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Divine *aseity* and the paradox of divine self-limitation

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This article explores the paradox between the classical doctrine of divine aseity and the notion of divine self-limitation. Drawing from biblical narratives and theological concepts such as divine accommodation and kenosis, the article shows that God's choice to enter into a temporal and relational interaction with creation affects God in such a way that God would not have been affected without the creation. Given the foregoing, open and relational theists conceptualised the notion of divine self-limitation in which, as a result of the creation and human libertarian freedom, God cannot maximally exemplify his great-making properties upheld in traditional theism. I argued in this article that although God seems to become *vulnerable* because of the act of creation, He nevertheless remains *a se* because He is not only the source of his existence, but the creation of significant others could not cause God to lose his essential attribute of independence. Therefore, God is still omnipotent, omniscient, eternal, immutable and the like because the possession of these divine attributes does not rule out the possibility that God can enter into a temporal relationship with the creatures. Divine self-limitation predicates real limitations of God contrary to the negating language of the Scripture and, therefore, undermines God's *Almightiness*.

Contribution: It is argued in this article that although it may be possible to speak about God's *vulnerability* because of his act of creation, which seems like a *hard choice* because He is omniscient, a weaker version of divine aseity that ascribes real limitations to God is not viable.

Keywords: aseity; divine self-limitation; hard choice; vulnerability; open and relational theists.

Introduction

Traditionally, God has been conceived to be *a se.* Aseity denotes that God is the source and reason for his own existence. Therefore, 'it is not logically possible that any agent could bring about God's existence if God is necessarily an eternal being' (Swinburne 1993:265). In other words, it is not only that God is a necessary being, but He is self-existent, contrary to contingent beings whose existence depends on the prime mover that is not moved or brought into existence by any. This is the line of argument utilised by cosmological arguments for the existence of God by Thomas Aquinas (1920:I.2.3). This notion that God is *a se* seems to present a philosophical puzzle in relation to the biblical depiction of a relational God who enters into temporal and contingent interactions with creation.

Divine aseity might be said to be conceived in a strong and weaker sense. For instance, divine aseity could connote that God is not only self-existent but self-dependent, self-contained and self-sufficient. This might be regarded as a strong view of divine aseity. A weaker view of divine aseity will accept that God is self-existent but may question such other notions as being self-sufficient, self-dependent and self-contained in all cases because one then is faced with the question of the need for creation. Framed differently, if God is *a se* in the strict sense of the four self(s), what would be his justification for creating contingent beings? On the contrary, if God is not *a se* in the strong sense, can we say the act of creation was freely executed? This brings us to the question of God's freedom in creation. Was the act of creation freely executed? In other words, is creation contingent as traditionally upheld?

Contrary to the notion of perfect being theology, the God we encountered in the Holy Bible seems not only to possess the great-making properties upheld in classical theism but appears to be vulnerable in some instances. In some instances, God appears to depend on humans (for instance, Moses); he seems to have a lack of knowledge of human contingent actions and, therefore, is said to have grieved, relented or repented (as in Gn 6). God's eternal plan seems to be a subject of trial

and error in the Old Testament. God seems to have suffered with his people in the Old Testament and died in Christ to redeem humanity. Although the classical doctrine of divine impassibility has been rejected by many today, most of the great-making properties of God are still upheld. As a result of the creation, it seems that if we agree that in saying yes to the act of creation, God entered into a temporal relationship with the creation because it is temporal, we cannot but agree that the creation may affect Him in a way in which He would not have been affected without it. In other words, God's choice to create in time is a choice for starting a temporal relationship.[1] This temporal relationship, to some extent, confers some vulnerability or, in a strong sense – what is commonly regarded as divine self-limitation on God.

In this article, I will examine the traditional notion of divine aseity in relation to the notion of divine self-limitation. Given that there seems to be a disparity between the actuality of the notion of divine aseity and the kind of divine relationality we encountered in redemptive history, Christian philosophers speak about divine accommodation (Calvin 1554; Huijgen 2011) and kenosis theory (McClain 1967) to explicate instances that present God as vulnerable. Today, open and relational philosophers[2] advocate divine self-limitation,[3] a further development from divine accommodation and kenosis theory. By divine self-limitation, I mean the notion that given God's willingness to enter into a genuine relationship with the creation, He voluntarily limits his ability to exercise his great-making properties (omnipotence, omniscience, immutability, eternality, absolute independence and the like) to the extent that such exercise will undermine human freedom. However, can we uphold both divine aseity and divine self-limitation? In other words, how can God be fully independent [*a se*] and yet voluntarily limit Himself? Is divine immutability still tenable, given the notion of divine self-limitation? In what follows, I will examine divine aseity and divine self-limitation and offer some reflections before concluding the article.

Divine aseity

Divine aseity: *df* = God alone is uncreated: self-existent; premise 1.

God brought the entire creation into existence *ex nihilo:* self-sufficient; premise 2.

He can bring every state of affairs whatever without cooperation from the creatures: self-dependent; premise 3.

Given the doctrine of the Trinity, God enjoys communion within the Godhead in such a way that He does not need any external being for love or fellowship: self-contained; premise 4.

1.See Antombikums (2023:80–97), for a further discussion on the implications of the choice of creation on God in relation to the divine-human relationship.

2.By open and relational philosophers and theologians, I mean open theists and process theists. However, a careful observer will realise that divine self-limitation as voluntary self-limitation upheld in open theism seems not to be the case in process theism. For a discussion on this distinction, see my forth-coming monograph: *Divine Control, Human Contingencies and the Problem of Evil* (Palgrave Frontiers in Philosophy of Religion).

3.See Highfield (2002) and Fouts (1993) for a comprehensive discussion on this subject.

The term aseity has its origin in the Latin word *a se*, meaning 'from oneself'. Divine aseity refers to God's incommunicable attribute of self-existence. In other words, by affirming the notion of divine aseity, theists argue that 'God's lack of dependence on anything besides himself distinguishes him radically from [*His*] creatures…' (Matthews 2015).

Also, the Bible attest to the self-sufficiency of God in many scriptural passages, one of which is Exodus 3:14, when the Lord says of himself, 'I Am Who I Am' or as it is best translated nowadays as 'I am He who is'.[4] Jesus, during His earthly ministry, repeated such notions in the Gospel of John 8:58–59. Also, Paul, in one of his sermons in Acts 17:24–25, argues that God is the source of the existence of everything but does not need the creation to provide for Him. Mathew Badorf defines aseity as the view '… that God, and only God, is completely independent, and that everything not identical to God depends upon God' (Baddorf 2017:406). Not only this, but it also follows that his character is not contingent upon anything other than God.

The notion of divine aseity, like other attributes of God, is not without critics, especially from Platonism and contemporary open and relational theologians. Platonism argues, contrary to the theistic notion that only God is self-existent, 'that there exist entities other than God that are uncreated, necessary, and eternal and that exist independently of God' (Cleveland 2021:165). These entities include mathematical truths, the metaphysical realm of forms or ideas and the like, which are beyond the scope of this article.[5]

For Anselm (1993), divine aseity means whatever God demonstrates; He is the very essence and existence of that state of affairs:

> BUT undoubtedly, whatever thou art, thou art through nothing else than thyself. Therefore, thou art the very life whereby thou livest; and the wisdom wherewith thou art wise; and the very goodness whereby thou art good to the righteous and the wicked; and so of other like attributes. (p. 13)

Similarly, in explicating the notion of necessity and God's existence as a necessary being in Aquinas, Swinburne argues that for Aquinas, to argue that God is His own existence means He 'does not derive his existence from anything external' (Swinburne 2015:226).

Calvin holds that the notion of divine aseity not only hinges on the fact that God is the Creator of the universe but that in disclosing his essence to Moses in Exodus 3:14, God shows that He is self-existent, and therefore, the only one who gives existence to every creature. In this disclosure, God refers to Himself as *ehyeh* from the Hebrew root word *hayah*, which means existence. In other words, He is not only the source of

4.Readers who wish to understand the various interpretations of Exodus 3:14 from a philosophical point of view could see J.W. Gericke's (2012) paper which traces the philosophical interpretation of *ehyeh asher ehyeh* from antiquity till date.

5.Readers interested in a deeper exploration of the challenges Platonism poses to the theistic notion of divine seity may want to refer to William Lane Craig's book, *God Overall* cited on this page.

existence for all other existing entities, but He *is.* As a result, He is starkly different from the creatures, and his core attributes are not shared with other created entities; hence, He is *sui generis* (Calvin 1559–1564; Ellis 2012). Calvin went on to argue that '"nothing is more characteristic" of God than eternity and "self-existence" (*αὐτουσία*), or rather, God's "existence of Godself" (*a se ipso existentia*)' (Asbill 2015:1; Calvin 1960:153).

William Lane Craig (2016) argues that the notion of divine aseity is central to the Judeo-Christian doctrine of God. Even if everything were to cease existing today, God will continue to exist because He is his own existence. In the theistic doctrine of creation, God is said to have created the cosmos *ex nihilo,* lacking nothing necessary for the act of creation. The writer of the Gospel of John takes up this notion, insisting that nothing in existence today came into being on its own. All that *is* in the cosmos came into existence because God made it to be so through the Logos, the second person of the Godhead (Craig 2016; cf Craig 2013).

Clearly, the language of creation, both in the Old and New Testaments, is in the past tense (Craig 2016). This poses a tough question regarding the current state of the creation, which open and relational philosophers and theologians believe was left open for humans to complete. Because open theists hold that everything was not completed at the dawn of creation, this conclusion leads to the notion of divine self-limitation, as discussed in the 'Divine self-limitation' section. In other words, given that the current state of the creation presupposes that the act of creation was not closed after the 6 days of creation, it follows that God handed over the aesthetic brush of creation to humans to continue painting the universe as they like (Rice 1985).

In contrast, the Church, in explicating the nature of the divine being, has consistently argued that God is '*Agenētos* [*which*] means unoriginated or uncreated, in contrast to *genētos*, that which is created or originated' (Craig 2016:32). In doing so, Christian philosophers and theologians established the ontological distinctions between the Creator and the creatures, on the one hand, while insisting that the Creator does not need or lack anything to be compensated by the creatures, on the other hand. Therefore, the act of creation was a free choice of a gracious God in creating humans for fellowship although the triune God is communal and does not need humans for further fellowship. Given the biblical notion of *agenetos,* '… many in the [*classical*] tradition have simply taken it as a given that aseity precludes God from being the dependent in any kind of dependency relation whatsoever' (Adams & Robson 2020:253). Further, this conclusion implies the continuity of divine action on the project of creation.

Classical theism holds that the act of creation was performed freely (Holme 2014; Hendry 1978). However, because the act of creation seems to impose some limitations or vulnerability on God, why not think that the choice of creation was a hard choice? A 'hard choice' may be considered as a choice between two competing interests in which the one making the choice thinks that option *a* might be better than option *b* in many respects. However, that might not be the case in all situations because option *b* might have some advantages over option *a.* In some instances, the one making the choice might consider the *overall* value of options *a* and *b* before making the choice. However, given that God is omniscient, can the notion of 'hard choice' be applicable to Him? (Draper 2019).

It seems God made a 'hard choice' in creating the universe, given the notion of divine omniscience. In other words, because God knows the end from the beginning, it must be that He knows that the creation at a time will go contrary to the divine plan. This conclusion is substantiated by supralapsarianism. In infra lapsarianism, this conclusion lacks warrant. If it is admitted that God from eternity ordained numerous states of affairs, both morally excellent actions and those that are not, then it logically follows that He may have made several *hard choices.* A typical example may include Israel's request for a king, a rejection of theocracy. God obviously knew that such a request was not the best choice for Israel, but He had to make the *hard choice* between his covenant with the creation based on love and freedom and the best that would emerge from His ruling over Israel. This seems to be the exact situation that the Father and the Son faced at the Garden of Gethsemane. Here, Christ willingly, out of love, went to the cross to redeem humanity. In fact, such an act also confirms that God sometimes makes *hard choices* in the overall interest of the divine project of creation. These *hard choices* leave God anthropomorphically in a state of *vulnerability.* This conclusion leads to the notion of divine self-limitation.

Deducing from the foregoing critics of classical theism argue that divine aseity entails conceiving God as *per seipsum necesse-esse*. In that case, God cannot have a real loving relationship with the creatures (Aquinas 1975:2.12; Asbill 2015:2). Classical theism holds that God is immutable. However, proponents of divine self-limitation argue that it suggests a dynamic interaction with the world that is lacking in the classical notion of divine immutability. If that is the case, does divine self-limitation compromise the classical doctrine of divine immutability, or is it compatible with a nuanced understanding of God's unchanging essence while allowing for relational changes with creation? As I see it, we cannot but agree that divine immutability does not entail unchangeableness in the divine project. Redemptive history reveals that it is in the nature of divine sovereignty to add or subtract from the divine project of creation. Second chances, forgiveness and the like result from this. However, the divine nature remains constant (Antombikums 2022).

Divine self-limitation

As discussed thus far, divine aseity implies that God is entirely self-sufficient, not dependent on anything external to Himself. However, open and relational theologians and philosophers argue that God limits Himself given the nature

of the creation and especially of human liberty. After all, we all agreed that God took up humanity in the incarnation. This raises the question: how do we reconcile the notion of divine self-limitation with absolute independence?

Recent developments in quantum physics and cosmology seemed to reshape classical metaphysical assumptions in a way that gives a nuanced philosophical explication of God's relationship to the cosmos, deviating from classical physics (Clayton 2004; Davies 2006). This nuanced interpretation makes a distinction between the notion that a thing *exists* or it simply *is.* In that case, God simply *is* rather than existing as a *being*, a notion that may likely lead to some form of limitations. The argument is that God is not merely an entity within the cosmos but, properly speaking, the ground of every existence. As such, He may transcend every form of limitation applicable to matter or entities existing within the cosmos. However, I do not find a sharp distinction between the notion that God *exists* and that He simply *is* because the word *is* can be used at least in two different senses: (1) *is* as existence, (2) *is* as identity. Therefore, if we say God *is*, it is a reference to his existence. This is a complex argument for a different article.

It follows from the foregoing that if God is understood as the ground of *being* rather than merely a causal agent within the cosmos, it seems divine self-limitation may not be tenable. Such may be regarded as an anthropocentric concept, which only makes sense within the framework of classical physics (Davies 1983; Polkinghorne 2007). However, an essential element in quantum physics is the concept of *indeterminacies* grounded on the rejection of metaphysical determinism and allowing for God's interference in the cosmos without interrupting its original autonomous nature (Karaba 2021). One would expect that, given this development, divine self-limitation should be unwarranted. However, such notions as quantum indeterminacy, inherent cosmological openness and chaos theory rather provide a breeding ground for divine self-limitation, especially in process philosophy than the rejection of divine self-limitation.

Divine self-limitation, just like divine aseity, is extrapolated from the doctrine of creation. Given that God brought the entire cosmos into existence *ex nihilo* and is the source of his own existence, one is logically led to the notion of divine aseity. However, as far as open and relational philosophers are concerned, His willingness to create significant others in time also means that God will now have a contingent experience, which He would not have had without creating contingent beings. In other words, God's willingness to create significant others amounts to divine self-limitation, especially in the context of the exercise of human freedom (Sanders 2007). It suggests that God allows space for creation to act freely. However, if we uphold the notion of divine self-limitation, then traditional theistic notions like divine providence, omnipotence, sovereignty and the like must be reconceptualised. The paradoxical relationship between divine control and human libertarian freedom raises critical questions about divine intervention in the world.

Open theists argue that given the nature of the world of libertarian freedom and divine love and the notions of absolute dependence and divine control, it is logically impossible to uphold both notions. If God were to be self-contained, self-dependent, self-existent and self-sufficient, He would not need to adjust his plans. However, as seen in human history, God has often adjusted the divine project of creation in relation to human inputs (Hasker 2004). Some of these human inputs are often negative inputs, frustrating the divine plan. As a result, we see God regretting, relenting and being surprised at some state of affairs He never expected (Sanders 2007). It, therefore, follows that He is not *a se* in the strong sense of divine aseity.

David Basinger, in conceiving divine self-limitation, argues that 'God's decision to create a world in which individuals exercise meaningful freedom does in fact significantly (self-) limit his ability to intervene in earthly affairs' (Basinger 1996:113). In other words, in saying yes to creating the world as it is today and not a deterministic one as conceived in classical theism, God has to say no to a deterministic world. As such, God works within the limits the creation of the world confers on Him (Sanders 2007). In fact, God depends on humans to decide the course of history (Sanders 2010).

William Hasker denies that God is self-sufficient and completely independent of the creatures. He argues that 'God is not remote closed off and self-contained' (Hasker 2004:97). On the contrary, He is open to the entire cosmos, including the creatures, while taking into account the future He is creating for humans on the one hand and at the same time taking their freedom into account on the other. This follows that if God is open to the entire creation, the notion of divine aseity becomes problematic because divine relationality, as witnessed in human history, portrays the contrary. Because God has willingly chosen to depend on humans by collaborating with them in the divine project, such a choice has a drastic implication for the outcome of God's choices and the divine project of creation. In other words, God is a risk taker, given such a choice (Hasker 2004).

Further, God's choices, actions and intentions are not ironcast, and God cannot always get what He wants. His actions depend on humans' responses (Rice 1994). In other words, God affects the creation, and the creation, in turn, affects God (Hasker 2004; Rice 1985; Sanders 2007). As a result, the nature of divine providence and divine foreknowledge emanating from this conception typically will deviate from the traditional notions where God meticulously controls everything, given that He has exhaustive foreknowledge of all future contingencies. Divine self-limitation denies that God micro-manages every state of affairs in the cosmos first because of the fact that such is not tenable in a libertarian context and second because the subject of knowing is contingent; the knowledge of the knower is not static. In that case, the knower grows in knowledge, coming to the realisation of and knowledge of the new state of affairs that

emerges contingently in time while evoking genuine responses like surprises, frustrations and the like (Sanders 2007).

Further, given that God is relational, a genuine divine-human relationship involving reciprocity has implications for God's emotions. As soon as human associates supply unwanted elements to the divine project or in the exercise of their genuine freedom, which God granted them at the creation contrary to the expectations of the divine being, His emotions will be affected. This informs the emotive responses God exhibited in the Scripture:

> God is not impassive and unmoved by his creation; rather, in deciding to create us and love us God has opened himself to the possibility of joy and sorrow, depending on what happens to us and especially on how we respond to his love and grace. (Hasker 1994:133–134)

Although this may seem to reduce the divine being to the human level, Hasker argues that this is not the case. He argues that there is a distinction between how God depends on the creatures and how the creatures depend on Him:

> God is ontologically independent of the creatures and yet also, by his own gracious decision, *relationally dependent on them.* God has freely chosen to create beings that act in ways he does not directly control, and by which he is affected in significant ways. (Hasker 2000:219 [*author's own emphasis*])

The immediate question following this conclusion is to what extent can God relationally depend on humans?

We have argued that logically from the act of creation, God is not only *a se* but that the Bible and traditional theism testify such about God (Brower 2009). Hasker argues that careful explication of Exodus 3:14 would certainly reveal the contrary of the position of classical theists who, in their credulity, extrapolated divine aseity from such a passage. The centrality of the text is about God's faithfulness and nothing else (Hasker 1994).

In line with this conclusion, Pinnock argues that Exodus 3:14 points to God's everpresent reality of existence. In contrast, classical philosophers and theologians falsely extrapolate from the text divine aseity and, especially, immutability, a notion of an impersonal being pattern according to Greek philosophy, as seen in the thoughts of Philo and Origen. As far as Pinnock is concerned, this text has nothing to do with the notion of existence but is based on God's faithful promises to His people (Pinnock 1994).

Possible objection against divine self-limitation

Thus far, this article has argued that, obviously, God is *a se*. However, God's choice to create, especially humans, and giving them libertarian freedom seems to mean that God made a *hard choice*, given that He is omniscient and therefore knows that human actions will not always align with the divine will. Because of the foregoing, we concluded that God becomes *vulnerable* because of His choice of creating contingent beings because it means that He started a temporal relationship with the cosmos. As a result, one may suppose that divine aseity may be construed from the weaker point of view, and in that case, the notion of divine self-limitation is established.

However, the notion of divine self-limitation seems to overstretch the doctrine of divine aseity in such a way that it confers on God substantial limitations, contrary to the negating language of the Bible (Highfield 2002). In other words, to what extent can we speak about divine self-limitation without undermining the divine essence or the great-making properties of God? The answer to this question is obvious: when real and unjustified human limitations are conferred on God, it is no longer divine self-limitation but a necessary metaphysical limitation. An unjustified limitation, in my estimation, is that kind of limitation conferred on the divine being without taking the creator-creature distinction into account. For instance, the argument that the creation of contingent beings with libertarian freedom means that God can no longer control them. At the same time, it is obvious that there are instances where He does so or does not do so is overstretched.

Further, when conferred on the Godhead, divine self-limitation does not make the distinction between the Persons of the Trinity. For instance, kenosis theory is well understood in the context of the incarnation. Similarly, divine accommodation is easily understood in the context of the divine-human relationship in the Old Testament. This is because of the creator-creature distinction and the notion of sin and rebellion, and especially the noetic effect of sin on humanity seems to have marred the divine-human relationship, which is not the case today with the atoning work of Christ. The notion of divine accommodation seeks to show how God stooped low to a finite level to establish a relationship with humankind, especially in the context of revelation. Anthromophic and anthropopathic expressions in the Scriptures are said to be expressions of divine accommodation.

Proponents of divine self-limitation reject divine omnipotence,[6] omniscience, immutability and eternity because such great-making properties do not seem to be compatible with divine relationality. However, this conclusion is faulty in that divine eternality, in particular, does not negate relationality. It might be logically impossible for an atemporal being to relate with temporal beings. However, it cannot be metaphysically impossible for an atemporal being to have temporal experiences, including relating with temporal beings, just as an omnipresent being executes divine activity in local contexts. Given that we speak about the immutable promises of God and his immutable essence, the doctrine of divine immutability is essential to the divine-human relationship (Antombikums 2024).

6.Readers who are interested in following the discussion about the rejection of divine omnipotence in lieu of divine open theism may refer to my forthcoming chapter, 'Divine omnipotence and love in open theism'.

Although the creation of the cosmos may have affected God differently than the lack of its existence would, it is pointless to suppose that the existence of the world limits God significantly to the extent that He loses his ability to bring about certain states of affairs. This leaves one with the impression that because of creation, God loses some of his great-making properties. However, this cannot be the case. As argued in this article, the act of creation was a voluntary choice, demonstrating God's love to enter a mutual relationship with the creation in general and with humans in particular. This gracious act of God in bringing the creation into existence does not denude God of his lordship over creation. God is still acting, including using both persuasive and coercive powers, to get things accomplished when He wishes to. God may choose the path of vulnerability as a lover does to the beloved; He cannot be overwhelmed by such vulnerability because He is the source of his own existence.

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