

RESEARCH ARTICLE

‘God could have not created’: critiquing (a) divine counterfactual predication

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Abstract

That God could have not created the world is a commonplace of Christian theology, often invoked to articulate the meaning of divine freedom. This essay argues that this counterfactual predication cannot be made consistent with the classical doctrine of God and so cannot be an adequate way of characterising God’s freedom. Drawing on a critical realist account of coherent counterfactual predications, it is shown that every cogent counterfactual attribution implies that the subject of the attribution is located in time, possessed of potential, and knowable in its essence. These entailments of counterfactual predications render them formally incompatible with a classical theist doctrine of God, in which God is not temporally located, purely actual and unknowable in essence by humans in the *status viatoris*. If the counterfactual on divine predication compromises the divine simplicity, divine perfection and divine pure actuality, it should be understood to be a metaphorical, not substantial divine predication.

Keywords: classical theism; *creatio ex nihilo*; divine freedom; divine simplicity; Thomas Aquinas

It is a commonplace in Christian theology that God could have not created the world.¹ Take, for instance, Bernard Lonergan, who writes, ‘God knows that this world exists; moreover, he wills it to exist. But he *freely* chose to create it; *he could have not created it*; contingently he created it’.² In this previous sentence the counterfactual glosses ‘freely’, practically defining its meaning. Some such understanding – that God could do otherwise than God does – is operative in many conceptualisations of divine freedom, especially as regards God’s creating of the universe. Although some take confessing this counterfactual on divine creating as central to Christian faith, that the counterfactual is

¹By the terms ‘world’, ‘universe’, ‘world order’ and ‘world process’, I mean to refer to all finite, non-divine reality taken collectively.

²Bernard Lonergan, *Early Latin Theology*, Robert M. Doran, H. Daniel Monsour and Michael Shields (eds), (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), p. 271 (emphasis added).

correct is not a view universally shared among Christian theologians, either today or in ages past.³ It is, however, the dominant view in the Latin Catholic theological stream flowing from the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas,⁴ so much so that for some it has become identical with the preservation of the ontological distinction between God and creatures: ‘creation can only be creation if God can be God without creating’.⁵

This article contends that, despite the majority status of this view, counterfactual judgements about God, such as the counterfactual on divine creating, cannot constitute coherent theological talk that aims to speak substantially and properly of God as God is in Godself. My concern here is not to give a constructive account of divine freedom in creating (or more broadly in God’s acts) so much as to argue for what it *cannot* mean: that God could have done otherwise. Such counterfactual predications fail to speak of God substantially and properly, for they predicate of God concepts that in their very meaning include materiality, composition or potentiality. Militating against attributing any such concepts to God are the classical divine attributes, among them the complete divine actuality, the divine perfection and the divine simplicity.⁶ To affirm these classical attributes requires that any attribution of such intrinsically finite concepts to God be judged as metaphorical or equivocal predications.⁷ The contention of this essay is that counterfactual divine predications, such as the counterfactual on divine creating, inevitably compromise these classical doctrines and so are logically incompatible with a classical theist conception of God.

Now, as indicated by the presence of ‘analogy’ and ‘classical doctrine of God’ in the previous sentences, the argument I prosecute here presupposes a particular vantage on questions of our natural knowledge of God and so also on the divine attributes discoverable through natural theology. I argue from a critical realist perspective drawn from the philosophy and theology of Bernard Lonergan,⁸ itself grounded to a major degree in Aquinas, who employs this counterfactual language throughout his writings.⁹

³For an Orthodox voice, see Sergius Bulgakov, *Bride of the Lamb*, trans. Boris Jakim, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 43–56. For a Protestant protest that the notion is irredeemably anthropomorphic, see C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), p. 26.

⁴Some important texts by Aquinas are *De potentia*, 3.15; *Summa contra gentiles* 1.81–83; and *Summa theologiae* (hereafter ST) 1.19.2, 3, 4, and 10.

⁵David B. Burrell, ‘The Act of Creation: Theological Consequences’, in David B. Burrell, Carlo Cogliati, Janet M. Soskice and William R. Stoeger (eds), *Creation and the God of Abraham* (Cambridge: CUP, 2010), p. 42.

⁶For an introduction to the question of divine attributes in Christian theology, see Stephen R. Holmes, ‘The Attributes of God’, in Kathryn Tanner, John Webster and Iain Torrance (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology* (Oxford: OUP, 2007), pp. 54–71.

⁷So, to speak of God as a ‘lion’ is to predicate metaphorically, but to say ‘God knows’ is not. See Aquinas, ST 1.13.1–3. On the distinction between metaphorical and substantial–analogical divine predication, see Ralph McInerny, *Aquinas on Analogy* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1996), pp. 116–36.

⁸For an introduction to Lonergan’s critical realism, see Joseph Fitzpatrick, *Philosophical Encounters: Lonergan and the Analytic Tradition* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), pp. 13–33. On Lonergan as inheritor and developer of Thomas Aquinas, see Jeremy D. Wilkins, *Before Truth: Lonergan, Aquinas, and the Problem of Wisdom* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2018). On natural knowledge of God, see Bernard Lonergan, *A Second Collection*, Robert M. Doran and John D. Dadoosky (eds), (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), pp. 99–113.

⁹For example, Aquinas, ST 3.1.2: *Deum incarnari non fuit necessarium ad reparationem humanae naturae, Deus enim per suam omnipotentem virtutem poterat humanam naturam multis aliis modis reparare*. All quotations from the *Summa theologiae* are sourced from aquinas.cc, as is the English

To that extent, this argument may provoke interest solely on the basis of the fact that it constitutes an immanent critique of the Thomist–Lonerganian use of counterfactual language with respect to divine action. But one need not be a Thomist or Lonerganian to appreciate the problems that accompany counterfactual predications about God. The reader need only share some commitment to the classical divine attributes as broadly understood in a ‘classical theist’ perspective.¹⁰

The argument for these claims requires a more in-depth exploration of counterfactual predication. Following the critical realist analysis of counterfactual predication from philosopher Andrew Beards, I delineate three essential features of coherent counterfactual predications.¹¹ These features concern not only the intelligibility of the predication in relation to the *x* that is the subject of the predication, but also, and equally importantly, concern the subject *doing* the predicating. To anticipate the conclusion, there are three reasons why counterfactual judgements cannot properly be made of God or God’s actions. First, counterfactual predication necessarily claims something true of the subject of predication in a *past time*. Second, valid counterfactual predications always implicate the subject so predicated in *potentiality or development* – two properties that classical Christian thought denies of the divine essence, for God is perfect and purely actual. Third (in relation to the status of the subject *doing* the predicating), finite knowers such as we have no epistemic grounds by which to make counterfactual judgements about God. To make such a claim, one must have a *direct insight* into the nature of the subject of our counterfactual predication; but that is just what we do not have for God.

First, however, comes an investigation into the basic elements of counterfactual judgements in general, after which we can turn most profitably turn the question of whether counterfactual predications about God can say anything meaningful about God in Godself.

On counterfactual judgements

By ‘counterfactual judgement’ I mean a cognitional act, which may but need not be codified in verbal or written expression, that posits concerning subject *x* that things could have been different or could currently be different *if some other condition(s) held now, had held in the past, had changed or were changed now*. ‘If it were snowing, I would have stayed indoors’ (implied: ‘I am now outdoors, because it is not snowing’) is one

translation by Laurence Shapcote, unless otherwise noted. The original locus of such counterfactual questions concerned God’s work in redemption: could, say, the Father have become incarnate, instead of the Son? On the originating context of this train of mediaeval speculation, see Lawrence Moonan, *Divine Power* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), pp. 20–1.

¹⁰The doctrine of divine simplicity is the key doctrine dividing classical theism from ‘theistic personalism’ on the one hand and process theology on the other. The implications of the doctrine of divine simplicity, however, are intensely debated, especially in contemporary literature on divine simplicity and ‘modal collapse’ (in the works of Ryan Mullins, Christopher Tomaszewski, Steven Nemes, etc.). Many classical theists consider it intrinsic to classical theism to affirm the counterfactual ‘God could have not created’, which is often articulated by saying that God was ‘free not to create’. For example, ‘In terms of classical theism, God is free to create or not to create . . .’ Brian Davies, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: OUP, 1982), p. 23 (on the relationship between a proper concept of divine freedom and this counterfactual, see n35 below). This article argues the opposite: the counterfactual view on God’s creating is inconsistent with a classical theist conception of God.

¹¹Andrew Beards, *Method in Metaphysics: Lonergan and the Future of Analytical Philosophy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), pp. 123–140.

mundane example. A critical realist understanding of counterfactual predication delineates sharply between counterfactual judgements that are philosophically coherent and those that purport to speak cogently but are discovered upon further inspection to involve the speaker in logical or epistemic impossibilities. To get the nature of such judgements right, with a full view of their cognitional and metaphysical entailments, is the task of this section.

The intrinsic temporality of the subject of counterfactual predication

First, every coherent counterfactual will necessarily claim something about its subject *at an earlier time in its history*, even if in its form the counterfactual uses the present tense. One instance: ‘Right now, you could be reading another article instead of this one’. To say that you could not be reading this article right now (at time t_2) is in effect a judgement that you could have chosen to do something different at an earlier point in time (t_1). For if this counterfactual judgement did not affirm something true about you *in the past* but referred instead only to you as you are now, in the present, it would dissolve into logical incoherence: namely, the counterfactual judgement would mean that you could, simultaneously, be reading and not reading this article, or be the one who is reading and not reading it. Were this its meaning, the content of the counterfactual judgement would therefore violate the logical laws of non-contradiction and of the excluded middle.¹² Such contradictions, implicit in the counterfactual, render this judgement unintelligible, on the assumption that the counterfactual speaks only of the subject of the predication in the present and not in the past.¹³ The first feature of counterfactual predication then is that any counterfactual predicated of the subject will affirm something about the subject in the past.

Potentiality as intrinsic to subjects of counterfactual predication

Second, every coherent counterfactual will posit *potentiality* in the entity to whom the counterfactual refers. For if you could have not read this article today, then this truth implies that there was potency in you to read or not to read. Any counterfactual act, were it to obtain, would indicate *change* with respect to what is now the case or what was the case. And change is nothing other than the reduction of potentiality to actuality.¹⁴ And so, if I claim that you could be acting otherwise than you are now, then this counterfactual judgement of mine implies that at some point in the past, a potential was actualised in one direction that, in principle, could have been actualised in another, or not actualised at all.

Not only that, but the counterfactual also implies that the subject of the predication (as the entity possessed of such potency) exists within the broader matrix – call it a ‘world order’ – in which its potentiality can be actuated in this way or that, for no potentiality reduces itself to act. As an illustration, imagine an iceberg which, while shaded by the clouds above, retains its internal temperature. But the moment the clouds

¹²Speaking of a fictional character Jim (whom we will meet again below), Andrew Beards writes, ‘If we imagine me sitting in the pub and saying, “Jim is the man doing x, y, and z, but he can be the man not doing these things,” it becomes clear that such a claim is nonsensical. It is to claim that this reality can, at the same time, be what it is and not what it is’. Ibid., p. 135.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Aquinas, *ST* 1.2.3: ‘*Movere enim nihil aliud est quam educere aliquid de potentia in actum*’.

part, the iceberg begins to melt under the action of the sun. This change, or the actualisation of the iceberg's potential to melt, occurs only when extrinsic conditions are met. If the clouds do not disperse, the iceberg keeps its surface intact.¹⁵ Let us name this the *principle of the higher third*, with 'higher' here indicating a higher explanatory context within which additional conditions for change for the agent-patient duo are understood as set and either fulfilled or not.

In every instance of change, there will be some higher third context within which this change occurs. And so if any change in an entity between t_1 and the same entity at t_2 results from a reduction of potency to act, then my counterfactual judgement about subject x necessarily situates, by implication, this entity within a world order of potency or development. The second essential feature of counterfactual predication is therefore the positing of potentiality in the subject of the predication, and this positing implies in addition that this subject exists within a world order in which its potentiality can be reduced to actuality.¹⁶

Insight into essence as precondition for counterfactual predication

Third, every legitimate counterfactual predication presupposes that the speaker has made a grounded judgement at time t_2 that allows her to speculate about the entity's past potential at time t_1 . In other words, for the judgement ' x could have done differently' or ' x could be doing differently' to have any meaningful content, the one making the counterfactual judgement must have had an insight into the data constituting x at some prior time and by that insight have understood something of x .¹⁷ Here is another basic feature of counterfactual predication, and it has two components, concerning 1) the subject of the predication and 2) the one doing the predication.

Let us take the latter first, the presuppositions of coherent counterfactual predication with respect to what must be true of the one doing the counterfactual predication. For me to make a grounded counterfactual predication at t_3 implies that at some prior moment in time, t_2 , I have learned enough of the nature of the subject of my predication that I can extrapolate, on the basis of that knowledge, as to what that subject could have done at t_1 , with the result that things could have developed for that subject counterfactually to how they have in fact unfolded by t_2 . This is to say that every counterfactual judgement uttered has *multiple referentiality*: it refers not only to the subject of the predication as such, but also to the subject of the predication *as I have come to know that subject in the past*. As Beards explains, any such correct judgement of fact about subject x 'may then enter into further contexts of thinking and knowing [concerning x]. But in such further thinking and knowing concerning [x] I will be referring to [x] precisely as the reality I knew could not be other than it was in the moment of my prior judgement'.¹⁸ It is only such knowledge of the subject of my predication, achieved by me in the past, that allows me to further conjecture what could have been or could be now instead of what currently is the case.

¹⁵I borrow this analogy, with some modification, from Bernard Lonergan, *Grace and Freedom: Operative Grace in the Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), p. 272.

¹⁶Note that there is no 'higher third' to serve as the explanatory context for the origination of everything *ex nihilo*, for God's creating of the world order is not change, or *mutatio*, in creatures. Aquinas, *ST* 1.45.2.2.

¹⁷Beards, *Method in Metaphysics*, pp. 135–7.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 136.

But this observation leads directly into the second subpoint on this feature of counterfactual predication. For me to be capable of referring implicitly in a counterfactual judgement to the subject of the predication as I knew it, it must be the case that there existed *data* on that subject and that this data was available to me to understand at some point in the past.¹⁹ Precisely through such data did I come to understand something of the subject of my future counterfactual predication, such that the counterfactual judgement I make about *x* now depends on prior factual judgements about *x*. Said in a more traditional metaphysical idiom, it is through learning, even if only partially, the *nature* of *x* through the data of *x*'s *accidents* that I can gain the knowledge without which my future counterfactual judgement must remain untethered from data, floating free in ungrounded speculation that mistakes mere conceptualisation with knowing reality.²⁰ That we regularly distinguish between grounded and baseless counterfactual thinking, and have recourse to established facts to do so, testifies to this implicit precondition of all coherent counterfactual predication.

I conclude this section and its explication of these three features of counterfactuals with one final illustration drawn from Beards. Here he analyses counterfactual judgements he could make of a fictional character 'Jim' whom Beards encounters at a pub. In discussing the only coherent sense that the judgement 'Jim could have not been here tonight' can have, he writes:

I can speculate as to what Jim might have done; I *know*, at time t_1 , that Jim is sitting on the other side of the bar, having a pint of beer, etc. I may think, 'He might never have come here to drink this evening; it was possible for him not to have come in here; he might have gone to see a film; he might have worn different clothes'. What I am doing here, as is suggested by the tenses of the verbs involved, is referring to past situations [= my point 1] when the future contained a number of possible courses that became more or less probable as the various conditions in the world process became fulfilled. On the basis of my knowledge of reality, on the basis of my knowledge of Jim, at time t_1 , I am extrapolating to earlier times and situations in the world process in which, I have reason to believe, Jim would have been involved. All the while in such speculation I am making reference to Jim, as I know him, that knowledge being of him as he was at time t_1 [= my point 3]. What I refer to, in my speculations concerning what Jim might have done, is not some other 'possible world', floating free of this one, but the actual world at times earlier than t_1 , and I therefore refer to the *potentiality* (not mere abstract possibility) that world process involving Jim had at those times for realising this or that possibility [= my point 2].²¹

¹⁹The knowledge I have of the subject of my counterfactual predication could also, of course, be mine through my believing another's report. But in any case, the knowledge I borrow by believing was once immanently generated by someone's insight into data. See Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, ed. Robert M. Doran and John D. Didosky (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), pp. 42–7.

²⁰Lonergan, *Insight*, pp. 32–3, 377–8. To return to Beards' example of the man encountered at the pub: 'If we say "Jim would still be Jim even if all I know of him were not the case," it may appear to follow that the name by which I refer to him could be stripped of all the associations it acquired that evening in the pub . . . However, what is implicit in the process of knowing and naming Jim, and my subsequent speculations about him, shows such reasoning to be mistaken.' It would represent 'metaphysics gone on holiday' to counterfactually predicate something of a subject if there existed no concrete data undergirding prior factual predications of that subject. Beards, *Method in Metaphysics*, pp. 134–5.

²¹Beards, *Method in Metaphysics*, pp. 136–7.

Let us take stock. I have argued that the three constitutive features of counterfactual predication are 1) that all counterfactual predications affirm something about the subject of the predication at some time in the past; 2) that counterfactual predications of some subject x posit some potential in this subject, as well as positing the subject's involvement in a world process of potential and development; 3) that every counterfactual predication presupposes some prior knowledge concerning the subject of the predication on the part of the one doing the predicating, and that this in turn implies that there existed and was available some data on subject x (moreover, it was on the basis of this data that one first had the insights concerning x that led to factual judgements concerning x , judgements that are presupposed in any later counterfactual judgement about x). With these three constitutive implications of counterfactual predication in mind, we can return to the investigation of the theological counterfactual judgement that motivates this article: 'Could God not have created?'

No counterfactuals about God

From what we have ascertained thus far, it becomes apparent that no counterfactuals can be meaningful or coherent when predicated of God. Let us take these three points in turn.

The intrinsic temporality of the subject of counterfactual predication

The first reason why we cannot coherently predicate counterfactuals of God is that counterfactuals affirm something of this world at a *past* temporal moment. When I say that you could have not read this article, or could be doing something else, I speak of a potentiality present at a certain past point in this concrete world order. God, however, exists in the *tota simul* eternal present; the divine essence cannot be plotted in time. Such plotting, however, is exactly what is entailed in any legitimate counterfactual predication. Neither can God's creative *act* be so plotted, insofar as the creative act is what gives existence to space and time, and insofar as, in the classical Thomist doctrine, there is no real distinction between God's act of creating and God's act of being God, or the divine *esse*.²² As such, God's creative act is necessarily eternal, even if its created term may not be. And if eternal, it cannot be subject to coherent counterfactual predications. Defenders of the counterfactual, 'God could have refrained from creating', would admit the point about the inescapably temporal nature of the counterfactual language, but nonetheless seek to preserve the counterfactual predication as indicating something true of God as God is. The following two points weigh against this.

Potentiality as intrinsic to subjects of counterfactual predication

Second, a counterfactual judgement attributes *potentiality* to the entity to whom the judgement refers (more specifically) and to the world order itself within which that entity is situated (more broadly). But just as God is not within the spatio-temporal world order, so too does God lack potentiality.²³ These two negations – that God and God's acts are not situated within a higher order, and that God has no potency – go hand-in-

²²Aquinas, ST 1.45.3.1: '*creatio active significata significat actionem divinam, quae est eius essentia cum relatione ad creaturam*'.

²³Aquinas, ST 1.3.3.

hand precisely because potentiality cannot reduce itself to act. Such reduction requires another agent, non-identical with the one being moved, to effect change. As is well known, Aquinas uses this principle (nothing reduces itself to act) to deduce the existence of an entity that is *actus purus*. It thus follows logically that if there is an entity that is pure act, then it has no potential whatsoever. But if counterfactual predication always implicitly attributes potentiality to the subject of the predication, then one cannot coherently say anything counterfactual about an entity that is pure act.

Nor can one meaningfully speak counterfactually about God's creative act without thereby implicitly inserting the divine essence into our world order, or the order of the universe. For if there are no essences existing abstractly in a Platonic heaven, but instead only *within* this world order, in its concrete and historical development, then there exist neither potency nor entities constituted by potency outside of this matrix of our world process that comprises all existing finite entities and their potentialities.²⁴ Every predication, counterfactual or factual, that imbricates an entity in potency thus situates it in this world order.

In Lonergan's critical realism, potentiality refers primarily to 'the capacity to develop'.²⁵ Thus to say you could be reading the daily newspaper instead of the *Scottish Journal of Theology* at this moment is to claim something not just of you but of the entire developing universe in which is found your potential to read either enriching theology or vexing national news. But the divine essence is not a part of the world order's development. God's pure actuality therefore entails God's perfection (analogically understood), for there is no development for God to undergo if God completely lacks potential, and perfection is but the completion of potential development. In other words, all development in this world order finds its explanation in the aforementioned principle of the 'higher third'. But there is no such higher context for God or God's creating. And so if to attribute a counterfactual to God's creative act is impossible without implying potentiality in God, then that same counterfactual will inevitably entangle God in the developing world order, determined by it as much as determining it. Simply put, a process theology will be required to affirm coherently the counterfactual, 'God could have not created'.²⁶

Insight into essence as precondition for counterfactual predication

Lastly, any counterfactual judgement inevitably refers – if it is meaningful – to an entity whose essence has to some degree been discerned through a judgement of fact, which judgement itself depends on a direct insight into the data on the subject of the predication. The difficulty with applying such counterfactual judgements to God is that no such discernment of the divine essence is possible for creatures in the *status viatoris*, where natural knowledge of God comes solely by means of other creatures. By understanding the ontological poverty of creatures, we understand that they exist solely

²⁴Bernard Lonergan, *Collection*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), p. 85.

²⁵Lonergan, *Insight*, p. 683.

²⁶For example, 'A being that is necessarily all-inclusive must be one whose potentiality for change is co-extensive with the logically possible. I call this property 'modal coincidence'. All actual things must be actual in God, they must be constituents of his actuality, and all possible things must be potentially his constituents. . . . Thus, God is infinite in what he could be, not in what he is; he is infinitely capable of actuality, rather than infinitely actual.' Charles Hartshorne, 'Philosophical and Religious Uses of "God"', in Ewert H. Cousins (ed.), *Process Theology* (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1971), p. 113.

through an impartation of being from the God whose very nature is to exist. And whatever else we may deduce about God as a result of this primordial insight into the ontological lack constitutive of creatures, that knowledge remains mediated to us through our experience of creatures, our understanding of them and our judgement that they could not *be* without God's causing them to be.²⁷ True, this mediated access to God allows us genuine, albeit analogical, knowledge of God, and this because God is the source and principle of all creatures. Accordingly, God possesses supereminently – as identical with God's *esse* – any perfections creatures possess.²⁸ Proper, substantial divine predication, or what we may call factual predication, is thus possible to us in this analogical mode.²⁹ But insight, or an act of understanding, into the divine essence is not.³⁰

Recall that my counterfactual judgements presuppose that I have in the past grasped by insight something of nature of the unity whose shifting data of accidents I observed. To return to Beards' imaginative encounter with 'Jim' at the pub:

In terms of an analysis that results from answering the question 'What do I know when I am knowing?' one could say that I have come to know a unity – identity – whole [an existing nature] in the data understood as individual, a person whom I name, refer to as, 'Jim'. The various movements, noises, appearances that are the data understood to be relevant... [are those] through which I come to differentiate the unity, the person, Jim.³¹

Once I have understood through experience of his *differentiae* what 'Jim' is, I can then extrapolate that he need not have exactly the same *differentiae* at all times; he could indeed have been drinking an IPA instead of a stout that night at our pub. In more traditional scholastic terminology, I can distinguish between Jim's *nature* and his *accidents*, and in my counterfactual judgement I mentally replace some of these accidents with others that could have obtained in the development of the world process.

Correspondingly and crucially, whenever a counterfactual judgement is made that God could have refrained from creating, the speaker necessarily implies *the possibility of an insight into the divine nature, such that its creative act can be mentally detached from it as if it were an accident*. The counterfactual implies that one possesses the following knowledge: if God were lacking the accident of creating this world and had, say, the distinct accident of having creating another world, or of creating none, the divine essence would be the same 'nature'.³² But how can one possess such knowledge without

²⁷This is the meaning of the Five Ways (Aquinas, *ST* 1.2.2), all of which articulate some ontological poverty on the part of creatures, such that their existence rationally requires a transcendent grounding in a reality of ontological plenitude. For a critical realist elaboration and transposition of the Five Ways, see Lonergan, *Insight*, pp. 657–708.

²⁸For example, Aquinas, *ST* 1.13.2.

²⁹For Aquinas' chronologically final statement on analogical predication in the *Summa theologiae*, see John F. Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2000), pp. 566–75.

³⁰Aquinas, *ST* 1.12.11.

³¹Beards, *Method in Metaphysics*, p. 135.

³²Aquinas would deny that his claim that God could refrain from creating renders divine creating a divine accident, for several reasons (e.g., to possess accidents is to be caused, and God is not caused; *ST* 1.3.4). This protestation notwithstanding, contemporary scholars have noted the complications attending Thomas' view that God creates contingently. For a thorough summary of the difficulties in reconciling 'free willing' in God

having had an insight into the divine nature? And even if in this life such an insight were had, how can one, on a classical understanding of divine simplicity, separate the divine act of creating from God's nature, if God's creating is understood as identical *in re* with God's nature and with God's act of being? God's act of creating this world, which the counterfactual must, by its very cognitional preconditions, transform into a divine accident, remains the presupposition of all of our natural knowledge of God – because in this life God is known only through creatures.

Objections and implications

In this final section, I address three potential objections to the argument laid out above.

Supernatural knowledge of divine counterfactuals

This essay's critique leaves open, it seems, the possibility that we have supernatural revelation that either directly or indirectly communicates or implies the counterfactual that God could have not created. The question here particularly concerns how one should interpret revelation that speaks of God's freedom: must one affirm the divine counterfactual to confess divine freedom? This question will be answered differently by different Christian theologians, depending on their understanding of biblical and magisterial teaching on this question.³³ As such the question is too large for detailed investigation here. Two points must suffice then as a precursory response. First, there exists no explicitly biblical teaching on the counterfactual; it is not a question envisioned by the biblical authors. But even if there were revealed texts communicating the counterfactual, this would not obviate what was explored above, namely the problematic entailments of counterfactual language when applied to God as proper divine predications. If the argument above is cogent that coherent counterfactual language must imply that the subject of the predication can be plotted in time, is possessed of potency and enjoys actuality only as situated within a greater horizon of possibility, and can be known in its essence sufficiently to distinguish in it what is natural and what is accidental, then these would be compelling reasons to judge that counterfactual predications about God, as many other biblical and traditional divine predications, are metaphorical and not proper divine attributions. Or at least these reasons should compel those committed to the classical doctrines of God's pure actuality, divine perfection and

(which assumes the counterfactual on creating is valid) with divine simplicity, especially as regards the question of whether Thomas' position can avoid making divine creating a divine accident, see Eleonore Stump, *Aquinas* (Routledge, 2003), pp. 100–11; 108–15.

³³With respect to theologians in the Catholic communion, it could appear that the counterfactual on God's creating has been codified as dogma in Vatican I's dogmatic constitution, *Dei Filius*, which teaches that God established created reality 'with the freest resolution' (*liberrimo consilio . . . condidit creaturam*) 'by a will free of all necessity' (*voluntate ab omni necessitate libera*). *Dei Filius*, ch. 1, and canon 5 of chapter 1 (https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/i-vatican-council/documents/vat-i_const_18700424_dei-filius_la.html; translation mine). But just what should be understood by 'God's will free of all necessity' is the vital question, and it is not self-evident that it must entail the counterfactual that God could have refrained from creating. At least, the arguments adduced here provide *prima facie* reasons for rejecting that the counterfactual view is a genuine entailment of affirming the freedom of God's will. For a critical exploration (from a Lonerganian and Thomist perspective) of the problems in counterpoising freedom and necessity in God's acts, see Frederick E. Crowe, 'Is God Free to Create or Not Create?', in Michael E. Vertin (ed.), *Lonergan and the Level of Our Time* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), pp. 441–53.

divine simplicity, as well as to this account of the limits of human natural knowledge with respect to God. And these considerations will bear as well on any positive articulation of divine freedom: to be theologically coherent, any account of divine freedom must avoid expressing the meaning of God's freedom by means of the counterfactual.³⁴

Transcending inherent limitations of the modus significandi

Next, it appears this argument proves too much. If counterfactual predication is to be rejected because, linguistically, it necessarily implicates God in time, potentiality and susceptibility to human insight, then all positive affirmations of God must land on the same chopping block. For as Aquinas argues, the very linguistic form of positive predication, which composes some attribute with some subject, mirrors the intrinsically composite act of judgement. But despite the composite *manner* of predicating (*modus significandi*), Aquinas claims we may yet understand simple entities to be metaphysically simple and not composed.³⁵ Why then can we not affirm the truth of the counterfactual on divine creating, even while denying the implications of its form? After all, we already prescind from attributing temporality to God when we use temporal markers in predications such as, 'God created the world'.

The answer is because the problem with counterfactual predication of God lies not solely in its mode of signification but in the very content of what is signified (the *res significata*). Let us take just one aspect of the counterfactual, the fact that, if uttered intelligently, it refers to some potential in the subject of the predication. The issue here lies not in the counterfactual's mode of signification but in that it attributes potentiality to the subject of the predication. Compare this with a factual (i.e., not counterfactual) divine predication, 'God is good'. The *modus significandi* by necessity involves a plurality: there is the subject of the attribution and there is what is attributed to the subject. Goodness, however, need not involve potentiality, and so it can be attributed analogically to God on the basis of the judgement that creatures are good, and that all creatures come from God as their source. When one affirms analogically, 'God is good', then one can transcend the limitation in the conceptualities of the manner of signifying (i.e., using two distinct ideas: subject and predicate) by performing a mental check of sorts, namely reminding oneself that the subject to which we refer in the predication is one simple subject essentially identical with any true concept analogically attributed to it.³⁶ But the concept of 'potential' – which, I have argued, is what every counterfactual

³⁴Cf. David Bentley Hart, *You Are Gods: On Nature and Supernature* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2022), p. 105: 'Inasmuch as God is not a finite being, in whom possibility exceeds actuality, but is infinitely actual . . . in him there is no meaningful modal distinction between freedom and necessity'.

³⁵Likewise, when it understands simple things above itself, it understands them according to its own mode, which is in a composite manner; yet not so as to understand them to be composite things. And thus our intellect is not false in forming composition in its ideas concerning God (*Et similiter, cum intelligit simplicia quae sunt supra se, intelligit ea secundum modum suum, scilicet composite, non tamen ita quod intelligat ea esse composita. Et sic intellectus noster non est falsus, formans compositionem de Deo*). Aquinas, *ST* 1.13.12.3. On composition in the process of understanding, see Bernard Lonergan, *Verbum: Word and Idea in Aquinas*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), pp. 61–71.

³⁶Aquinas, *ST* 1.13.12: '*Sed tamen, quamvis intelligat ipsum sub diversis conceptionibus, cognoscit tamen quod omnibus suis conceptionibus respondet una et eadem res simpliciter*'.

attributes to the subject of the predication – contradicts this ‘mental check’. One cannot simultaneously predicate potential to God while reminding oneself that the referent of the predication is metaphysically simple and pure actuality. The very content of the predication, that is, contradicts its being predicated of a simple subject. To make the predication is therefore to involve oneself in a logical inconsistency. And if ascribing potentiality to some entity is intrinsic to counterfactual predication, then there is no way to predicate the counterfactual on divine creating to the God who is simple and pure actuality.

Therefore, any such intrinsic contradictions with the classical divine attributes in divine predications render the attribution metaphorical, not said *essentialiter*.³⁷ But then what is meant to be communicated metaphorically by the counterfactual, if by predicating it we cannot be referring to God as God is in Godself? It may mean only that, if divine creating is conceived on the analogy of divine willing, that God does not will creatures as a means that can procure God’s end, for God already possesses God’s end, the divine nature, simply by existing.³⁸ If that is all that is meant, then the predication metaphorically communicates something true, although it should be observed that the predication is often taken as saying something substantial and proper about God’s creative act itself.

Perhaps an objector will concede that the counterfactual on divine creating tells us nothing about God in Godself, but that it was never meant to; this article’s critique therefore only sets fire to a strawman. Because God bears no real relation to creatures,³⁹ to predicate the counterfactual on divine creating says something only of creatures, namely that they *could have failed to exist*, precisely because their existence requires extrinsic grounding, because their existence is not self-explanatory. Note, however, the implication. Once ‘God could have not created’ becomes a claim primarily about creatures, and not about God’s creative activity, then the conclusion of this argument has effectively been granted: the counterfactual view does not achieve the status of a proper divine predication, as it tells us nothing about God as God is.

The counterfactual on creating as deduction from divine transcendence

The final objection concerns the third critique, that the counterfactual presumes in the one uttering it an insight into God, so as to remove from the latter the accident of having created this world. Not all judgements, it may be claimed, require a direct insight into data. Some true judgements regard the corollaries of the content one would grasp through such a direct insight, if one could have it. The discovery of the planet Neptune is a choice example. Before it was known that ‘Neptune’ was Neptune, Urbain Jean-Joseph Le Verrier concluded that some great planetary-like body must be located in certain specific coordinates, on the basis of known disturbances in Uranus’ orbit around the sun. From these disturbances, scientists were able to infer certain properties of this planetary-like entity and also exclude others. They could grasp the corollary that the entity must be greater than a certain size, for example; expressed counterfactually, the corollary understood was that ‘whatever disturbed Uranus’ orbit on y date could not have been smaller than x [kind of measurement]’. Although it was not until 1846 that

³⁷We cannot essentially call God ‘stone’, for potentiality is intrinsic to stones (see Aquinas, *ST* 1.13.3.1).

³⁸For example, Aquinas, *De veritate* 23.4.

³⁹Aquinas, *ST* 1.13.7.

Neptune was finally observed on the basis of Le Verrier's calculations, true knowledge concerning Neptune was acquired without a direct understanding of Neptune's proper data or accidents.⁴⁰

Analogously, the counterfactual judgement on divine creating can have another foundation besides a direct insight into the divine essence. It may instead be derived from the analogical concept of the divine nature that we gain through arguments such as the Five Ways. Here is the train of reasoning. If this universe's existence requires a transcendent ground, then that transcendent ground must be infinite in intelligibility, which is to say that it must be an unrestricted nature. Its activity of creating, then, must follow from an equally unrestricted active power, for power is the principle of action, and the divine power is nothing other than the unrestricted divine essence.⁴¹ To deny the counterfactual, 'God could have not created', is in effect to claim that God's power is proportionate only to this world order, that is, to these restricted and finite effects that are ordered in the precise manner that divine wisdom has ordained for this universe to develop. But if divine power and wisdom were so restricted, then the unrestricted divinity would be reduced to the proportion of restricted reality – *reductio ad absurdum*. It was precisely for this reason, to safeguard the infinity of the divine essence, that Aquinas concluded that we *must* affirm the counterfactual that God could have not created, or, in the scholastic idiom, that 'God can do otherwise than God does'.⁴²

To respond fully to this objection would require us to examine, *inter alia*, Aquinas' philosophical derivation of the notion of power and its applicability to divine creating (in addition to a consideration of the thorny distinction between absolute and ordained divine power),⁴³ the notion of action by 'natural necessity' as analogically attributed to an unrestricted and so analogically conceived 'nature', and the viability of 'free willing' as a proper divine predication. The limitations of space, however, preclude that kind of thorough investigation, and this article is already nearing its terminus.

For purposes of argument, let us grant the objection: unless one affirms the counterfactual on divine creating, one cannot safeguard the divine wisdom and the divine power, and more fundamentally, the divine transcendence. But in that case, we discover that either affirming or denying the counterfactual on divine creating brings noxious consequences. In both directions one infringes on the classical doctrine of God, compromising through affirmation of the counterfactual God's pure actuality and perfection and through denial of the counterfactual the transcendence of the divine nature. It appears the cherubic flaming sword threatens any who would trespass the apparent antinomy. To decide whether the antinomy is more than apparent lies beyond the scope of this article's more modest intervention, which is limited to illuminating the

⁴⁰See <https://www.nasa.gov/history/175-years-ago-astronomers-discover-neptune-the-eighth-planet/#:~:text=On%20the%20night%20of%20Sept,orbit%20of%20the%20planet%20Uranus>.

⁴¹Aquinas, *ST* 1.25.1.

⁴²Aquinas, *ST* 1.25.5: '*Unde dicendum est simpliciter quod Deus potest alia facere quam quae facit*'.

⁴³Cf. the comments of William Courtenay on this distinction, as pertains to our discussion of counterfactuals about divine action: '[T]he distinction of absolute and ordained power hypothesises a time before God acted, even before he willed – a time when God had before him the full range of possibility, limited only by the impossibility of acting against the divine nature or of making contradictories simultaneously true. The distinction entailed the further inconvenient supposition, albeit a hypothetical device for purposes of analysis, of ascribing to God a moment of choice, when a course of action is chosen from a wider field of possibility'. William J. Courtenay, *Capacity and Volition: A History of the Distinction of Absolute and Ordained Power* (Bergamo: Pierluigi Lubrina Editore, 1990), p. 78.

difficulties in making counterfactual predications of God. But we may conclude here by noting that it should not be too surprising that, in considering divine creating, human reason risks capsizing in the divine infinity. How could it be otherwise if God's act of creating is identical with the one, transcendent, unfathomable act by which God is God?