ex nihilo* and his providence are enveloped under the divine act of 'actualising this possible world'. Further, for God, choosing and actualising the totality of this possible world is one complete and unified act. In this model God does not have any 'fuzzy gaps' or 'loose ends' in some of the details.

An open theist model of providence appears to provide for a greater amount of contingency because the future is literally not yet fixed or determined. God's decision is made in stages in this model – not merely the outworking of that decision, but even the decision itself is in process; indeed it becomes difficult to speak of a unified decision at all. The creative decisions and the actions comprising God's creating and sustaining are all quite distinct on this model – for the open theist, creation and providence are categorically different and distinct. As time progresses and the world unfolds, God is making decisions and acting; in so doing he is gradually narrowing the pool of possible worlds which might become actual. Perhaps the finalisation of God's choice lies in the eschaton, but currently for God it is genuinely up in the air how many of the aspects of reality will turn out.

These two models differ starkly on the issue of human free will. Given the open theist commitment to libertarian free will, it is easy to see how God 'risks' or 'discovers' in relation to a (libertarianly) free action because that action contributes to the determining of the actual world. With perhaps Aquinas as a notable exception,¹³ the meticulous providence model appears only possible on a compatibilist account of freedom; no coherent conjoining of libertarian free will and the meticulous providence model seems possible. We will argue that, within a compatibilist framework,

¹³ For contemporary defences of this view, see Alfred J. Freddoso (ed.), *The Existence and Nature of God*, University of Notre Dame Studies in the Philosophy of Religion, 3 (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), pp. 115–40; W. Matthews Grant, 'Aquinas among Libertarians and Compatibilists: Breaking the Logic of Theological Determinism', *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 75 (2001), pp. 221–35; and Hugh J. McCann, 'Divine Sovereignty and the Freedom of the Will', *Faith and Philosophy* 12/4 (1995), pp. 582–98.

God's providential action exhibits creativity. Using possible world talk as a conceptual framework, we will develop our first three reasons supporting meticulous providence as compatible with a God who exercises creativity.

Before moving on to possible worlds, a brief word on the first two chapters in Genesis seems in order. We have been intentional in describing creation and providence as a *process* – biblically, there seems to be warrant for viewing creation in some sense as such. Whatever one makes of the Genesis account of creation and all the interpretive issues involved, it cannot be denied that on some level God's act of creating is portrayed as a purposeful *process*, unfolding over the course of several 'days'. The creation account in Genesis sees creation 'emerging out of a prior plan or purpose'.¹⁴ Whether one sees the purpose in the creation account to be the formation of the nation of Israel as rabbinic commentators suggest,¹⁵ or the establishment of humanity which ultimately anticipates Christ, the basic point is the same: Genesis sees God's relationship to the cosmos in terms of a process with a goal or purpose in mind. This hints at the idea that creation *ex nihilo* and providence are united in a variety of ways, particularly in purpose.

Possible world talk and divine creativity

As stated earlier, creation *ex nihilo* and providence are to be viewed as complementary aspects of the one and unified eternal act of God in choosing to actualise this possible world. Viewing creation and providence in terms of possible world talk helps us to see the benefit of the position defended in this article: regarding creation, it retains divine freedom and transcendence; regarding providence, it affirms a strong sense of divine sovereignty. It does all this while still maintaining a way in which both God as *agent* and providence as *process* can exhibit divine creativity. Within a possible world framework, we offer three reasons why it makes sense to attribute the language of human creativity to God and providence.

First, God's agency in creation and providence exhibits creativity because God acts *freely*. God's creative freedom in choosing between good possible worlds is free, but not unlimited. By this we mean (1) that God's choice is limited to one of the possible worlds, and (2) that God's character means that he will choose a world that is fundamentally good. Regarding the first point, God does not actualise a contradictory state of affairs: God can only actualise a possible world. Fundamentally we are denying that God is 'beyond' or 'above' logic (whatever that might mean) and are affirming that the laws of

¹⁴ Russell R. Reno, *Genesis, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2010), p. 34.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

logic stem from his being – he does not choose or create them (while there is much more that could be said here, the end result is to affirm this: God does not do contradictions). Regarding the second point, God's goodness, wisdom, etc. mean that he will only choose a world which is fundamentally good, is a wise choice, etc.¹⁶ God is free to choose from amongst a seemingly infinite number of good possible worlds.

Theologians of the classical tradition have often (rightly, in our judgement) wanted to emphasise God's choice to create. This avoids any talk of God's creativity as emanation (creation is not automatic), and it also guards against a process view of God (God does not need to create or to have a creation to be who he is). The objection sometimes raised is that it is hard to see how this account avoids accusations of making God's decision to create an arbitrary one. In response, we question what is meant by 'arbitrary'. If by 'arbitrary' one means 'for no (good) reason', then certainly God's choice to create is not arbitrary. God's essential nature limits the scope of his options when it comes to the decision regarding creation. His nature excludes his will from actualising a world with contradictions, a fundamentally bad world, a world that would be unwise to bring about, etc. Within those limitations, it seems God has an unfathomable number of options of worlds he might actualise. Here is where the accusation of arbitrariness still might arise: amongst those options, just exactly why did God choose this world to actualise and not some other? We are not sure how anyone, save for God, could answer that question; in theology there are points where we simply reach our boundaries of understanding and run into mystery. However, it seems to us that we can and should say that God's free choice is not arbitrary: he is *pleased* to actualise this world, he *chooses* to give being to this cosmos and he *loves* his creation. God's choice is not without reasons: he has values, he has preferences and he has passions (in the sense understood within classic theism). Nothing except God's essential being accounts for the exercising of his will, and the exercising of his freedom in no way offends against any of the divine attributes. God enjoys a radical self-determination which is completely unique and which vividly displays his creativity.

Possible world talk, by emphasising the difference between possible and actual worlds, preserves the transcendence of the divine creative act. And, by

¹⁶ There are worlds which are on the whole fundamentally good, and worlds which are fundamentally bad; there is no 'best' possible world (*contra* Leibniz). There are many good worlds which involve evil but are nonetheless on the whole fundamentally good because of some other good things which require the involvement of evil, that 'brings the baggage of evil along with it' in such a way that there is no possible world in which these good things obtain but evil does not.

emphasising that God creates according to his essential being, it affirms that the divine creative act is self-limiting.

Second, God's activity in the process of meticulous providence exhibits creativity because things could have been otherwise. In this point we will treat the sense of *contingency* which brings us to speak of divine creativity.

The meticulous providence model would consider divine providence to be one and the same with God's choice to actualise this particular world: the two are merely different aspects of a singular divine act. In as much as God is free in his choice of which world to actualise, any specific detail of that world *could have been otherwise* (should God so will). The creativity of the process is conceptually linked to the creativity of the choice of possible worlds. In contrast, a co-creative interaction between God and creation would hold that divine providence is engaged in an open process, the course of which is greatly affected by the action of creation and not by God.¹⁷

The distinction between possible and actual worlds is suggestive of a way in which divine creativity may incorporate creaturely response. If creation could have been otherwise, then the actualised world is more than simply a means to an end. M. B. Foster argues that, if such is the case, the meaning of creation 'is not capable of being conceived in distinction from the sensible material in which it is expressed'.¹⁸ Like the artist who must look and see what he has made to know what it means, God has made a world which can only be fully understood in its very contingency, creatureliness and materiality. Thus, the full meaning of creation can only be ascertained in its actuality.

Third, God's activity in the process of meticulous providence exhibits creativity because the actual world in fact *actually* exists. God's creative activity requires the real actualisation of the creative product and of the creative process. It is not enough for God to know the world as a possibility or an ideal; creation must have real, objective, independent existence outside the

¹⁷ E.g. 'I believe we may say that God knows at any moment all that there is to be known about the future. That is, God knows it as the future ... So God knows all the possibilities that exist for the world and its inhabitants ... But God knows these as possibilities, not as actualities, because they have not yet happened.' Paul Fiddes, *Participating in God* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2000), p. 142. John Polkinghorne presents what appears to be an even stronger position: 'The Creator's kenotic love includes allowing divine special providence to act as a cause among causes. Of course, nothing could reduce talk about the Creator to terms that bear a valid analogy to creaturely discourse, other than that the divine condescension had allowed this to be so.' John Polkinghorne, 'Kenotic Creation and Divine Action', in Polkinghorne (ed.), *The Work of Love* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), p. 104.

¹⁸ M. B. Foster, 'The Christian Doctrine of Creation and the Rise of Modern Natural Science', *Mind* 43 (1934), p. 462.

mind of God for it to be meaningful, for it to give God glory, and for us to speak of God's creativity. If part of the meaning of creation is God's glory then we can say that creation does not mean anything until God makes it actual.

By emphasising the difference between possible and actual worlds, possible world talk establishes a ground for the relationship between Creator and creation. Perhaps an illustration about God's love might help clarify this difference. In the possible world that God has actualised, there is never a person called Thor Watkins-Bawulski from Nantucket. God does not love Thor Watkins-Bawulski from Nantucket, because there is no such person. There are possible worlds in which the person Thor Watkins-Bawulski from Nantucket does exist, and if one of those possible worlds were the actual world, then God would love Thor. But since in this world – the actual one – there is no Thor, God does not love him. Only that which is in the actual world exists, existence is more than merely a property of an idea in the mind of God, and God only interacts with things which actually exist.

Creativity is, like love, an active relationship that God has with the actual world. A robust Christian doctrine of creation not only affirms that God brings something out of nothing, but also that divine creativity is continuous and that it moves creation towards its end. Like the above example in which we argue that God does not love a possible world, divine continuous creativity only makes sense in relation to an actual creation. Further, like love which seeks the response of the beloved, creativity seeks a free response from that which it creates. Only in the context of a relationship between Creator and creature who both have real, independent existence, is it possible to speak of creation's free response to the Creator and to use language such as 'process', 'discovery' and 'risk' to describe divine creativity.

Is God simply 'going through the motions'?

While our consideration of possible world talk provides us with important reasons why meticulous providence may be compatible with a God who exercises creativity, one may still wish to question whether these reasons are sufficient to attribute creativity to God's actions in relation to the world. This is an important objection and we will consider it in detail. Although his agency is free, creation contains an element of contingency and actuality is significantly different from possibility, it may be that divine providence is God simply 'going through the motions'. For example, W. H. Vanstone writes:

It is assumed that for that to which He gives purpose He already has purpose, and that of that which he uses he has predetermined the use. To

make this assumption is to destroy the basis for any real analogy between divine and human creativity, and to exclude from the activity of God all the precariousness and all the poignancy of love. It is to reduce the divine activity to a kind of production – a mere drawing out, or display, of that which already is. If the purpose of God in creation is foreknown and foreordained to fulfilment, then the creation itself is vanity.¹⁹

Vanstone is suggesting that if God is the ultimate cause of everything that happens in creation, then there can be no 'basis for any real analogy between divine and human creativity'. Meticulous providence, argues Vanstone, posits a picture of God's action which is absent of risk. According to Vanstone's view, divine creativity offers to creation what he calls the 'power of response'. Thus, God grants creation the power to determine divine creativity 'as either triumphant or tragic'.²⁰ If divine action cannot be described as risky, it would seem that God does not adequately respect the response of creation to the activity or love of God as something that is genuinely 'other' than God. In other words, Vanstone's criticism is based upon an assumption that creative activity reaches beyond itself and seeks a response from something other.

Vanstone's critique of meticulous providence assumes that vulnerability is an inherent and inescapable aspect of creativity. Attributing creativity to God, therefore, appears to simultaneously import passibility as a divine attribute as well. Paul Fiddes suggests that there is a connection between a divine ontology which includes potentiality and divine attributes which include creativity. He writes that 'a suffering God is one who has potentialities within him which he has not yet actualised; only in this way can we speak of a God who suffers change in suffering'.²¹ Fiddes then carries the language of potentiality/actuality from the context of God's passibility into a discussion of providence and creativity. He writes:

There must be some gap between what God already knows and what the world does at any point in time . . . One way of conceiving this would be to distinguish between what God knows perfectly in potentiality, and what he knows perfectly in actuality as it happens . . . We might also appeal to the analogy of an artist painting a picture; he will have the potential of it in his mind as he begins, but in his interaction with the materials of his creation he will discover new aspects to his purpose, and the actuality

¹⁹ W. H. Vanstone, *Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense: The Response of Being to the Love of God* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1977), pp. 65–6.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

²¹ Fiddes, *Creative Suffering of God*, p. 52.

will have novel features to it. There is some co-creativity between artist and medium, some playful development of artistic purpose.²²

An epistemic gap between God and the world allows Fiddes to speak of God genuinely discovering something new about the world as he relates to it. Fiddes suggests that co-creativity is the only God–world relationship which allows us to speak meaningfully of creation's free response to the Creator, and so of divine creativity.²³

Both Vanstone and Fiddes raise a fundamental question: 'what is at stake when ascribing creativity to God?' There are, of course, a great many scriptural references which make sense if understood in terms of divine creativity. Some descriptions of God as a craftsman would not appear to be coherent if God did not exercise creativity.²⁴ The playful role that Wisdom has in creation narratives of Proverbs is very suggestive of a divine creativity which is less like a technician and more like a playful child.²⁵ Furthermore, descriptions of the beauty, order and diversity of creation are suggestive of a God who exercises creativity.²⁶ So, ascribing creativity to God seems to add greater coherence to this kind of biblical language, but it would also seem important to ascribe creativity to God if one intends to understand divine creation in terms of personal agency. One need not assume a romantic notion of creativity which emphasises feeling over reason, and expression over craftsmanship, but it seems obvious that some notion of divine creativity is helpful for separating a Christian doctrine of creation from mechanistic, random or automatic processes. Indeed, Foster argues that an important feature which separates (logically and philosophically) the Christian creator from the Platonic demiurge is that the creator produces something like a work of art, whereas the demiurge produces a technology.²⁷ If we are to maintain this hallmark of the Christian doctrine of creation – that God creates like an artist or craftsman – then we need a way of articulating divine creativity in an intelligent and coherent way.

Vanstone and Fiddes assume that classical theism and meticulous providence cannot do justice to divine creativity because of its account of

²² *Ibid.*, p. 56.

²³ Fiddes, *Participating in God*, p. 143. He writes: 'If God is going to allow the world to be creative with some reflection of God's creativity, there must be some things which are possible but which have not yet become actual for God. Further, when they actually happen there will be something new about them, something contributed by the world.'

²⁴ Gen 2:7–9; Jer 18:1–10.

²⁵ Prov 3:13–20, 8:22–31.

²⁶ Job 38–41; Ps 8, 19, 74:12–17, 104, 136:4–9.

²⁷ Foster, 'Christian Doctrine of Creation', p. 462.

the epistemic relation between God and the world. To use Fiddes' words, if there is no 'gap between what God already knows and what the world does at any point in time', then God is not exercising creativity. Without this gap, it would seem that God works in a more impersonal way: like a technician rather than an artist. Similarly, we would hesitate to ascribe human creativity to an activity which is exposed as 'completely accidental' or 'mechanical'.²⁸ Berys Gaut, for example, suggests that the creative process must involve an element which he calls 'flair'.²⁹ To put it succinctly, flair is the use of one's skills without following a set routine. Creativity, therefore, involves the freedom to stand back from a routine and make evaluative judgements. Flair suggests the possibility of doing something in a new way, changing one's mode of operation or improvising in an unanticipated situation. Does God have the freedom to do something 'new' in creation, or is creation the unfolding of a plan conceived in eternity?

The force of Vanstone's and Fiddes' criticism is that meticulous providence cannot accommodate, in a meaningful and analogous way, the idea that God discovers something new in creation. This is why Vanstone argues that 'if the purpose of God in creation is foreknown and foreordained to fulfilment, then the creation itself is vanity'. Fiddes' criticism extends even further than Vanstone's. For Fiddes, a God who exercises creativity cannot be the classical God who is *actus purus*. He must be a God who includes potentiality within himself. The God who exercises creativity, argues Fiddes, is also the God who is passible and vulnerable because creativity is an activity which extends beyond the self and reaches out towards the other. But how can the God of meticulous providence and classical theism discover something new in creation? If the whole of creation is actualised according to God's eternal choice, how can there be any possibilities for God to uncover?

Is it possible to defend meticulous providence from this critique? One might look, initially, to Calvin's development of divine providence for an answer. As Paul Helm points out, Calvin does include a 'diversity of purpose'³⁰ within his understanding of providence. This allows Calvin 'to

²⁸ Berys Gaut, 'Creativity and Skill', in Michael Krausz, Denis Dutton and Karen Bardsley (eds), *The Idea of Creativity* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2009), p. 86.

²⁹ *Ibid.* Similarly, Dustin Stokes argues for the following as a minimal condition for the creative process: '[features of a process] is creative only if [those features] could not, relative to the cognitive profile of the agent in question, have been done or performed before the time it actually was'. Stokes, 'The Metaphysics of Creativity', in Kathleen Stock and Katherine Thomson-Jones (eds), *New Waves in Aesthetics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 120.

³⁰ Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas*, p. 100. See Calvin, *Institutes*, II.iv.2.

attribute intrinsic powers to the various levels of agency',³¹ and to preserve the relative independence of God's creatures. The diversity of purpose within God's providential action comes to the fore in Calvin's theology when he deals with the question of evil. When pressed on the issue of evil, Calvin softens his meticulous providence position and suggests that God does not command, but permits evil. Although he does not seem wholly satisfied with the language of permission, it allows him to speak of evil as something that God discovers in creation and then redeems by directing it towards his own ends.³² This might be a starting point for attributing creativity to meticulous providence but, ultimately, it is unsatisfying because it only allows one to say that God exercises creativity in relation to evil but not good. Furthermore, even if Calvin could speak of God discovering something new in creation, he would not suggest that this discovery leads to a change in God.

Is it possible to speak of divine creativity in a meaningful way if the God-world relationship is not understood in terms of co-creativity? Is it possible to hold a meticulous model of divine providence, and affirm that God exercises creativity? We suggest that the argument 'God can exercise creativity if and only if the world is co-creative' relies upon the assumption that divine passibility and creativity are located within the first order divine attributes. If passibility and creativity are located elsewhere, such as in the incarnation, it is still possible to hold meticulous providence. We will now discuss how one might speak of God's creativity in relation to the incarnation.

The incarnation and creativity

We now arrive at the fourth and final point in defending our thesis: God's activity in relation to the world exhibits creativity because God discovers something new in creation.³³ The problems associated with meticulous providence may be ameliorated by considering the incarnation to be a focus for God's providential activities. It is notable that Calvin does not articulate providence in trinitarian terms, and so the divine may appear impersonal and overbearing. As numerous New Testament writers suggest, Christ is not only sovereign over all creation, but he also has a role in its creation and providence. Christ is described as the beginning, sustainer and goal of all

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

³² Helm uses 'finding' language when he interprets Calvin's position on evil. He writes, 'Calvin's emphasis is not on God causing evil, nor on planting evil, but on him "finding" it, and on using what he finds for his own holy ends.' *John Calvin's Ideas*, p. 125.

³³ Use of the word 'discovery' is metaphorical: God in the divine nature does not change, but discovers new things about creation as a human rather than discovering new things directly as God.

things.³⁴ Eduard Lohse draws attention to the way in which New Testament language regarding Christ's relationship to creation draws upon and subverts a Stoic philosophy of nature.³⁵ He writes that in contrast to

Stoic praise of nature the self-contained harmony of all things is described with the words 'All things ... go back to you', the phrase *eis auton* (toward/to him) [in Colossians 1:16] which refers to Christ receives a different meaning; all things are created 'toward' him. In this way not only the statements about the origin of creation are summarised, but also the goal of creation is indicated: creation finds its goal in no one save Christ alone.³⁶

Furthermore, as Colin Gunton pointed out, 'If Jesus Christ is a model of God's determination of the creature, then clearly it is a determination that realises rather than stunts freedom.'³⁷ God mediates himself in relation to creation, argued Gunton, but not in such a way that God must hold back some of his activity or leave open an autonomous sphere of activity for the creature. The incarnation establishes the possibility of a free creaturely response to the Creator that is, at the same time, perfected by the Son. Locating divine creativity within the incarnation, rather than the divine attributes, preserves the idea that divine providence cannot be frustrated. In the incarnation, God takes on the actuality of creaturely existence and discovers, in a way he could not have otherwise, what it means to be a creature.

According to this view, God's capacity to be affected by creation, to receive a creaturely response, is mediated through the person of Jesus Christ. Such a christological formulation is strongly Chalcedonian as it affirms that the two natures do not mix. The Council of Chalcedon (451) stated: 'one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, recognised in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union, but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person and subsistence, not as parted or separated into two persons ...' But the two natures do come together to form the one person of Jesus, in whom the divine and human attributes are communicated.

³⁴ See e.g. 1:1–3; 1 Cor 8:6; Eph 1:3–14; Col 1:15–16; Heb 1:2–3.

³⁵ Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, tr. William R. Poehlmann and Robert J. Karris, in Helmut Koester (ed.), *Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), pp. 49–52.

³⁶ Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, p. 52.

³⁷ Colin Gunton, *The Triune Creator* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 183.

In a very qualified sense, one could hold a Chalcedonian christology and argue that God is passible in regards to his creation. Thomas Weinandy, for example, is a contemporary theologian who argues that all language of divine suffering should be restricted to the person of Jesus Christ. He criticises contemporary theologians who champion a God who suffers in himself and so diminish Christ's sufferings to 'a mythological expression or symbol of what is happening transcendentally and ahistorically to and within God as God'.³⁸ Instead, Weinandy argues for a christology which allows God to suffer as a human being. He writes:

God from all eternity may have known, within his divine knowledge, what it is like for human beings to suffer and die, and he may have known this perfectly and comprehensively. But until the Son of God actually became man and existed as a man, God, who is impassible in himself, never experienced and knew suffering and death as man in a human manner.³⁹

Thus, the suffering that God experiences in Christ is genuinely new, and one could say that the actuality of creaturely existence affects him. To place Weinandy's statement in terms of possible world talk, the knowledge of suffering in possibility is not enough for God, and so he enters creation to know suffering in its actuality.

Although it seems common sense that a God who responds in his essence to the suffering of humanity is more compassionate, restricting the suffering of God to the person of Jesus may establish a much deeper response. Weinandy points out that the God who suffers in the person of Jesus is the more appropriate answer to a modern world that wants to know if God is compassionate and understands human suffering.⁴⁰ He argues, quite logically, that a God who suffers in a human manner knows what human suffering is like to a greater extent than a God who suffers in a divine manner. Similarly, human creativity demands that the artist understand and know his material on a deep level. This could be most profoundly achieved if the human artist could somehow incarnate herself in the material so as to understand it from the inside. We may understand God's creativity as discovering something new in creation because, through the person of Jesus Christ, God comes to a full knowledge and understanding of creaturely existence.

Just as we may locate divine creativity in the incarnation, we may also locate other language associated with human creativity, such as 'process',

³⁸ Thomas Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), p. 173.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

'risk' and 'discovery', there as well. 'Process' is a difficult term to articulate because divine creativity, according to our possible worlds model, remains atemporal. Instead of expressing the process in terms of time, it may be more fruitful to understand the divine creative process in terms of the structure of call and response. According to the christological understanding that we have been developing, God is both the call and the response, but the response, in the person of Jesus, incorporates the experience of his creatures. 'Risk' and 'discovery' suggest that God somehow encounters the unknown. Weinandy puts it well when he writes, 'In an unqualified manner one can say that, as man, the Son of God had experiences he never had before because he never existed as man before'.⁴¹ Though God may have full propositional knowledge of his creation, gaining experiential knowledge of creation (knowing what it is like to be a creature) is a matter of existing within that creation. The Son of God in the person of Jesus is exposed to new experiences, and so we may legitimately speak of God risking and discovering.

We must point out that within the view we are defending, however, there is one aspect in which God's experience of risk, discovery etc. is disanalogous from human experience of the same. Jesus' experience in the world was *subjectively* risky, involved *subjective* vulnerability, was an experience of *subjective* human creativity etc. Yet, in strict terms, as the incarnate God of classic theism, operating under meticulous providence, there is not a sense in which Christ experienced *objective* risk in his interaction with the cosmos, even in the incarnation. Of course, in his human nature Christ only had epistemic access to this truth by *human faith*, which ensures the genuineness of his subjective experience. For example, in our view, when Christ is betrayed by Judas, and brought before the High Priest and Pilate, it is not that God is out of control, but that he experiences the risk of being handed over to the power and control of another is incorporated into Christ's redemption of creation.⁴² God chose to actualise a world in which Jesus would risk his life and ultimately die. This, however, does nothing to diminish the *subjective* experience of risk of Christ as real, genuine and just like ours, even if, objectively speaking, there are points of disanalogy between the objective aspects of his experience of risk and the objective aspects of ours.

We locate divine creativity in the person of Jesus Christ because it is there that the Creator discovers what it is to be a creature. It might be questioned

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Mark 14, Matt 26, Luke 22, John 18. Unlike the Synoptic Gospels, John sheds doubt upon the extent to which Jesus subjectively experienced risk in his arrest and subsequent passion. John writes that, before Jesus was arrested, he knew 'all that was going to happen to him' (18:4).

whether the particularity of the incarnation is sufficient in view of our thesis that God's activity in relation to creation exercises creativity. In response, one could say that this mystery is at the very heart of the Gospel: that through one human being God redeems the entirety of the cosmos. Gunton's view of Christ's role in creation is helpful. He writes 'the teleology of the whole creation, past, present and to come is shaped through Christ: begun through him, reordered to its end through his self-emptying, and directed to him as its end'.⁴³ The incarnation, as God's discovery of what it is to be a creature in the fullest sense possible, carries universal consequences for the whole of creation. Furthermore, the new humanity of Christ is an anticipation of the new creation, and so it might be argued that this act of discovery could have eschatological consequences for the new heavens and new earth.

Conclusion

We have endeavoured to show that it is, in fact, possible to speak meaningfully about God with the language of human creativity from within a commitment to meticulous providence and to classical divine attributes. Possible world talk provides a description of the divine act of creation which preserves its transcendence and shows how it is self-limiting. Within a possible world understanding of the divine decree, a compatibilist model of human freedom is enough to safeguard the genuine creativity of creation.

Unlike those who locate divine creativity among God's attributes, we chose to locate it in the person of Jesus where the Creator experiences and performs the response of his creatures by becoming one of those creatures. The result of the view defended in this article is that creativity is a *second order* attribute for God. Under classic theism at least, one criterion (among others) for an attribute of God to be of the first order is that God has it in all possible worlds. In the possible world in which God does not create anything, it is difficult to see how he could have wrath, for example, or, more pertinently, how he could have creativity. Since creativity is a second order attribute, it must be derived from some combination of first order attributes as viewed in a particular way, in regard to a particular situation. We suggest that divine creativity should be seen as a cross-section of God's love, his goodness, his glory and his freedom (and probably others) in regard to a complex creation. Much as in painting, where secondary colours are derived from primary ones (yellow and blue make green), an attribute like *creativity* is unique and distinct from other divine attributes but is ultimately dependent on others.

⁴³ Colin Gunton, *Christ and Creation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1992), p. 98.

The important question that Vanstone and Fiddes raise is: 'What is at stake when we attribute creativity to God?' We have argued that the Creator's personal relationship to creation, exemplified in metaphors such as God as artist, includes the notion that God is free to discover something new in creation. Although we have suggested that God discovers something new in the person of Jesus Christ, it is not at all clear that our christological solution succeeds. It could be argued, for example, that more needs to be said about the role of the Holy Spirit mediating creation to God, and in the perfecting of the created order. It could also be argued that the particular Chalcedonian christology we have employed separates the person of Christ from the two natures of Christ to such an extent that the person may seem too capable of functioning, at times, without the divine nature. Such a stark differentiation between the human and divine natures, and between nature and person, could render the notion of Christ as a single subject difficult to uphold. Furthermore, it may also be necessary to speak of God's creative activities in time for providence to be 'creative', but our emphasis upon God's choice to actualise this particular world as encompassing both creation *ex nihilo* and providence may seem to undermine the reality of created time. Or it may be that a greater emphasis upon divine action, as opposed to the foreknowledge suggested by possible world talk, is required to make an analogy with human creative activity.

There is certainly much more that needs to, and can, be said about how and why God exercises creativity in his providential action. But, against criticisms to the contrary, we suggest that such a meticulous providence view, as well as classical theism, is compatible with an analogy between divine and human creativity. By locating creativity in the incarnation, it may be possible to speak of God who exercises creativity and who brings creation to its good end without frustration or risk.