

Introduction: Divine Attributes

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1 On the Importance of Reflecting on God's Attributes

An earthworm feels the pleasant warmth of the African sun when a herd of elephants passes by. All of a sudden, it feels vibrations in the ground, a shadow falls upon it, and the temperature decreases notably. One of the elephants stopped close to the earthworm. Does the worm have any clear conception of what is going on? Can it perceive the elephant and create a mental representation of it, given its sensory apparatus and brain performance? Most probably not. As far as we know, the earthworm's sensory apparatus is not capable of perceiving an elephant, and its brain is unable to produce a mental image of it.

There are a fair number of theologians and philosophers who claim that our situation is analogous to the one described above when it comes to acquiring reliable knowledge about God. We are like earthworms—incapable of producing any adequate sensory perception or mental representation of God. All that we can do is cautiously

approach the mystery of God by being aware that all our images, reflections, and teachings about it are ultimately inadequate attempts to grasp a reality far beyond our cognitive grasp.¹

According to such a view, any philosophical and theological reflection about the divine nature and the divine attributes amounts to mere academic quibble or, even worse, pseudo-discussions.

There is no doubt that the motivation for holding such a view is noble and also points to something religiously important. “You shall not make for yourself a carved image of God,” says the first of the Ten Commandments. This commandment reminds us that any attempt to grasp God in a determinate and precise way is hubris that will inevitably end in idolatry. This reminder, however, does not mean that any attempt to systematically reflect on the nature of God is religiously misleading. On the contrary, a closer look shows that, among the different roads leading to a reflection about the nature of God, there are at least two that are intrinsically motivated by religious life itself.

The first road is scriptural evidence. Various passages in the Bible ascribe properties to God that are taken to be part of the divine nature. Gen. 17:1 and Ps. 91:1, for instance, describe God as almighty; Ps. 139 says that God has unlimited knowledge; and Ps. 51:1 declares that God's love and faithfulness will never cease. If these passages are not taken as purely metaphorical expressions but are read with a literal kernel, then one natural question to ask is in what sense we shall attribute these properties to God.

The second road is the religious praxis of worship. Reflection upon what kind of being is worthy of worship

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¹ We use the metaphor of the elephant and worm because it was proposed by a theologian at a recent workshop on the atemporality/temporality of God.

leads to a reflection upon the divine attributes. It appears obvious to claim that a being that is surpassed in its positive attributes is not worthy of worship, for then there would exist another more excellent being that deserves more to be worshipped. In other words, it seems to be religiously unsatisfying if a being possesses many great-making and admirable attributes that, however, can still be thought to be ascribable in a qualitatively and quantitatively increased manner to another being.

The third road is philosophical theology. Some philosophers and theologians have provided arguments for the existence of God. With these arguments comes the requirement to clarify which features God possesses. Take, for instance, Thomas Aquinas. After providing arguments for the existence of God, he goes on to argue for God's infinity, moral perfection, omnipresence, omniscience, immutability, eternity, omnipotence, beatitude, etc. at the very beginning of the *Summa Theologica*. Traditional handbooks of dogmatics kept this order with some modifications up to the present day. It has been part of the general curriculum of theology to reflect on the divine attributes.

These brief considerations indicate that a thorough reflection about divine attributes appears to be well motivated from the perspective of religions praxis as well as systematic reasoning about it.

Taking up the metaphor of the worm and elephant, however, one could object that we are simply not able to form any positive conceptions of the divine attributes. Philosophers and theologians may have such a claim in mind when they say that all we can do is to state that God is a "being beyond being" or a "being that transcends being and non-being." Instead of complicating matters further with such hard-to-grasp or even paradoxical expressions, it appears clearer to straightforwardly say that God is beyond any cognitive grasp of ours and, as a consequence, we can form no positive conceptions of the divine attributes, full stop. This account, however, would amount to the view that a strong and powerful tradition of systematic reasoning about the divine is inherently flawed and therefore should be abandoned.

Other philosophers and theologians suggest a weaker thesis when they say that we can give a non-paradoxical and positive characterization of the divine attributes but only in non-literal terms. As understandable as the danger of a too-anthropomorphic conception of God may be as a consequence of literal ascriptions, one can justifiably ask to what end such a view leads. What exactly does it mean to say that God is all-good, all-knowing, all-powerful, etc. when our common understanding of goodness, knowledge, and power should be applied to God only in a non-literal sense? Our understanding depends on our interactions with entities to which these terms can be ascribed literally. Thus, the suggestion to expand the use of these concepts to an entity who does not share these

features with us at all—and therefore any literal ascription results in inadequacy—is hard to swallow. There is hardly a way of providing content to the claim that God is all-good, all-knowing, and all-powerful unless we suppose that God has these attributes in a relevantly similar way to other beings with which we are familiar.

These thoughts propose that the metaphor of the worm and elephant is misleading and intellectually problematic when it comes to describe the cognitive situation of human beings regarding God. Claiming that we can speak about God only in paradoxical, metaphorical, and non-literal ways because God is a mystery utterly beyond our comprehension disqualifies any talk about God from being part of serious rational discourse.

Of course, it might turn out at the end of the day that a meaningful interpretation of some, many, or all divine attributes cannot be provided, and metaphorical speech is all what we are left with. A closer analysis might reveal that some, many, or all attributes involve inconsistencies, are mutually exclusive, or lack any determinate content. This may be so. However, it should be the end point, not the starting point, of a long road travelled. Since we are still in the midst of this intellectual journey, more reflections about divine attributes are apt and appropriate—particularly in times when irrational and arbitrary conceptions of the divine seem to be on the rise and many harms and sufferings are caused in the name of God.

2 God's Attributes as a Philosophical Problem

Analytic philosophy of religion has witnessed a significant increase in interest in the ontological presuppositions of the various theological doctrines. One might speculate about the motives of this development within a philosophical tradition that was critical or even hostile towards religious reasoning at its beginning (Wolterstorff 2009). As a matter of fact, it can be said that substantive and creative theorizing about God's nature and attributes has taken place within the analytic tradition from the late 1970s onward (see, for instance, the contributions of Swinburne 1977; Davis 1983; Freddoso 1983; Wierenga 1989; Gale 1993; Hughes 1995; Hoffman and Rosenkranz 2002).

Investigation of divine attributes has focused on several themes. We briefly mention four. First, attempts were made to reach a clear definition of divine attributes without falling prey to logical incoherence. Several questions about divine omnipotence are well known: Is God able to do absolutely everything, or are there limits to divine power? Can God actualize contradictory states of affairs? Can God perform acts contrary to divine nature, for instance, deciding that it is no longer necessary for Him to be eternal or morally perfect? Concerning omniscience, analogous

problems have been discussed: Does God's omniscience also encompass the knowledge of what it is like for a concrete individual to feel a subjective experience, such as joy, regret, or anger (Zagzebski 2013)?

Second, there is a debate about the composability of these attributes. Take Leibniz's famous claim that God ought to create the best of all possible worlds out of His moral perfection. Does this claim entail that God must of necessity create this world, which appears to stain His omnipotence? Another example: If God knows what time is now, then this seems to make God a subject of time and change, contrary to a long and prominent theological tradition according to which a perfect being ought to be immutable. On the other hand, denying that God knows what time is now seems to harm His omniscience.

Third, someone may focus on the relationship between divine attributes and some other fundamental principles of the theistic tradition, such as human freedom. If human beings are free in a robust, libertarian sense, then it is hard to see how God is able to foreknow free human decisions. If this is the case, can one still claim that God is omniscient and everything dependent on His power?

A fourth topic of interest concerns the relationship between divine attributes and observable features of our world, such as the quantity and quality of evil we experience. Why does a perfectly good, omniscient, and omnipotent God permit all the evils in the world? At the least, with Leibniz's classical treatise of this problem, the topic of theodicy is at the very top of the list of themes discussed in theology, philosophy of religion, and criticisms of religion.

Finally, it is important to notice that the topic of divine attributes is not only central to contemporary philosophy of religion but also deeply intertwined with general questions of logic and metaphysics. The divine attributes are deeply intertwined with concepts such as modality, consistency, coherence, causation or freedom. A careful analysis of these concepts is a presupposition for grasping aspects of the divine nature. However, they are also of utmost importance for understanding the existence of mundane entities and their relations to each other. Therefore, the philosophical analysis of divine attributes proves interesting not only for scholars in theology and philosophy of religion, but in principle for any philosopher with an interest in our fundamental concepts and intuitions about being, knowledge, modality, causality or freedom.

3 The Papers of This Issue

The papers of this special issue can be divided into three main groups.

The first group, consisting of only one paper, faces the problem of the knowledge of the essence of God and of His

attributes. In his contribution, "Divine incomprehensibility. Can we know the unknowable God?" Stephen Davis discusses the relationship between God as essence and God as revealed and whether the God as revealed in the Scriptures is a reliable representation of God's essence. Davis critically analyzes the reasons one could advance for ruling out the possibility of human knowledge of God and some possible reactions and solutions to the problem of the knowledge of God's essence. His conclusion is that via Revelation we can know certain things about God in essence. We do not know much, and we do not fully understand all that we can know. Nevertheless Revelation does accurately reveal divine essence.

A second group of papers deals with the concept of God itself and with divine attributes in general. Daniel Howard-Snyder's aim in his essay "Who or What is God, according to John Hick?" is to analyze the problem of the concept of God. He starts from Hick's well-known account, which provides a systematic framework to carve a notion of God shared by all the most important religions. However, Howard-Snyder argues that this concept is probably impossible given its metaphysical features; on the other hand, even if it were consistent, this notion is unworthy of interest.

As said before, one of the classic problems in philosophy of religion concerns the coherence of divine attributes. Many criticisms of theism try to show that the alleged attributes of God are indeed inconsistent. Therefore, Peter van Inwagen proposes that, in defending theism, a certain amount of tinkering is permissible with the concept of God. In his contribution, "Permissible tinkering with the concept of God," Jeff Speaks critically engages with van Inwagen's account that the most important fixed point in tinkering is the conception of God as the greatest possible being.

Michael Almeida, instead, discusses the way in which God possesses His attributes. His essay "A Posteriori Anselmianism" provides an account of Moderate Anselmianism, which maintains that the essential properties of God are not primarily necessary. The God of classical theism is personal as the talk about omnipotence, omniscience, divine will, divine love or moral perfection indicates. However, this tradition ascribes other features to God which are hard to accommodate with a personal conception such as God's immutability, simplicity or atemporality. This tension introduces the main concern of John Bishop's and Ken Perszyk's paper "The Divine Attributes and Non-personal Conceptions of God" which outlines a specific non-personal, monist, and "naturalist" conception of God.

There is, then, a third group of papers concerning specific divine attributes. Regarding *omnipotence*, in his contribution "The power to do the impossible," Brandon Carey argues that, in fact, God has the power to actualize

impossible states of affairs even though there is no possible world in which He does this. Carey shows that this is not paradoxical. As to *omnipresence*, in his essay “God is where God acts: reconceiving divine omnipresence,” James Arcadi offers an interpretation of what it means for an immaterial being as God to be at every location and maintains that we have to conceive of God’s presence at a location as an instance of divine action at that location.

God is often considered the unchanging *cause* of all changes and, classically, the need of existence of a cause of everything is advanced as a proof of the existence of God. This proof is based on the Aristotelian principle that nothing can come from nothing. In his contribution “Divine causation,” Graham Oppy discusses this principle and its epistemological credential. Oppy shows that the robustness of this principle is not higher than other principles concerning causality. In particular, it seems to be no more justified than the principle that a cause, by causing some change, changes itself. The latter principle is, of course, in tension with the idea of an unchanged cause. Oppy concludes that the Aristotelian principle that nothing comes from nothing is not a good reason for preferring theism over naturalism.

In her paper “Divine Freedom”, Frances Howard-Snyder considers two divine attributes in particular: *incompatibilist freedom* and *moral perfection*. She argues that incompatibilist freedom implies the capacity to do worse than the best action God can do. If so, then God is not essentially morally perfect.

Two papers deal with the attribute of *divine simplicity*. In his article “An argument from divine beauty against divine simplicity,” Matthew Baddorf argues against the possession of this attribute by God on the ground that, if God is beautiful and if beauty arises from structure, then God must be structured and, thus, complex. In his paper “Simplicity’s deficiency: Al-Ghazali’s defense of the divine attributes and contemporary Trinitarian metaphysics,” Nicholas Martin discusses Al-Ghazali’s defense of the thesis that God’s oneness of essence is not compromised by unity with extra-essential formal properties like God’s attributes. Martin notices the similarity of Al-Ghazali’s defense with Brower and Rea’s model of a Trinitarian God, according to which the three Persons of Trinity are like three diverse properties of the same substrate.

Three papers tackle the attribute of *divine omniscience*. Two of them are concerned, in particular, with the problem of divine foreknowledge of future human actions. In his contribution “Causation, time and God’s omniscience,” Richard Swinburne argues that God cannot know future

free human actions. If God is in time, then God’s past beliefs should depend on future human actions, but this is impossible because backward causation is metaphysically impossible. If God is timeless, then He cannot know temporal facts, including human action. Swinburne also shows that there is scriptural support for a weaker conception of God’s omniscience. In their contribution “A note on eternity,” Ciro De Florio and Aldo Frigerio question the relation between a timeless God and a tensed world. In particular, they show that the correctness of the thesis that a timeless God cannot know tensed facts depends on the metaphysics of time that is assumed. They argue that if the Fragmentalist metaphysics of time is accepted, then it is possible to argue that a timeless God can know tensed facts, including human free actions. The third paper about omniscience investigates a different problem. One usual argument against God’s omniscience is that God does not know facts known by creatures in a first person’s perspective. In his paper “Omnisubjectivity and incarnation,” Adam Green discusses Linda Zagzebski’s view that God is omnisubjective, i.e., He knows every conscious state of every creature from that creature’s first person perspective. Green offers an interpretation of omnisubjectivity in which God knows everything that happens in the mind of His creatures not because He can imagine their experience, but because He, in some way, can perceptually grasp everything that happens in His creation. Furthermore, Green speculates on what new kind of knowledge God acquires through incarnation, given that He already knew what it meant to be a human being.

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Divine Incomprehensibility: Can We Know The Unknowable God?

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Abstract Christians traditionally hold that we know God as God is revealed to us, but that we do not know God in essence, as God is in himself. But that raises the question of whether God as revealed (GR) accurately represents God's essence (GE). Perhaps, given our cognitive limitations, God logically cannot reveal the divine essence to us. Or perhaps God knows that it would not be good for us were he to do so. Descartes raised the possibility that God is an Evil Genius who systematically misleads us. This paper explores several attempts to build a bridge from GR to GE. All appear to have serious limitations. It concludes that, contrary to much of the tradition, GR does (in part) reveal God's essence to us.

Keywords Divine essence · Knowledge of God · Revelation · Divine transcendence

I

Suppose we assume that God exists. Indeed, let us suppose that the God of Christianity exists and reveals himself to us in history and in the Bible. Now Christian theologians have traditionally distinguished between God as God is revealed

and God as God exists in the divine essence.¹ We can know the first—so they say—but cannot know the second. God as revealed is said to be the omnipotent, omniscient, and loving creator and the Father of Jesus Christ. But—so many theologians since Pseudo-Dionysius insist—we know nothing, or virtually nothing, about God's essence. This is because God is also said to be transcendent, unlimited, incomprehensible, inscrutable, and ineffable. That is, God in essence is beyond our ken.

The question that I want to raise here is this: what is the relationship between these two? That is, what reasons do Christians have, if any, for holding that God as revealed corresponds to or is a reliable representation of God's essence? Maybe God in God's essence (let's call this GE) is importantly or even radically different from God as revealed (which we can call GR); maybe revelation tells us little or nothing at all about GE.² I am not asking whether GR can tell us everything about GE or even everything that we might want to know about GE. Nobody in the Christian tradition to my knowledge thinks that it does or can. Rather, the question is: do we have any reason to suppose

¹ A similar point is often made via the distinction between the "immanent Trinity" and the "economic Trinity".

² The distinction between GE and GR is in some ways similar to the famous distinction made (in an entirely different context) by Kant between the *noumenon* (the thing as it is in itself, which we cannot know) and the *phenomenon* (the thing as we experience it) (see Kant 1965, pp. 74, 87, 149). But I should state that I am not raising a general epistemological question (e.g., "How do we know that the pencil as we experience is the way the pencil really is?") but an issue that emerges from the specifically Christian notion of God.

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that GR is accurate to GE, captures for us actual knowledge of GE?³

Christianity is based on the assumption that in some sense GR is reliable, that God really is as God has revealed himself to be. But how do we know this? How do we know that this assumption is rational or justified? It might end up being a matter of sheer trust, not based on any evidence. But of course sometimes in life trust is warranted and sometimes it is not, and we naturally want to know whether it is warranted in this case. The theological stakes here seem huge. Thus Thomas Torrance (following Karl Barth) says: “If there were no such bridge [between GE and GR], the Gospel would be finally detached from reality, empty of truth and validity and its account of the saving acts of God would be no more than a mythological projection out of human fancy...” (Torrance 1996, 77). This is why we cannot just ignore the issue before us and decide to concentrate on GR and not worry about GE. Christians naturally want to know whether their opinions about God are true.

A bit later I will test some possible solutions to this conundrum. But first I want to discuss three different ways of imagining the possibility that GR does not correspond to GE, that GR is not a reliable representation of GE. They are: (1) In revealing God to us (as GR), God is doing God’s best to tell us as much as it is possible for us to know about GE (given the nature of the world, our fallen state, and the kind of creatures that we are), but it just can’t be done. That is, it is logically impossible accurately to communicate to finite, ignorant, and fallen human creatures (since theologians hold that our sinfulness has affected our cognitive faculties) anything about the essence of a transcendent being who is infinite in power, knowledge, and love. (2) God has it within the divine power to make GR adequate to GE but God knows that it is actually better for us not to be given accurate or reliable information about GE; accordingly, God withholds information about GE. (3) God is systematically lying to us about GE. (The second and third possibilities are similar in that both agree that God is misleading us. The essential difference is that on the second, God does the misleading for a benevolent purpose

³ For the sake of clarity, let me note here three important areas that I am not going to explore in the present paper: (1) I will not explore revelations or purported revelations in the context of others religions beside Christianity, although I suspect the question I am asking can be raised in many of those contexts too; (2) I am going to pretend that what has been revealed by God about God (i.e., GR) is all of a piece; that is, I will ignore the fact that most theologians hold that revelation via God’s deeds and words in history is progressive; (3) I will not explore the fascinating question of theological predication, i.e., whether we can speak of God only negatively, or analogically, or even unequivocally; this despite the fact that the question of predication is closely related to the issue that I am considering.

while on the third possibility it is for a malevolent purpose.)

I will argue that the first two are not promising ways of trying to understand the skeptical possibility that GR gives us no, or far too little, reliable information about GE. They can be considered briefly. The third way, however, raises troubling issues that we will need to discuss in some detail.

II

(1) The first possibility—that we human beings simply cannot receive any accurate or reliable information about GE—certainly seems true in part. It does seem difficult to imagine finite and limited creatures like human beings fully grasping the essence of a transcendent and unlimited being. This is presumably what Christian theologians have in mind when they deny that we can know God’s essence. Thus Augustine’s famous dictum, *Si comprehensis, non est Deus* (“if you comprehend him, he is not God;” Augustine, *Sermons*, 52, vi, 16 and 117, iii, 5). Thomas Aquinas wrote, “We are unable to apprehend [the divine essence] by knowing what it is.” (Aquinas 1955, 1.14.2) Nicholas of Cusa declared that God is above all the concepts that any human can frame; accordingly, he spoke to God as follows, “The intellect knoweth that it is ignorant of Thee because it knoweth Thou canst not be known.” (Nicholas of Cusa 1928, pp. 58–60) Martin Luther made a sharp distinction between God preached and God hidden; of the latter, he wrote, “Now, God in His own nature and majesty is to be left alone; in this regard, we have nothing to do with Him, nor does he wish us to deal with him.” (Luther 1961, p. 191) And John Calvin wrote, “[God’s] essence is incomprehensible; hence, his divineness far escapes all human perception” (Calvin 1955, 1.13.1).

What seems to be affirmed here is that humans cannot fully understand God or cannot understand God in anywhere near as full a way as we can understand other creatures like, say, pigeons or fruit flies. That point seems entirely sensible. But does it follow that we cannot receive or grasp any reliable information about GE at all? Indeed, it seems that theologians are in fact trying to assert something about GE when they say things like, “God is mysterious,” or “God is transcendent,” or even “God is ineffable.” Aren’t such statements—despite the fact that they amount to negations—intended to be reliable representations of God essence? Accordingly, the first possibility does not seem promising.

(2) The second possibility is that God could, if God wanted to do so, convey to us accurate information about GE, but for our own benefit chooses not to do so. The author of the mystical classic, *The Cloud of Unknowing* (a late fourteenth century English monk whose name is

unknown to us), seems to suggest as much. Speaking apparently to a younger monk, he wrote: “But now you put me a question and say: ‘How might I think of Him in Himself, and what is He?’ And to this I can only answer thus: ‘I have no idea.’ But with your question you have brought me into that same darkness, into that same cloud of unknowing, where I would you were yourself.” Humans can understand other creatures and even some of the works of God—so the author allowed—but he went on to insist, “No man can think of God himself. Therefore, it is my wish to leave everything that I can think of and choose for my love the thing that I cannot think. Because he can certainly be loved, but not thought” (Unknown 2004, p. 20).

So the idea is apparently that in ruling out the possibility of human knowledge of God, God opens the possibility of love of God. And it is clear that the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* held that love of God is the way that we are to approach God and even, as he says, hold to God. That is why the author wrote that he wanted the younger monk to be in the same state of ignorance (of GE) that he himself experienced.

Another way of arguing that knowledge of GE would be spiritually dangerous to humans is to claim that in knowing God’s essence we could be “possessing God” in some sense or having some sort of claim on God. Karl Barth seems to argue along these lines. Even though Barth argued against Luther that there is no “hidden God” who is somehow different from (what I am calling) GR, he insisted that in revelation, God is not “delivered up” to us. Human knowledge does not “contain” God or reduce God’s freedom. Otherwise, God becomes a creature or idol (Barth 1975, p. 322).

Perhaps there are other ways of arguing that God deliberately keeps us ignorant of GE and that this is in our best interest. But the point we are considering here does not seem convincing. For one thing, it is clear that we *can* love things that we know, e.g., our friends or loved ones, and it is hard to see why having some knowledge of GE rules out or is an impediment to love of God. Indeed, it seems much harder to love something that we do not know than to love something that we do know. Moreover, it is not easy to see why we would be “possessing God” in some theologically untoward sense if we were to know something of GE. Nor is it easy to see why human knowledge of GE, as opposed to GR, would reduce God’s freedom or make God into an idol. It seems that as long as one holds that there is continuity between GR and GE, knowledge of GR (which of course Barth insists that we have) would do the same.

(3) The third possibility is that God, in revealing the divine to human beings, is systematically misleading us about God’s own nature. And this notion naturally reminds us of Descartes’ famous “Evil Genius” from his

Meditations on First Philosophy. In order to rationalize his policy of methodical doubt, Descartes raised the possibility that

an all-powerful God existed by whom I have been created such as I am. How do I know that he has not brought it to pass that there is no earth, no heaven, no extended body, no magnitude, no place, and that nevertheless I possess the perceptions of all these things and that they seem to me to exist just exactly as I now see them?

A bit later he wrote:

I will then suppose, not that God who is supremely good and the fountain of truth, but rather some evil genius not less powerful than deceitful, has employed his whole energies in deceiving me. (Descartes 1970, pp. 147–148)

So Descartes’ radical idea—at least at this point in the development of his philosophy—was that nothing at all that he once believed could be trusted; the Evil Genius could fool us about anything. Accordingly, everything must be doubted. (Of course Descartes did not believe that the Evil Genius actually existed; the hypothesis was instead a graphic way of motivating Descartes’ strategy of doubting everything that can be doubted.)

Now in the present essay we are concerned not with methodical doubt in pursuit of a stable epistemological strategy vis-à-vis knowledge in general, as Descartes was. Our concern is with the theological problem raised by the possibility that via revelation God systematically misleads us about the nature of the divine. Still, it might prove helpful to think a bit longer along Cartesian lines.

Let us raise the extreme possibility that God is deceiving us in the following (to Christians, anyway) highly radical way: Suppose that God has hidden from us the fact that in his essence God is what I will call the Anti-Christian God (or ACG, for short). This God, let us imagine, is remarkably ecumenical and tolerant of all sorts of human beliefs, religions, sects, or practices—except Christian ones. At death, God receives into eternal bliss all human beings, regardless of gender, race, beliefs, good or bad deeds, etc.—except Christians, whom the ACG hates. All those who have believed and behaved Christianly (e.g. by attending Christian religious services, etc.) he sends immediately to eternal damnation.

It is clear that the Evil Genius, as conceived by Descartes, does not trade in what we would ordinarily call “illusions.” These are cases—like a stick in water that looks bent, like an oasis or a lake that seems to appear on the horizon in the desert, or like the lady who is apparently sawn in half by the magician—where careful investigation can fairly easily reveal to us what has gone wrong and why

things are not in fact as they appear to be. The Evil Genius is much cleverer than that. He wants to fool us at a far deeper level; he wants to cause us to hold firmly to false beliefs that we think are overwhelmingly warranted. So he creates illusions so cunning that no investigative strategy that we could possibly undertake could reveal the truth to us. For example, he shows me what looks and seems like an ordinary ball point pen—and will still seem to be a ball point pen no matter what I do to or with it—and then chuckles because he knows that the “ball point pen” is really a very, very, very cleverly disguised cantaloupe.

Following Bouwsma (1965, p. 34), let’s call illusions that can be detected or figured out “thin illusions” and the type of illusions we are imagining the Evil Genius to be producing “thick Illusions.” Bouwsma offers a classic response to the thick illusion strategy of the Evil Genius. He first points out that we normally use words like “illusion” or “deceived” or “fooled” in contexts where it is possible to discover that one is mistaken, i.e., in the context of thin illusions. He next argues that if the illusion is so cleverly constructed that nothing I can possibly do will show me that the ball point pen is really a cantaloupe, i.e., no matter what I do it will still look and behave like a ball point pen, then I am not being “fooled” in believing that it is a ball point pen. I should not be bothered in the slightest if the Evil Genius were to own up and tell me that the thing I am looking at in my hand and writing with is not really a ball point pen but just a thick illusion of a ball point pen. The word “illusion” has lost all sense. Finally, Bouwsma suggests that in the present scenario the Evil Genius has outsmarted himself; he thinks he is fooling me but he is the one who is being fooled because he mistakenly thinks he is “fooling” me.

But, unfortunately, Bouwsma’s clever response to the thick illusion strategy of the Evil Genius is not available to us as we wrestle with the gap between GE and GR and the possibility that God is the ACG. For one thing, we can easily imagine that the Evil Genius one day reads Bouwsma’s essay, realizes his mistake, smacks himself in the head with the words, “Oh dear, I never thought of that,” and then sets out to amend his ways. He might then decide to eschew thick illusions and instead start deploying what we might call semi-thick illusions. These are illusions that are incredibly difficult to detect but can be detected, but only with the greatest effort and with the use of the most sophisticated investigative methods. Then Descartes’ Evil Genius hypothesis will not have been refuted. But, more importantly, in the present context there does not appear to be any sort of linguistic barrier (like our normal use of words like “illusion”) to rule out the possibility that God, as GR, is systematically fooling us about GE. It might still be the case that we have no idea of GE; it might still be the case that the ACG exists.

III

I will now discuss four possible reactions to the conundrum that we are discussing. The first two amount to possible bridges that might be built from GR to GE. They are: (1) Jesus Christ is the bridge; and (2) via human reason and GR, we can triangulate on GE (so to speak) and arrive at least at some reliable information about GE. The third and fourth reactions are more radical. (3) Christians should change their notion of God; and (4) the problem cannot be solved, i.e., our belief that GR accurately represents GE is perhaps an assumption that we must make if we are to be Christians, but there is no reliable warrant for it. After discussing these four, I will close with a fifth solution; it is the one that I wish to endorse.

(1) *The bridge is Christ.* It might be argued that Jesus Christ, who is the preeminent revelation of God, and who is (as Christian creeds insist) both truly divine and truly human, is the needed guarantor of the reliability of what we learn about God by revelation. After all, he is said to be “the one mediator between God and humankind” (I Tim. 2:5). Speaking of Christ, Thomas Torrance says, “he is in himself what he reveals of the Father and what the Father reveals of himself in the Son he is in himself as Father.” (Torrance 1996, p. 78) Accordingly, Christ imparts to us knowledge of GE.

Now this sort of argument is certainly sufficient—or so it seems to me—to convince most Christians of the reliability of GR. But that is because most Christians already make the assumption mentioned above, viz., that GR is accurate and reliable. They find the idea of God lying to us distasteful and blasphemous. But in the absence of that assumption, as for example based on our ACG hypothesis, the idea of Christ as the bridge between GE and GR does not seem convincing. If the ACG exists, he could falsely convince us that Christ is the bridge, but only as a part of his strategy of producing more Christians for him to punish in the afterlife.

(2) *Triangulation.* The idea here is that different lines of evidence can converge to show us at least some things about GE, just as GPS can locate a radio signal on the surface of the earth by triangulation from two or more satellites in earth orbit. Or perhaps a better model would be orthographic projection in mechanical drafting.⁴ It is impossible accurately to depict a three-dimensional object on a two-dimensional surface like a piece of paper. But what can be done—and what drafters often do—is to depict the object from different angles and perspectives, thus showing its true configuration.

This notion of triangulation might be metaphorically applied to God in the following way: in the Christian

⁴ I owe this point to Professor Scott Cormode.

tradition we have various (as we might say) sources of information about God, some perhaps more important or more reliable than others: (1) *natural theology* (what we can learn about God by our own reasoning abilities); (2) what we can learn by thinking about the meaning of God's *revelatory actions* in the world (e.g., the Exodus, the incarnation of Christ, the resurrection of Christ); (3) what can learn from God's *revelations in words* (e.g., the Ten Commandments, the teachings of the Old Testament prophets, the teachings of Jesus); and (4) what we can learn about God in *religious experience* (e.g., in the Eucharist or in prayer). And if all sources of information tend to converge and give us a coherent picture of God (as theologians usually say that they do), then by a sort of triangulation we have learned something about God, indeed about GE. For example, if it is clear from two or three or maybe even all four sources that God is not the ACG, then we can know that God's essence does not include a determination to send all Christians to hell.

There are various points that could be made about this proposed bridge between GR and GE. But the most important is the fact that even if the triangulation seems to work, we have not ruled out the possibility that we are still deeply mistaken about God's nature—indeed we have not ruled out the possibility that God is the ACG. This is because we can imagine the ACG orchestrating or rigging the triangulating sources of information precisely in order to convince more people to be Christians so that he can punish them.

(3) *Christians should change their notion of God.* One possibility, of course, is that the problem we are discussing can be resolved by altering those aspects of the Christian concept of God that cause it. The properties that are responsible for our conundrum are clearly the claims that God is unseen, ineffable, inscrutable (incomprehensible, mysterious), and transcendent. Can we change them?

If *unseen* means essentially and thus always unseen, Christians reject that notion already because they believe that God became a man in Jesus Christ and walked on earth. If *ineffable* is to be taken literally—we cannot put into words who or what God is, cannot say anything true about God—then I would reject the idea that God is ineffable because it leads to self-referential incoherence. When people say, “God is ineffable,” they are trying to say something meaningful and true about God, which you cannot do if God is ineffable. (Doubtless there are less radical senses in which God is ineffable.) Perhaps, then, Christians can afford to give up on these first two putative divine attributes.

But the other two, God is *inscrutable* and God is *transcendent*, can hardly be given up by those who have no desire to make Christianity into a new and different religion. Of course, Christians hold that via revelation we can

understand at least something of God's nature and actions in history. But surely this leaves a huge area of ignorance. And unless we want to make God like the non-transcendent gods of the ancient Greek pantheon (they were much more powerful than humans and did not have to die, but in most other respects were like us), we must never give up on the idea of God's transcendence. That God is unlimited, infinitely wise, infinitely powerful, mysterious, etc. are notions that cannot be discarded. And—so it seems—as long as we retain such notions, the gap between GR and GE still yawns.

Accordingly, the problem we are discussing will disappear if we go this third route. But assuming that we do not want to deny inscrutability and transcendence, we need to go on to the fourth reaction to our conundrum.

(4) *The problem cannot be solved.* This fourth reaction is not a proposed solution to the problem; indeed, it amounts to an admission that the problem cannot be solved; there is no bridge from GR to GE. The bridge is something that Christians must simply posit; it is a matter of trust or maybe a sheer leap of faith to hold that GR and GE are congruent. It is a presupposition of all Christian faith, practice, and rational discourse about God—but it cannot be proved.

What we seem to have arrived at is a kind of theological skepticism that is, as we might say, internal to Christianity. That is, this skepticism does not arise via the arguments of religious skeptics; it is created by Christianity's own theological commitments; it is not motivated by anything external like lack of evidence for or compelling arguments against its claims.

To be clear, I am definitely not saying that the existence of the ACG—or of any major incongruence between GR and GE—is *probable*. So this is not a skepticism that must involve lack of belief; I certainly hold that GR is reliable. But given our current assumptions I do not see how I or anyone else could prove it. This is a skepticism that involves admitting that a certain theological problem cannot be solved. But then does the problem we have been discussing amount to any sort of serious internal or apologetic difficulty for Christianity? I do not think so. As noted above, the conviction that GR accurately represents GE is an assumption that you must make if you want to be a Christian. It cannot be proved; accordingly, like other items in the Christian creed, it must be taken on faith.

There is a solution to the problem, but it lies in the future. Years ago, in an entirely different context, John Hick introduced the notion of “eschatological verification.” (Hick 1957, pp. 150–163) It is, of course, part of Christian belief that the religious mysteries that we now face will be cleared up. Thus Paul wrote, “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have

been fully known” (I Corinthians 13: 12). So some day, when faith is replaced by sight, we will know God fully.

IV

This concludes my discussion of the four possible solutions. But there is another possibility. Let us return to solution (3), changing the notion of God. As noted, the claims that God is unseen and ineffable are non-starters for Christians (although the idea that God is unseen in God’s essence must naturally be retained). But we also concluded that God’s transcendence (God is unlimited, infinitely wise, infinitely powerful, infinitely good, mysterious) is non-negotiable.

But my question would be this: would that core notion of divine transcendence be endangered if Christians were to hold that we can know God’s essence? Here “knowing GE” would not mean knowing all about GE or even understanding fully what we do know about GE. It would mean simply knowing certain things—things that we take God to have revealed—about GE. Note that in Trinitarian theology, Christian thinkers have often made a distinction between the economic Trinity (God is three-in-one as God is revealed to us) and the immanent Trinity (God is three-in-one in God’s inner being, quite apart from human knowledge). And most such theologians have affirmed and even insisted that God three-in-oneness is a fact about God as God is in himself; modalism, after all, is a heresy.

The solution to the skeptical conclusion that we tentatively reached, then, is that via revelation we can know certain things about God in essence. What we can know will not be much; moreover, we will not fully understand all that we can know. But GR does accurately reveal GE. When we say “God is infinitely wise,” we are truthfully saying something about the essence of God. Of course just

saying that we know something of the divine essence does not make it true. But to prove that point is not part of the aim of the present essay. My central aim is to argue that Christian theologians should not say that we know only GR, not GE.

Christians naturally do not want to change our notion of God. But affirming that God’s essence is not quite totally hidden from us does not do that. This, indeed, seems to me to be the starting point of Christian thought about God.

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Who or What is God, According to John Hick?

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Abstract I summarize John Hick’s pluralistic theory of the world’s great religions, largely in his own voice. I then focus on the core posit of his theory, what he calls “the Real,” but which I less tendentiously call “God_{hick}”. God_{hick} is supposed to be the ultimate religious reality. As such, it must be both possible and capable of explanatory and religious significance. Unfortunately, God_{hick} is, by definition, transcategorical, i.e. necessarily, for any creaturely conceivable substantial property F, it is neither an F nor a non-F. As a result, God_{hick} is impossible, as shown by the Self-Identity Problem, the Number Problem, and the Pairing Problem. Moreover, even if God_{hick} is possible, it faces the Insignificance Problem. The upshot is that, so far as I can see, John Hick’s God is unworthy of any further interest.

Keywords God · God_{hick} · The Absolute · The Real · Ultimate reality · John Hick · Religious pluralism · Ineffability · Transcategoriality

1 Introduction

“Who or what is God?,” asks John Hick (Hick 2009). Good question. Hick denies the usual theistic answer that God is an infinite person or personal being (Hick 2010a,

22; Hick 2010b, 27).¹ His own answer arises out of his “pluralistic theory” of “the world’s great religions,” which he introduces by way of several alleged facts.

The first alleged fact is “the religious ambiguity of the universe, the fact that it can be understood and experienced both religiously and naturalistically”; the total publically available evidence does not settle the matter (Hick 2004a, xvii, 1989, 73–125). Despite this ambiguity, it is “entirely rational for those who experience religiously to trust their religious experience and to base their living and believing on it,” a conclusion Hick draws from the “critical trust principle,” according to which “it is rational to trust our experience *except* when we have some reason to doubt it,” and the fact that those who experience religiously lack such reason (Hick 2004a, xviii, 1989, 210–228). However, “religious experience sometimes differs widely between, and indeed within, the religious traditions,” ranging from experience as of “personal gods,” e.g. Yahweh, Vishnu, Shiva, the Trinity, Allah, etc., to experience as of “non-personal absolutes,” e.g. Brahman, the Tao, the Dharma-kaya, etc., resulting in incompatible belief-systems (Hick 2010c, viii, 2004a, xviii, xix, 1989, 228). Since the critical trust principle applies universally, and since the people of no world religion have reason to doubt their own religious experience, the critical trust principle “validates a plurality of incompatible religious belief-systems” (Hick 2004a, xix).

Apprised of this situation, those of us who experience the world religiously cannot “reasonably claim that our own form of religious experience, together with that of the tradition of which we are a part, is veridical whilst the others are not,” “as virtually every religious tradition has

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¹ For critical assessment of Hick’s reasons, see Howard-Snyder (forthcoming a).

done” (Hick 1989, 235). That’s because, says Hick, the people of each religion lack any reason to regard their own religious experience as more veridical than that of other religions, aside from “the very human, but not very cogent, reason that it is one’s own” (Hick 1989, 235, 2004a, xli–xlii, note 3). In addition, each of the world’s major religions uses “moral and spiritual transformation” from “self-centeredness” to “unself-centeredness” (i.e. love and compassion) as the criterion for veridical religious experience, and no religion is better than any other at producing this transformation (Hick 2004a, xiv–xxvi, 1989, 299–342, 2007, 221–222).² So, the people of each religion face a difficult pair of questions:

if the different kinds of religious experience justify people in holding incompatible sets of beliefs developed within the different traditions, has not our justification for religious belief thereby undermined itself? Does it not offer an equal justification for acceptance of a number of mutually contradictory propositions? (Hick 1989, 228)

“The pluralistic theory,” says Hick, “is a response to this apparently anomalous situation” (Hick 2004a, xix).

2 Hick’s Pluralistic Theory and the “Apparently Anomalous Situation”

According to Hick, “there is an ultimate reality”—which he calls “the Real,” but which I will less tendentiously call “God_{hick}”—“which is in itself transcategorical (ineffable), beyond the range of our human conceptual systems, but whose universal presence is humanly experienced in the various forms made possible by our conceptual-linguistic systems and spiritual practices” (Hick 1997, 279; 1989, 236, 2004b, 9, 2004a, xix, 2007, 220–221, 2009, 4).³ Hick gives this thought a Kantian twist, “suggesting that we use something analogous to Kant’s distinction between noumenal reality and its phenomenal appearance(s) to human consciousness.... [T]he noumenal [God_{hick}] is thought and experienced by different human mentalities, forming and formed by different religious traditions, as the range of divine *personae* and metaphysical *impersonae*, [the “personal gods” and “non-personal absolutes”] which

the phenomenology of religion reports” (Hick 2004a, xix). (Hick uses “mentalities” in its historiographical sense, as in the phrase “*histoire des mentalités*,” i.e. “mindsets” or “worldviews,” complexes of conceptual, cultural, historical, linguistic and other conditions that form a way of understanding and experiencing the world.) To spell this out a bit, Hick says that, “when we are open to [God_{hick}’s] universal presence,” it sometimes “impinges” on us, “impacts” us, “affects” us; “transmitting information” “that the human mind/brain is capable of transforming into what we call religious experience” (Hick 2010a, 70–72, 2010c, 69–72, 1989, 243–244). Our mind/brain transforms this “information,” however, only through specific religious mentalities that “particularize” or “schematize” the “universal presence” of God_{hick} into the diverse kinds of religious experience reported by the variety of religions.

Hick divides those mentalities into two groups: first, those that deploy “the concept of God, or of [God_{hick}] as personal, which presides over the various theistic forms of religious experience,” and second, those that deploy “the concept of the Absolute, or of [God_{hick}] as non-personal, which presides over its various non-theistic forms” (Hick 1989, 245, 2007, 220). So the Zen disciple, after years of tutelage and meditation, may “finally attain *satori* and become vividly aware of ultimate reality as immediately present in the flow of ordinary life”; or, the advaitic Hindu, upon a different regimen, “may in due course attain the awareness of oneness with Brahman and become *jivan-mukti*”; or, the Christian, in times of prayer, may sense the presence of the loving Father, Abba, forgiving, guiding, and strengthening her (Hick 1989, 294). And the same goes for other mentalities.

But how, exactly, does this solve the anomaly Hick identifies? The answer hangs on the ontological status of the *personae* and *impersonae* of God_{hick}, of which Hick proposes “two models,” patterned after “two different understandings of the ontological status of the [heavenly] Buddhas” in the *trikaya* doctrine of the Buddhas (Hick 1989, 269–275).

According to the first understanding, Amida, Vairocana, Ratnasambhava, and the other Buddhas, are “mental creations,” “ideations of the Bodhisattvas: to the Bodhisattva his ideal becomes so vivid and alive that it takes shape as a subjective reality” (Hick 1989, 272–273, quoting Schumann). Amida, etc. are thus, “projections of the religious imagination,” but not *mere* projections: “they are modes in which the limitless Dharmakaya affects our human consciousness” (Hick 1989, 273). As such, although these modes of human consciousness may seem to the Bodhisattva as though they are “real persons,” they are not; nevertheless, the Dharmakaya “transmits” “authentic information” to the Bodhisattva in whose consciousness such modes are produced (Hick 1989, 273).

² Each religion also uses consistency with its belief-system as a criterion of the veridicality of religious experience, a fact that Hick ignores.

³ Why less tendentious? Because, as we will see, to speak of Hick’s God as “the Real” is to import into its conception connotations that cannot be underwritten by its transcategoriality. I therefore use a neutral term, although “X,” which Hick sometimes uses, e.g. Hick (2010c), 75, would be even more neutral, and accurate.

Using this understanding to model the ontological status of the *personae* of God_{hick}, Hick says that “Jahweh, the heavenly Father, Allah, Shiva, Vishnu and so on are not objectively existent personal individuals with their own distinctive powers and characteristics,” but rather ways (“modes”) in which human consciousness is modified by “the universal presence” of God_{hick}, shaped by the category of deity, resulting in “a powerful and deeply resonant sense of personal presence,” sometimes further schematized by distinctive aspects of the mentalities of specific theistic traditions, resulting in experiences distinctive of each of these traditions. “In worshipping this divine Thou”—this “mode of human consciousness,” this “mental creation,” this “projection of the religious imagination”—“we are accordingly relating ourselves to [God_{hick}]
—whether or not we are aware of the complex way in which the relationship is being mediated” (Hick 1989, 273). And something similar goes for the *impersonae* of God_{hick}. Each of them is a way in which human consciousness is modified by “the universal presence” of God_{hick}, shaped by the category of the Absolute, resulting in a sense of a non-personal ultimate reality, sometimes further schematized by distinctive aspects of the mentalities of specific nontheistic traditions, resulting in experiences distinctive of Zen Buddhism, Advaitic Hinduism, etc. On the first model, then, the noumenal God_{hick} manifests itself through these phenomenal projections, which, for the *personae* of God_{hick}, are identical with Jahweh, etc. and, for its *impersonae*, are identical with Brahman, etc.⁴

According to the second understanding of the ontological status of the heavenly Buddhas, they are “objectively existing, supramundane and subtle beings” (Hick 1989, 274, quoting Schumann). Furthermore, “Amida, [etc.] are real persons, of immense but not limitless proportions” (Hick 1989, 274).

Using this understanding to model the *personae* of God_{hick}, Hick says that “Jahweh, [etc.]...are real personal beings, independent centres of consciousness, will, thought and emotion” (Hick 1989, 274). However, says Hick,

each of them is finite; for each exists alongside and is limited by the others with their own particular natures and capacities. Although the power of any one of this plurality cannot therefore be infinite it may nevertheless be so great as to be virtually infinite from our human point of view, as the gods exercise their powers in response to prayer and in the providential ordering of nature and history. (Hick 1989, 274–275)

⁴ Hick (1989), 278–296, has a parallel discussion of the *impersonae* of God_{hick}, but no explicit application of the two models. No explicit application in Hick (2004a) either. However, at Hick (2010c), 69, we find an explicit application.

So on the second model God_{hick} manifests itself to us through our experience of these “objectively existing” realities which, for the *personae*, are identical with Jahweh, etc. and, for the *impersonae*, are identical with Brahman, etc.

Two concerns about the second model. First, it implies polytheism; Hick wants to avoid that.⁵ Second, as William Hasker points out, it contradicts Hick’s pluralism, since the *personae* are supposed to exist in virtue of different mentalities “schematizing” the “universal presence” of God_{hick} into distinctive religious experiences (Hasker 2011, 194–195).

In his last published word on the subject, Hick replaces the second model, as stated above, with the following one, in an effort to address both concerns:

My suggestion is three-fold: (1) The monotheistic God-figures are human projections, existing only in the religious imaginations of a particular faith community.... (2) These projections are human responses within a particular cultural situation to the continuous impact upon humanity of the universal presence of [God_{hick}].... And (3) The thou experienced in prayer and revelation is quite likely an intermediate figure between us and [God_{hick}]. The Gods, then, are phenomenal appearances of [God_{hick}] existing, with their omni- and other properties, in the thought of the worshipping community. But in praying to them we may in fact (unknown to us) be in contact with a real personal presence which is an ‘angel,’ in the sense of an intermediate figure between us and [God_{hick}], corresponding to the angels, archangels of the western monotheisms, or devas (gods with a small g) of Indian religion, or the heavenly Buddhas of one interpretation of one strand of Mahayan Buddhism. These are independent centres of consciousness, finite in their qualities. (Hick 2011, 200, cf. 2010a, 25–26.)

Hick concludes: “The God-figures are not independent centres of consciousness, like the angels, and I was wrong when I proposed that the second interpretation of the *triyaka* doctrine was equally compatible as the first with the pluralistic hypothesis” (Hick 2011, 201).

So on the first model, the thous experienced in prayer and revelation are human projections, “so vivid and alive,” they seem to be real persons, though they aren’t; “Yahweh”, etc. name these projections. On the revised second model, however, the thous experienced in prayer and revelation are a plurality of intermediate beings, so that “a

⁵ At least the implication holds if we say that “x is a god,” with a little g, means by definition “x is a very powerful non-embodied rational agent” (Swinburne 1970, 53).

Christian in prayer is addressing an angel, or indeed different Christians [are] addressing different angels,” unbeknownst to the Christians. And the same goes for Hindus and their divas, Buddhists and their Buddhas, and so on for other “spiritual beings” each of whom exists independently of any human mentality (Hick 2011, 200).⁶

Now we can see how Hick addresses the “apparently anomalous situation” of religious experience equally justifying contradictory propositions. He proposes that the propositions in question are not contradictory since they are about different objects (Hick 1997, 716, 2004a, xxx). On the first model, the objects of belief are distinct imaginative projections. So if, by way of his experience, Christopher comes to believe that God is F, and if, by way of his experience, Mohammed comes to believe that God is not F, for Christopher, “God” “refers” to a Christian projection of the Christian community whereas, for Mohammed, “God” “refers” to a Muslim projection. Since the Christian projection is distinct from the Muslim projection, Christopher’s beliefs are compatible with Mohammed’s. On the second model, the objects of beliefs are distinct “spiritual beings,” with distinct “spheres of operation”. So if, by way of her experience, Christina comes to believe that God is F, and if, by way of her experience, Khadijah comes to believe that God is not F, for Christina, “God” “refers” to, say, the archangel Michael, whose provenance is the Christian community, whereas, for Khadijah, “God” “refers” to, say, Ridwan, the guardian of heaven, whose provenance is the Islamic community. Since Michael is distinct from Ridwan, Christina’s beliefs are compatible with Khadijah’s.⁷

How does God_{hick} figure in all of this? As follows:

[W]e are led to postulate [God_{hick}] *an sich* as the presupposition of the veridical character of this range of forms of religious experience. Without this postulate we should be left with a plurality of *personae* and *impersonae* each of which is claimed to be the

⁶ While the revised second model avoids Hasker’s concern, it remains thoroughly polytheistic. For discussion, see Mavrodes (2000), Hick (2004a), xxvii–xxviii, (2010c), 33–35, Mavrodes (2010a), 62–69, Hick (2010c), 69–72, Mavrodes (2010b), 72–75, Hasker (2011), Hick (2011) and Howard-Snyder (forthcoming b).

⁷ Four observations. (1) Plantinga (2000), 49–52, misrepresents the referential situation. (2) On the first model, for nearly any F, belief that God is F will be false since, for nearly any F, no projection can be F. (3) The angels of various religions overlap extensively; so the second model will need finessing. (4) Tricky questions about reference abound. For example, on a descriptivist theory of reference, “God” and its natural language equivalents refer on an occasion of use only if the intended referent satisfies a certain description. If the intended referent must satisfy a description that no projection or angel can satisfy, e.g. *is neither imaginary nor a creature*, then, on no occasion of use will “God” refer to a projection or an angel. On reference, see Reimar and Michaelson (2014).

Ultimate, but no one of which alone can be. We should have either to regard all the reported experiences as illusory or else return to the confessional position in which we affirm the authenticity of our own stream of religious experience whilst dismissing as illusory those occurring within other traditions. But for those to whom neither of these options seems realistic the pluralistic affirmation becomes inevitable, and with it the postulation of [God_{hick}] *an sich*, which is variously experienced and thought as the range of divine phenomena described by the history of religion. (Hick 1989, 249.)

The thought is that, when it comes to understanding the religious experience “described by the history of religion,” there are just three options: illusion, confessionalism, and pluralism. We should reject illusion and confessionalism for reasons I mentioned earlier; we are left with pluralism.

Hick offers a false trilemma here. That’s because of the penultimacy option, according to which there are many penultimate gods and absolutes, each of which is variously experienced in a veridical fashion. To be sure, claims to one’s own god or absolute as the “sole creator or source of all finite existence” will have to go, but penultimacy resolves the “anomalous situation” at least as well as Hick’s pluralism, and it arguably does so while preserving more of what the traditions say about the objects of their experience and thought, without positing a transcategorical God_{hick} which is, as I will argue shortly, impossible and explanatorily/religiously insignificant (cf. Eddy 2015, 184; Hick 1989, 269).

Of course, Hick’s pluralism faces other criticisms. Some critics argue that our universe does not suffer from religious ambiguity. Others argue that there are good reasons that undermine the justification of belief based on religious experience. Still others argue that, from the point of view of the major world religions, the cost is too high: if Hick’s pluralism is true, each of them is false. Still more argue that, given his description of God_{hick}, “moral and spiritual transformation” could not be a criterion for veridical religious experience.⁸

I want to focus on something else, however. I want to focus on Hick’s assumption that what he describes as God_{hick} is a genuine candidate for being God, the ultimate religious reality. I will argue that this assumption is false. My argument assumes that any candidate for being the ultimate religious reality must be possible and must have explanatory and religious significance. If we can show that the very idea of God_{hick} entails that it is impossible or that

⁸ See Ward (1994), Byrne (1995), Heim (2001), Sugirtharajah (2012), Rose (2013), Eddy (2015) and Netland (2015), and the works cited in the bibliographies of these books and at <http://www.johnhick.org.uk/jsite/>.

it has no explanatory or religious significance, we will have shown that it cannot be the ultimate religious reality and so it cannot play the role Hick assigns to it in addressing the “apparently anomalous situation”.

3 Hick’s Principle of Transcategoriality: Five Observations

According to Hick, God_{hick} is “transcategorial”. But what, exactly, does that mean? After distinguishing “[God_{hick}] as it is in itself and as it is thought and experienced through our religious concepts,” Hick tells us that “it follows” from this distinction that

we cannot apply to [God_{hick}] *an sich* the characteristics encountered in its *personae* and *impersonae*. Thus it cannot be said to be one or many, person or thing, substance or process, good or evil, purposive or non-purposive. None of the concrete descriptions that apply within the realm of human experience can apply literally to the unexperienceable ground of that realm.... We cannot even speak of this as a thing or an entity. (Hick 1989, 246)⁹

I want to make five observations about this and related passages.

Observation 1 Hick conflates contraries and contradictions. Surely he does not mean to allow that God_{hick} is neither good nor evil but indifferent, neither substance nor process but stuff, etc. Rather, “[t]ranscategoriality excludes the attribution of properties either positively or negatively”; God_{hick} “is beyond assertion *and* denial” (Hick 2004a, xx, 2009, 5. Cf. Hick 1995, 64, 2000, 42–43. Quinn 2000, 243, note 7, misunderstands Hick). So God_{hick} is neither good nor *non-good*, neither a substance nor a *non-substance*, etc.

Observation 2 Transcategoriality cannot exclude the attribution of *all* properties since, as Hick concedes, “it is obviously impossible to refer to something that does not even have the property of ‘being able to be referred to’”. Further, the property of ‘being such that our [categories] do not apply to it’ cannot, without self-contradiction, include itself” (Hick 1989, 239). “It cannot therefore be *absolutely* transcategorial” (Hick 2000, 41). So: which properties are in? Which out?

Hick divides properties into two mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive classes: the “purely formal” and the

⁹ Of course, it’s false that “it follows” from this distinction that we cannot apply to God_{hick} *an sich* the characteristics encountered in its *personae* and *impersonae*. For critical remarks on this passage, see Quinn (2000), 229–230, with partial reply at Hick (2004a), xxii.

“substantial,” and he says the formal are in but the substantial are out. As examples of formal properties, Hick mentions *being able to be referred to* and *being such that our categories do not apply to it*, while examples of substantial properties include *being good*, *being powerful*, and *having knowledge* (Hick 1989, 239). More generally, Hick says that formal properties “do not tell us anything significant,” “do not tell us anything about what [something] in itself is like,” and “[do] not give us any information about [it]”. Rather, formal properties are “logically” or “linguistically generated,” “devoid of descriptive content,” and “trivial or inconsequential in that nothing significant follows from them”. By contrast, substantial properties “tell us something significant,” “something positive about [a thing],” “something about what [it is like] in itself” (Hick 1989, 239, 352, 2000, 41, 2004a, xxi, 2009, 6, 1995, 28).¹⁰ These contrasts run orthogonal to each other, however; and they invite tempestuous disagreement.¹¹ Nevertheless, it’s what we have to work with.

Observation 3 It appears, then, that according to Hick’s “principle of transcategoriality,” as he calls it,

- Necessarily, for any *substantial* property F, God_{hick} is neither an F nor a non-F.

Critics object. God_{hick} is not green, so non-green, not a tricycle, so a non-tricycle (Quinn 2000, 243, n7; Rowe 1999, 146; Plantinga 2000, 45).¹² Here’s Hick’s reply:

...I do indeed hold that [God_{hick}] cannot properly be said to be either a tricycle or a non-tricycle, and either green or non-green, on the ground that the concepts of tricality and greenness do not apply to it either positively or negatively. But I now want to add a distinction between properties such as being green or being a tricycle that are religiously irrelevant, in the sense that in religious discourse no one would think for a moment of attributing them to the ultimate divine reality, and those that are religiously relevant, such as being personal, good, loving, wise, etc. Although still in my view a mistake, it would do no harm religiously to say that [God_{hick}] is non-green, non-blue, a non-teapot, a non-tricycle, a non-heap of manure, a non-Mount Everest, etc., etc., because from a religious

¹⁰ Quinn, Insole, and Rowe say Hick does not draw the formal/substantive line in general terms (Insole 2000, 27; Quinn 2000, 232; Rowe 1999, 145).

¹¹ As Hick discovered from the protest to his claim that “[t]he most famous instance in western religious discourse” of a formal property “is Anselm’s definition of God as that than which no greater can be conceived” (Hick 1989, 246). Eddy (1994), 472; Ward (1990), 10; Quinn (2000), 233. Hick recanted: Hick (1995), 60, note 12, (2010c), 91.

¹² Mavrodes (2010b), 75, misrepresents Hick on negation.

point of view these are trivial truths from which nothing significant follows. (Hick 2004a, xxi–xxii)

In this passage, Hick countenances, without asserting, the idea that God_{hick} has “religiously irrelevant” substantial properties, in the specified sense, e.g. *being a non-tricycle* and *being non-green*. How plausible is this idea?

Not very, in my opinion. After all, in light of what some religious traditions have deemed significant foci of ultimate reality’s relation to the world, consider what would have been the case if our species had evolved so that some tradition thought that ultimate reality was specially related to greenness, tricycles, etc., say by becoming green or a tricycle or a green tricycle, etc. Or consider what would have been the case if our species had evolved so that no tradition thought God was personal. If God_{hick} has “religiously irrelevant” substantial properties, then, in the first case, it would not have been non-green, a non-tricycle, a non-green-tricycle, etc., although it actually has those properties. Moreover, if God_{hick} has “religiously irrelevant” substantial properties, then, in the second case, God_{hick} would have been non-personal, although it actually lacks that property. But it can’t be that, simply by virtue of the historic accident that no religion thinks greenness, etc. are religiously relevant, God_{hick} is none of those things; it can’t be that simply by virtue of the historic accident that some religion thinks *being personal* is religiously relevant, God_{hick} is neither personal nor non-personal. Therefore, in my opinion, Hick should reject the idea that God_{hick} has, in the specified sense, “religiously irrelevant” substantial properties.

Observation 4 Critics complain that Hick repeatedly puts “his fingers in the jam pot” of substantial properties (Alston 1995, 56. Cf. Mavrodes 2010b; Yandell 1999, 71; Netland 2012, 39). Hick says that God_{hick} is “the ground” of religious experience, even “the ground of our being”; indeed, it is “the source and ground of everything” (Hick 2010c, 94, note 8, 1995, 27). Moreover, it is “the necessary condition of our existence and our highest good” (Hick 1995, 63). Furthermore, although it is a “transcendent reality,” it has a “universal presence,” which “impacts” and “affects” us (Hick 1995, 60, 2010c, 71, 1989, 243–244, 1995, 61, 2007, 221, 2004a, xxix). In addition, it is “infinite, self-existent,” and “self-subsistent” (Hick 1995, 59, 1989, 139, 1989, 249). Moreover, Hick speaks of its “nature,” and he refers to it in the singular, which means number applies it (Hick 1989, 246, 2007, 223). None of these properties are logically or linguistically generated, and each is significant, informative, descriptive, non-trivial, and consequential.

Hick replies that in some of these cases—i.e. those implying causal or explanatory relations with the world,

e.g. sourcehood and grounding—he’s speaking only metaphorically (Hick 1995, 63, 2004a, xxix, 2010c, 72). This is unfortunate, however. A merely metaphorical “source and ground of everything” is a source or ground of nothing. But Hick needn’t go this route; after all, his transcategoriality principle, by way of his formal/substantial distinction, allows God_{hick} to bear significant *relations* to the world; it only precludes significant *in-itself* properties.¹³ Transcendence and presence are relations to the world as well. Hick’s response in other cases—e.g., having a nature—is retreat: God_{hick} neither has nor lacks a nature since “the concept of a nature...belongs to the network of human concepts which [it] totally transcends” (Hick 1995, 62. But see Hick 2010c, 83: “divine transcategoriality does not entail that [God_{hick}] has no nature”). Self-subsistence, self-existence, and infinity require retreat too. I will address number later.

Observation 5 Hick with his fingers jam free has to make you wonder, though. Absent any substantial properties, God_{hick} is looking quite ethereal, perhaps even *unreal*. After all, if it is neither an F nor a non-F, for any substantial property F, then, as Hick puts it, “the ultimate reality, which we are calling God, is an empty blank” (Hick 2009, 6; cf. Smart 1993a). But there is no difference between an empty blank and nothing at all. God_{hick}, therefore, collapses into nothing. Call this the *Empty Blank Problem*.

In reply, Hick stresses that transcategoriality only entails that God_{hick} “is beyond the range of our *human* conceptual resources,” that it has “no *humanly* conceivable qualities” (Hick 2009, 6, my emphases, 1995, 61–62, 2010c, 83). But this can’t be right. Hick does not mean to allow that God_{hick} has properties that can be conceived by nonhumans, say extra-terrestrials or angels.¹⁴ Nor does he mean to allow that God_{hick} has properties that can be conceived by merely possible creatures, say Perelandrians or Hobbits. Rather God_{hick} has no properties that can be conceived by any possible creature. So let’s charitably understand him as saying that

Transcategoriality. Necessarily, for any substantial property F that could be conceived by a creature, God_{hick} is neither an F nor a non-F.

¹³ Hick misleads critics here. “Hick does attribute properties to [God_{hick}] *an sich* (such as being the transcendent source and cause of religious experience) that, according to his own lights, cannot apply” (Harrison 2015, 264).

¹⁴ Hick approvingly applies Gregory of Nyssa’s words to God_{hick}: it is “incapable of being grasped by any term, or any idea, or any other device of our apprehension, remaining beyond the reach not only of the human but of the angelic and all supramundane intelligence” (Hick 1989, 238; quoting *Against Eunomius*, I:42).

Notice that, this principle leaves it wide open whether God_{hick} has substantial properties that *cannot* be conceived by a creature. Hick counts on this possibility in two ways.

First, creaturely *inconceivable* substantial properties provide an answer to the Empty Blank Problem. Although God_{hick} has no creaturely conceivable substantial properties, it “is not nothing!,” Hick proclaims (Hick 1995, 60). Rather, he insists, it is “so rich in content that it can only be finitely experienced in the variously partial and inadequate ways which the history of religions describes” (Hick 1989, 247. Cf. Hick 1995, 62, 66, and 2010c, 83).¹⁵ Clearly enough, it could not be like this without creaturely *inconceivable* substantial properties.

Second, they explain the relations God_{hick} bears to the world. Why is God_{hick} “the source and ground of everything,” as Hick says it is? Why is it “that which there must be if religious experience, in its diversity of forms, is not purely imaginative projection but also a response to a transcendent reality”? Why is it “such that in so far as the religious traditions are in soteriological alignment with it they are contexts of salvation/liberation”? Why is it “that reality in virtue of which, through our response to one or other of its manifestations as the God figures or the non-personal Absolutes, we can arrive at the blessed unself-centred state which is our highest good”? Why is it “such that it is authentically responded to from within the different world religions” (Hick 1995, 60, 1995, 27, 1995, 60. Hick 2000, 44. Cf. Hick 2004a, xxiii–xxiv)? Not because of any creaturely conceivable substantial properties; it has none of those. And not because of any formal properties; they are too thin to explain such things. Thus, unless God_{hick} has creaturely *inconceivable* substantial properties, it could not bear any of these explanatorily and religiously significant relations to the world.

Let’s now turn to a different problem.

4 The Property Bivalence Problem

According to Transcategoriality, it is necessary that, for any creaturely conceivable substantial property F, God_{hick} is neither an F nor a non-F. But how could that be? After all, consider Property Bivalence, a principle we find in Aristotle among many others before and after him:

Property Bivalence. Necessarily, for any x, and for any property F, x is either an F or a non-F.

Given Property Bivalence, God_{hick} is impossible since that principle entails that, necessarily, for any creaturely conceivable substantial property F, God_{hick} is either an F or a non-F. Call this the *Property Bivalence Problem*.

¹⁵ Yandell (1993), 194ff misses this point.

Hick notes that Transcategoriality “has been challenged on the logical ground that anything, including [God_{hick}], must have one or other of any two mutually contradictory qualities, x and non-x, and therefore cannot be outside the domain of our human concepts” (Hick 2004a, xx–xxi). Hick responds both by arguing against Property Bivalence and by arguing for Transcategoriality. Let’s look at the chief arguments he gives.

First, Hick argues against Property Bivalence by way of what he calls

the familiar idea of concepts which do not apply to something either positively or negatively. It does not make sense, for example, to ask whether a molecule is clever or stupid, or whether a stone is virtuous or wicked, because they are not the kinds of thing that can be either. And I have suggested that it does not make sense to ask of the transcategorial [God_{hick}] whether it is personal or non-personal, good or evil, just or unjust, because these concepts do not apply to it—either positively or negatively. (Hick 2004a, xx–xxi. Cf. Hick 2007, 222–223, 2009, 5)

Elsewhere, Hick says that to apply a concept, either positively or negatively, to God_{hick} is to commit “a category mistake” (Hick 2009, 5. Cf. Hick 1995, 61, and Stenmark 2015). What should we make of the line of thought here?

Notice, first of all, that Hick, once again, confuses contraries and contradictories. *Being clever* and *being stupid* are contraries; something of average intelligence or of no intelligence is neither clever nor stupid. *Being virtuous* and *being wicked* are contraries too; something of average goodness or of no goodness is neither virtuous nor wicked. Neither pair is a case of “two mutually contradictory qualities, x and non-x”.¹⁶

Correcting for Hick’s confusion, we can understand him as giving the following argument against Property Bivalence:

The Category Mistake Argument

1. If something is such that “it does not make sense” “to ask whether” it is an F or a non-F, then it is neither an F nor a non-F.
2. If something is neither an F nor a non-F, then it is false that, necessarily, for any x, x is either an F or a non-F.
3. So, if something is such that “it does not make sense” “to ask whether” it is an F or a non-F, then it is false that, for any x and for any property F, x is either an F or a non-F. (1, 2)

¹⁶ Others also ignore the relevance of the contrary/contradictory distinction. See, e.g., Harrison (2015), 264.

This line of thought is fine as far as it goes, but unless there is something about which “it does not make sense” “to ask whether” it is an F or a non-F, we cannot infer the falsity of Property Bivalence. Hick offers molecules and stones. He says it doesn’t make any sense to ask whether a molecule is clever or non- clever, or whether a stone is virtuous or non-virtuous.

My reply is two-fold. First, it does make sense for you to ask these questions if you don’t already know the answer. Second, even if you do know the answer, and so even if it would be inappropriate for you to ask these questions, it does not follow that the proposition that molecules are non- clever or the proposition that stones are non-virtuous is false or meaningless. On the contrary, they are true, in fact necessarily true. Divide reality into what is clever and what is not, and you’d be wise to look for molecules among the non- clever. Divide reality into what is virtuous and what is not, and you’d be foolish not to look for stones among the non-virtuous. So, by my lights, Hick’s first argument against Property Bivalence fails (Cf. Rowe 1999).

Hick’s second argument can be seen in a response to an objection from William Rowe. Hick writes:

...Rowe still insists that it is logically necessary that if the attribute of being personal does not apply to [God_{hick}, then it] has the attribute of being non-personal. For ‘personal’ and ‘non-personal’ are logically interdependent, in that if X is not personal, it is necessarily non-personal. But the inference from ‘X is not personal’ to therefore ‘X is a non-personal, or impersonal, reality’ only holds within the domain of things to which the concepts ‘personal’ and ‘non-personal’ apply. The transcategorial [God_{hick}] is not in that domain.... To deny—as in effect Rowe does—that there can be a reality beyond the scope of human conceptuality seems to me to be a dogma that we are under no obligation to accept. (Hick 2010c, 84–85, 2000, 42–43)¹⁷

If I’m not mistaken, we have latent here the following argument:

The Beyond Human Conceptuality Argument

1. There can be a reality that is beyond the scope of human conceptuality.
2. If there can be a reality that is beyond the scope of human conceptuality, then there can be a reality

such that, for some substantial property F, it is neither an F nor a non-F.

3. If there can be a reality such that, for some substantial property F, it is neither an F nor a non-F, then it’s false that, necessarily, for any x, and for any property F, x is either an F or a non-F.
4. So, it’s false that, necessarily, for any x, and for any property F, x is either an F or a non-F. (1–3)

What should we make of this line of thought?

Let’s begin with three observations.

First, Hick says everything, including God_{hick}, has some formal properties within the scope of human conceptuality. So we must restrict premise (1) to substantial properties.

Second, a substantial property “is beyond the scope of human conceptuality” just in case it does not fall under any concept humans have a grasp of.

Third, given these two points, premise (1) must be read as the claim that

- 1a. There can be a reality at least some of whose substantial properties do not fall under any concept humans have a grasp of.

Moreover, in order for the argument to remain logically valid, premise (2) must modified to the claim that

- 2a. If there can be a reality at least some of whose substantial properties do not fall under any concept humans have a grasp of, then there can be a reality such that for some substantial property F, it is neither an F nor a non-F.

Unfortunately, (2a) is false. For suppose that there can be a reality at least some of whose substantial properties do not fall under any concept humans have a grasp of. What follows? So far as I can see, nothing of immediate interest. In particular, it is left wide open whether that reality—or any other reality, for that matter—is such that, for some substantial property F, it is neither an F nor a non-F. Our supposition is simply silent on that score. So Hick’s second argument against Property Bivalence has a false second premise.

Hick also argues for Transcategoriality. Here’s one such passage:

...[God_{hick}] *an sich* is the ultimate mystery. For the relationship between [God_{hick}] and its *personae* and *impersonae* is, epistemologically, the relationship between a noumenal reality and the range of its appearances to a plurality of perceivers. It is within the phenomenal or experienceable realm that language has developed and it is to this that it literally applies. Indeed, the system of concepts embodied in human language has contributed reciprocally to the formation of the humanly perceived world. It is as

¹⁷ Cf. Rowe (1999), 149–150. Let’s ignore Hick’s name-calling (“dogma”), Hick’s modal confusion (Rowe asserts the necessity of the conditional, not the necessity of the consequent), and Hick’s misrepresentation (Rowe asserts that even if ‘personal’ and ‘non-personal’ are *not* logically interdependent, they are nevertheless *necessarily* interdependent).

much constructed as given. But our language can have no purchase on a postulated noumenal reality which is not even partly formed by human concepts. This lies outside the scope of our cognitive capacities. (Hick 1989, 349)

We can put the line of thought here like this:

The Language Development Argument

1. Human language has a purchase on the experienceable world because it has developed in that world.
2. If human language has a purchase on the experienceable world because it has developed in that world, then it can have no purchase on the noumenal world.
3. If human language can have no purchase on the noumenal world, then it can have no purchase on God_{hick} .
4. If human language can have no purchase on God_{hick} , then, for any humanly conceivable substantial property F , God_{hick} is neither an F nor a non- F .
5. So, for any humanly conceivable substantial property F , God_{hick} is neither an F nor a non- F .

What should we make of this argument?

The problem, I submit, is premise (1). Even if human language has developed within the experienceable world, it has a purchase on that world *not* because of where it developed but rather because it embodies a system of concepts at least some of which apply to that world. A concept within that system applies to the world of our experience just when it is as that concept describes. Whether a concept embodied in human language applies to the experienceable world has nothing to do with where that language developed. Indeed, whether a concept embodied in human language applies to the noumenal world has nothing to do with where that language developed. A concept within a system of concepts embodied in human language applies to the noumenal world just when the noumenal world is as that concept describes.

Elsewhere, we find what looks like a second argument for Transcategoriality. Hick asserts that if God_{hick} “must be either a personal or a non-personal reality,”

this would at a stroke falsify either all the theistic or all the non-theistic religions—for the argument can be deployed equally well either way according to preference! But either way it would be unacceptable from a global religious point of view. (Hick 2004a, xxii)¹⁸

¹⁸ Hick’s “global religious point of view” implies the falsehood of the globe’s religions. For relevance, see Netland (1986), 255–257, Twiss (2000), 73–77, Byrne (2003), 205–206, and Netland (2012), 36–39.

So far as I can see, the deepest idea here is that the denial of Transcategoriality is “unacceptable from a global religious point of view”. But what is “a global religious point of view,” exactly? And what about it renders the denial of Transcategoriality “unacceptable”? And why is it more acceptable than the denial of Transcategoriality? Hick doesn’t pause long enough to say.

Hick fails to solve the Property Bivalence Problem. Moreover, he fails to shed any light on how Transcategoriality can be true. I would like to try to do better.

5 How to Solve the Property Bivalence Problem and Understand Transcategoriality

Let’s begin with a simple question: how could it be that God_{hick} is, for example, neither personal nor non-personal?

The only way, it seems to me, is illustrated by a homely example. Consider the property of *being bald*. Now imagine a man who is a borderline case of baldness, a man who is such that no amount of empirical research or arm-chair theorizing can decide the question of whether the quantity and distribution of his hair renders him bald. In such a case, some philosophers say that there is nothing determinate about him in virtue of which he is either bald or non-bald. There is no fact of the matter. Thus, he lacks the property of *being bald* and he lacks the property of *being non-bald*. The propositions that *he is bald* and *he is non-bald* are neither true nor false (Van Inwagen 1996; Merricks 2001; Sorenson 2013).

Hick can say something similar. Consider the property of *being personal*. Hick can say that God_{hick} is a borderline case of *being personal*. There is nothing determinate about it in virtue of which it is either personal or non-personal. There is no fact of the matter. Thus, it lacks the property of *being personal* and it lacks the property of *being non-personal*. The propositions that *God_{hick} is personal* and *God_{hick} is non-personal* are neither true nor false. And what goes for the property of *being personal* goes for any other creaturely conceivable substantial property.¹⁹

This way of understanding Transcategoriality is a significant advance, for three reasons.

First, we can now see why Property Bivalence is false. Property Bivalence is false because there can be borderline cases of being an F . In such a case, there is nothing determinate about x , there is no fact of the matter about x , in virtue of which x has the property of *being an F* or *being a non- F* . So it is neither.

¹⁹ On my view, God_{hick} has to be indeterminate only with respect to its creaturely conceivable substantial properties, whereas on the view of others, it “has to be utterly indeterminate” (Smart 1993b, 62). Cf. Yandell (1993), 197.

Second, we can also more easily understand Transcategoriality. It is no more surprising that God_{hick} is neither personal nor non-personal than it is that a borderline case of a bald man is neither bald nor non-bald—which is to say it is not surprising at all.

Third, this way of rejecting Property Bivalence and understanding Transcategoriality avoids Hick's errors. It does not confuse contraries and contradictories. It does not incorrectly affirm that, if there can be a reality that is beyond the scope of human conceptuality, then Property Bivalence is false. It does not erroneously say that molecules are not non-clever, or that stones are not non-virtuous. It does not inaccurately affirm that language has a purchase on reality because of the location of its development. It does not appeal to a mysterious "global religious point of view".

To sum up, I contend that we must understand Transcategoriality in terms of God_{hick} 's extensive indeterminacy. That is to say, if Transcategoriality is true, it is true only because God_{hick} is a borderline case of every creaturely conceivable substantial property.

Objection. If God_{hick} is a borderline case of every creaturely conceivable substantial property, then God_{hick} has the property of *being an x such that x is a borderline case of every creaturely conceivable substantial property*. But that property is itself a creaturely conceivable substantial property: after all, we can conceive of it and it is in-itself, informative, significant, nontrivial, and descriptive. Therefore, Transcategoriality entails that God_{hick} has neither it nor its logical complement. And so it is false that Transcategoriality is true only because God_{hick} is a borderline case of every creaturely conceivable substantial property.

Reply. Two possible replies might help us avoid the objection.

First, if Transcategoriality is true, then there is something about God_{hick} in virtue of which it is true. It's not just magic. We should expect, therefore, that, if Transcategoriality is true, there may well be an implicit restriction of its quantifier to properties that are not required in order to explain why it is true. Such a restriction would not be *ad hoc*. Given my explanation of what that something is, Transcategoriality allows God_{hick} to have the property of *being an x such that x is a borderline case of every creaturely conceivable substantial property*.

Second, if Transcategoriality is true, then God_{hick} has the property of *being an x such that x is transcategorial*, i.e. God_{hick} has the property of *being an x such that x is neither an F nor a non-F for any creaturely conceivable substantial property F*. But that itself is a creaturely conceivable substantial property! Or so it appears. On closer inspection, however, appearance is not reality. Why?

Because a property is substantial not only if it is in-itself, informative, significant, nontrivial, and descriptive, but also only if it is neither logically nor linguistically generated. The property in question, however, is logically or linguistically generated—it is logically or linguistically generated from Transcategoriality itself, which is definitive of God_{hick} . So it is in fact a formal property, contrary to (initial) appearances (Hick 2009, 6). The same arguably goes for the property of *being an x such that x is a borderline case of every creaturely conceivable substantial property*. At least it does if I am right that Transcategoriality is true only because God_{hick} is a borderline case of every creaturely conceivable substantial property. For if I am right, then it is an *entailment* of Transcategoriality that God_{hick} has the property of *being an x such that x is a borderline case of every creaturely conceivable substantial property*. Therefore, that property is logically generated by Transcategoriality itself, and therefore it is a formal property of God_{hick} and not a substantial one—contrary to initial appearances. As such, Transcategoriality allows God_{hick} to have it.²⁰

6 Why God_{hick} Can't Be God, the Ultimate Religious Reality

We are now in a position to see that God_{hick} is not a genuine candidate for being God, the ultimate religious reality. There are at least four problems. Any one of them undermines its candidacy.

The self-Identity Problem The gut idea driving the Self-Identity Problem is that something can have some properties only if it is self-identical; but God_{hick} can't be self-identical given Transcategoriality. We can spell this out as in the form of an argument:

The Self-Identity Argument

1. Necessarily, for any x, if x has some properties, then there is some y such that y is identical with x.

Thus, for example, necessarily, if Barack Obama has some properties, then there is some y such that y is identical with Obama. Of course, Obama has many properties, e.g. the property of *being the first black US President*. Thus, there is some y such that y is identical with Obama. Naturally enough, the y in question is Obama himself. Obama has the property of *being a y such that y is identical with Obama*. Of course, it follows from (1) that

2. Necessarily, if God_{hick} has some properties, then there is some y such that y is identical with God_{hick} . (1)

²⁰ Thanks to Alex Clark for pressing me on this matter.

Hick assures us that God_{hick} is “infinitely rich” with creaturely inconceivable substantial properties, and so it has some properties. Let’s assume, for *reductio*, that he’s right:

3. God_{hick} has some properties. (Assume for *reductio*)

It follows from (2) and (3) that

4. There is some y such that y is identical with God_{hick} . (2, 3)

But

5. If there is some y such that y is identical with God_{hick} , then God_{hick} has the property of *being a y such that y is identical with God_{hick}* .

It follows that

6. God_{hick} has the property of *being a y such that y is identical with God_{hick}* . (4, 5)

Now notice that this property is a creaturely conceivable substantial property. After all, we can conceive of it; furthermore, it is in-itself, informative, significant, nontrivial, descriptive, and neither logically nor linguistically generated from Transcategoriality itself. So, Transcategoriality entails that God_{hick} does not have it or its logical complement. So, God_{hick} does not have it. That is,

7. God_{hick} does not have the property of *being a y such that y is identical with God_{hick}* .

Contradiction (6, 7). Therefore, our assumption for *reductio* is false. That is, it is false that God_{hick} has some properties. But God_{hick} is possible only if it has some properties, say, those creaturely inconceivable ones that give it that special “infinite richness” that Hick goes on about rapturously. Therefore, God_{hick} is impossible.

The Number Problem Number is a creaturely conceivable substantial property, and so Transcategoriality implies that God_{hick} “does not have number,” an implication Hick affirms (Hick 1989, 247, 249, 2007, 223, 1995, 71). Critics complain that, if God_{hick} really is “beyond number,” then Hick should not prefer the singular over the plural when he speaks of “it,” which he uniformly does (Smart 1993a, 100; Quinn 2000, 232–33; Mavrodes 2000: 66, 73).

In reply, Hick makes four points. First, he says that there could not be a plurality of ultimate realities since, if there were, each would be “the sole creator or source of the Universe,” which is impossible (Hick 1989, 248). Second, “the postulation of [God_{hick}] *an sich* [is] the simplest way of accounting for the data” of the history of the world religions, from a religious perspective (Hick 1989, 249, 2004a, xxvii). Third, and perhaps as a consequence of the first two points, “we affirm the true ultimacy of [God_{hick}] by referring to it in the singular” (Hick 1989, 249). Fourth, “the exigencies of our language compel us to refer to it in either the singular or the plural,” and “the plural would be

more misleading than the singular” (Hick 1989, 249, 2010c, 75).

None of these points adequately addresses the critics’ complaint, it seems to me. As for the first, given Transcategoriality, Hick might as well say there could not be a single ultimate reality since, in that case, it would be “the sole creator or source of the Universe,” which is impossible. Being *the sole* F is ruled out by Transcategoriality every bit as much as being *one among many* F s. As for the second, the postulation of God_{hick} is the simplest way of accounting for the data only if that postulation involves fewer entities than competing hypotheses. But, according to Transcategoriality, number does not apply to God_{hick} , and so the concept of fewer doesn’t either. As for the third, since God_{hick} is “beyond number,” there is nothing about it in virtue of which we affirm its “true ultimacy” by referring to it in the singular. We affirm its “true ultimacy” just as well—or, rather, just as poorly—by referring to it in the plural. As for the fourth, the plural is more misleading than the singular only if there is something about God_{hick} in virtue of which the singular is closer to the truth than the plural, but there is nothing about God_{hick} in virtue of which that is the case given that God_{hick} is “beyond number”.

The real worry here, however, is not that Hick has no basis to prefer the singular over the plural when he speaks of God_{hick} . Rather, the real worry is that, on the one hand, number *cannot* apply to God_{hick} but, on the other hand, it *must*—in which case God_{hick} is impossible.

As for why number cannot apply to God_{hick} , the reason is just what Hick said. God_{hick} is defined by Transcategoriality. Thus, since number is a creaturely conceivable substantial property, number cannot apply to God_{hick} .

As for why number must apply to God_{hick} , the gut idea is that if something is distinct from everything else, then it must *uniquely* have some distinguishing substantial property, in which case number applies to God_{hick} .

We can spell this out more formally by way of the following argument.

The Unique Substantial Property Argument

1. Necessarily, if God_{hick} does *not* uniquely have some substantial property, then it is *not* distinct from everything else.
2. God_{hick} (if such there be) *is* distinct from everything else.
3. So, necessarily, God_{hick} uniquely has some substantial property. (1, 2)
4. Necessarily, if God_{hick} uniquely has some substantial property, then number applies to it.
5. So, necessarily, number applies to God_{hick} (if such there be). (3, 4)

Logic sanctions (3) and (5). What about (4), (2), and (1)? In defense of (4), consider this argument:

- 4a. Necessarily, if God_{hick} uniquely has some substantial property, then there is some substantial property G such that God_{hick} has G and nothing else has G.
- 4b. Necessarily, if there is some substantial property G such that God_{hick} has G and nothing else has G, then God_{hick} is *the one and only* G.
- 4c. Necessarily, if God_{hick} is the one and only G, then number applies to it.

Premise (4) follows by two applications of hypothetical syllogism.

As for premise (2), two considerations tell in its favor. First, *you* aren't God_{hick}. But don't take it personally. Neither is Hillary Clinton, Mother Teresa, or Donald Trump, despite what he seems to think of himself. Go through the entire inventory of what there is and, with one exception, everything will be distinct from God_{hick}. Second, nothing could be a "transcendent reality" that is "the source and ground of everything" unless it is distinct from everything but itself.

As for premise (1), consider the following argument:

- 1a. God_{hick} does not uniquely have some substantial property. (Assume for conditional proof)
- 1b. Necessarily, for any x, if x does not uniquely have some substantial property, then x has no substantial properties in virtue of which x is distinct from everything else.
- 1c. Necessarily, for any x, if x has no substantial properties in virtue of which x is distinct from everything else, then x is not distinct from everything else.
- 1d. God_{hick} is not distinct from everything else.

Discharging our assumption for conditional proof, we arrive at premise (1).

The weak link in this argument is premise (1c). Here is an argument for it. Necessarily, for any x, if x has no substantial properties in virtue of which it is distinct from everything else, then, if x is distinct from everything else, x is distinct from everything else merely in virtue of its purely formal properties. But, necessarily, there is no x such that x is distinct from everything else merely in virtue of its purely formal properties. So, necessarily, for any x, if x has no substantial properties in virtue of which it is distinct from everything else, then x is not distinct from everything else.

The upshot is that, on the one hand, number *cannot* apply to God_{hick} and, on the other hand, number *must* apply to God_{hick}. Contradiction. So, God_{hick} is impossible.

The Pairing Problem. We can begin to see the problem here by way of

The Pairing Thesis. There are pairs of creaturely conceivable substantial properties, F1 and F2, such that, necessarily, for any x, if x is a borderline case of an F1, then x is not a borderline case of an F2.

To illustrate, if something is a borderline case of *being located all and only in Australia*, then it is not a borderline case of *being located all and only in Brazil*. That's because, necessarily (and holding fixed the actual locations of Australia and Brazil), if something is indeterminate enough to be a borderline case of *being located all and only in Australia*, then it is determinate enough *not* to be a borderline case of *being located all and only in Brazil*; it is *non-located-all-and-only* in-Brazil. Likewise, if something is a borderline case of *being bald*, then it is not a borderline case of *being a physical object*. That's because, necessarily, if something is indeterminate enough to be a borderline case of *being bald*, then it is determinate enough not to be a borderline case of *being a physical object*; it is a physical object. And the point holds for religiously relevant substantial properties as well. For example, if something is a borderline case of *being perfectly loving*, then it is not a borderline case of *being obstinately wicked*. That's because, necessarily, if something is indeterminate enough to be a borderline case of *being perfectly loving*, then it is determinate enough not to be a borderline case of *being obstinately wicked*; it is *non-obstinately-wicked*. And the same goes for other pairs of substantial properties, e.g. *being almighty* and *being wimpy*, *being omniscient* and *being irrevocably ignorant*, *being wholly independent* and *being wholly dependent*, etc.

These observations are relevant to Transcategoriality, as can be seen by way of the following argument:

The Pairing Argument

1. For any creaturely conceivable substantial property F, God_{hick} is neither an F nor a non-F. (Assume for *reductio*)
2. So, God_{hick} is neither almighty nor non-almighty. (1)
3. If God_{hick} is neither almighty nor non-almighty, then God_{hick} is a borderline case of being almighty.
4. So, God_{hick} is a borderline case of almightiness. (2, 3)
5. If God_{hick} is a borderline case of almightiness, then it is not a borderline case of wimpiness—it is a non-wimp.
6. If God_{hick} is a non-wimp, then there is some creaturely conceivable substantial property F such that God_{hick} is a non-F.
7. If there is some creaturely conceivable substantial property F such that God_{hick} is a non-F, then it is

false that, for any creaturely conceivable substantial property F, God_{hick} is neither an F nor a non-F.

8. So, it is false that, for any creaturely conceivable substantial property F, God_{hick} is neither an F nor a non-F. (4–7)

Our assumption for *reductio* leads to a contradiction, i.e. the conjunction of (1) and (8). So our assumption is false, in which case Transcategoriality is false and God_{hick} is impossible.²¹

The Insignificance Problem We have three arguments against the possibility of God_{hick} . Even if they all fail, and God_{hick} is possible, matters look grim for its candidacy as the ultimate religious reality. That's because it has no explanatory or religious significance. Let me explain.

I take it that there must be something about God_{hick} in virtue of which it is, as Hick says, “the source and ground of everything”. There must be something about it “in virtue of which,” as Hick says, “we can arrive at the blessed unselfcentred state which is our highest good”. And the same goes for other relations of explanatory and religious significance that Hick mentions. It isn't a brute, inexplicable fact. So what is it about God_{hick} in virtue of which it has such explanatory and religious significance?

Is it God_{hick} 's formal properties? No. They are too thin to bear the burden of being that by virtue of which God_{hick} has explanatory and religious significance. Is it God_{hick} 's creaturely conceivable substantial properties? No. It has no such properties. There is only one other option: God_{hick} 's creaturely *inconceivable* substantial properties. The worry, however, is that they are not up to the task either.

To see why, consider the property of *being an x such that x is capable of bearing significant explanatory and religious relations to the world by virtue of x's creaturely inconceivable substantial properties*. This property is in-itself, informative, significant, nontrivial, descriptive, and neither logically nor linguistically generated. Therefore it is substantial. Furthermore, it is conceivable by us. So, given Transcategoriality, God_{hick} does not have it or its logical complement. Therefore, God_{hick} does not have it. But if God_{hick} does not have the property of *being an x such that x is capable of bearing significant explanatory and religious relations to the world by virtue of x's creaturely inconceivable substantial properties*, then it is not the case that God_{hick} is capable of explanatory and religious significance by virtue of its creaturely inconceivable substantial properties.

The upshot, then, is this: neither by virtue of God_{hick} 's formal properties nor by virtue of its substantial properties is it capable of explanatory and religious significance. But it has no other properties. Therefore, God_{hick} has no properties by

virtue of which it is capable of explanatory and religious significance. Therefore, it cannot be “the source and ground of everything,” it cannot be that “in virtue of which...we can arrive at the blessed unselfcentred state which is our highest good,” etc. But God_{hick} is a candidate for being the ultimate religious reality only if it is capable of explanatory and religious significance. So, even if God_{hick} is possible, it cannot be the ultimate religious reality, it cannot be God (Cp. Yandell 1999, 79; Yandell 1993, 197; Netland 2015, 162).

Here's another implication of the Insignificance Problem. Hick makes a big deal of distinguishing what he calls “literal truth” from “mythological truth,” the former of which consists in a statement's “conformity to or lack of conformity to fact” and the latter of which consists in its not being literally true but rather “tend[ing] to evoke an appropriate dispositional attitude” to what it's about (Hick 1989, 348). Hick says that, with the exception of formal statements, no statement about God_{hick} is literally true; rather, a statement about God_{hick} is true if and only if it is mythologically true, if and only if it has the “capacity to evoke appropriate or inappropriate dispositional responses to [God_{hick}]” (Hick 1989, 349–353, 2004a, xxxiii–xxxiv). Of course, as Hick rightly observes, this raises the question: “what is it for human attitudes, emotions, modes of behavior, and patterns of life to be appropriate to [God_{hick}]?” (Hick 1989, 353). Here is his answer:

It is for the god or absolute to which we relate ourselves to be an authentic manifestation of [God_{hick}]. In so far as this is so, that *persona* or *impersona* can be said to be in soteriological alignment with [God_{hick}]. For example, to love both God and one's fellow humans is a natural and appropriate response to the awareness of God as imaged in much of the Christian tradition. And to the extent that ‘the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ’ is indeed an authentic *persona* of [God_{hick}], constituting the form in which [God_{hick}] is validly thought and experienced from within the Christian strand of religious history, to that extent the dispositional response appropriate to this *persona* constitutes an appropriate response to [God_{hick}]. Again, an un-self-centred openness to the world and compassion for all life are the natural expressions of an awakening through meditation to the eternal Buddha nature. And to the extent that this is an authentic *impersona* of [God_{hick}], validly thought and experienced from within the Buddhist tradition, life in accordance with the Dharma is likewise an appropriate response to [God_{hick}]. (Hick 1989, 353)

But there's a problem with all this.

For, as we've seen, God_{hick} has no properties by virtue of which it is capable of explanatory and religious significance. Therefore, it is impossible for any “god or absolute to which we relate ourselves to be an authentic

²¹ Thanks to Hud Hudson and Frances Howard-Snyder. Cf. Yandell (1993), 197.

manifestation of [God_{hick}]; moreover, no “*persona* or *impersona* can be said to be in soteriological alignment with [it]”. Consequently, it is false that “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ’ is indeed an authentic *persona* of [God_{hick}], constituting the form in which [God_{hick}] is validly thought and experienced from within the Christian strand of religious history”. Moreover, it is false that “the eternal Buddha nature” “is an authentic *impersona* of [God_{hick}], validly thought and experienced from within the Buddhist tradition”. That’s because that claim is true only if God_{hick} is capable of explanatory or religious significance. But, it is not. Consequently, it is also false that “an un-self-centred openness to the world and compassion for all life” and “life in accordance with the Dharma” are “an appropriate response to [God_{hick}]”. Generalizing, there are no mythologically true statements about God_{hick}.

(We might go further: for any true non-formal statement, it is either literally true or mythologically true. On Hick’s view, no statement about God_{hick} is literally true. We’ve just learned that no statement about God_{hick} is mythologically true either. So, a statement is true of God_{hick} if and only if it is a formal statement. But that’s not possible. So, necessarily, no statement is true of God_{hick}. But something is possible only if, possibly, some statement is true of it. Therefore, God_{hick} is impossible.)

According to some of Hick’s critics, given Transcategoriality, we could never know whether God_{hick} was explanatorily or religiously relevant, we could never know whether there were any mythologically true statements about it (e.g., Mavrodes 2010b, 74; Plantinga 2000, 56–59). Hick replies that he never said anyone *knows* such a thing. Rather, he postulates God_{hick}, with its creaturely inconceivable substantial properties, distinguishes its *personae* and *impersonae*, and uses them to explain the data of the history of religions and to solve the “apparently anomalous situation” he identified. Hick and his critics are both wrong, in my opinion. Hick is wrong because Transcategoriality implies that God_{hick} has no explanatory or religious significance at all, and so cannot explain or solve anything. His critics are wrong because Transcategoriality implies that we *can* know whether God_{hick} is explanatorily or religiously significant, we *can* know whether there are any mythologically true statements about God_{hick}. Indeed, we *do* know. We know that God_{hick} is explanatorily and religiously *insignificant*, we know that there are *no* mythologically true statements about God_{hick}.

7 Conclusion

Hick’s pluralism has been extensively criticized in the literature. In a revealing passage, Hick complains that “the great majority” of his critics

start from the presupposition that there can be at most only one true religion, and the fixed conviction that this is their own. A hermeneutic of suspicion cannot help wondering if their search for anti-pluralist arguments, usually philosophically sophisticated arguments, is driven by a need to defend a highly conservative/evangelical/sometimes fundamentalist religious faith. For it is noticeable that thinkers, within both Christianity and other traditions, who are more progressive/liberal/ecumenical in outlook tend to have much less difficulty with the pluralist idea....Needless to say, and as the religiously conservative critics would probably be the first to point out, this does not show that they are mistaken in their beliefs. But, together with the fact that their holding their conservative Christian, rather than conservative Muslim or Hindu or other, beliefs is precisely correlated with their having been raised in a Christian rather than a Muslim or Hindu or other society, it does ‘make one think’. (Hick 2010c, 72)

Three observations about this passage are in order.

First, as Hick well knows, each of the world’s great religions posits its own gods or absolutes as ultimate realities, and its own diagnosis of what ails humanity and how to fix it. And, as Hick also well knows, his pluralism implies that they are all wrong. So it’s not just conservative Christians who will have a “fixed conviction” that entails the negation of his pluralism. The faithful of all the world’s great religions will have the same. Indeed, in my opinion, embracing Hick’s pluralism—not pluralism *per se*—is a sure mark of infidelity to those religions.

Second, Hick says that those of us who are more progressive, liberal, and ecumenical in outlook tend to have much less difficulty with his pluralism, which implies that we tend to have much more difficulty discerning its defects—that is an extraordinarily offensive thing to say. Do we who are more progressive, liberal, and ecumenical in outlook tend to be so dense that we are less likely to see Hick’s conflation of contraries and contradictories? Do we tend to be so incompetent that we are more likely to overlook the multiply-equivocal line he draws between formal and substantive properties? Do we tend to be so inept that we are less likely to recognize his manifold blunders in defending transcategoriality? Do we tend to be so thick that we are more likely to be unable to process its disastrous philosophical, explanatory, and religious implications? Do we tend to be less likely to put forward “philosophically sophisticated arguments”? It is appalling that Hick would insult us in this way. Just who does he think he is, anyway? It’s not pleasant to say this, but someone must call him to account, even if in retrospect.

Third, Hick's "hermeneutic of suspicion" ploy is at least as apt to make one wonder about his motivations, and the psychological impediments that blinded him to the failings of his view, as it is to make one wonder about the motivations and impediments of anyone else. The mere fact that he'd stoop to such tactics might well "make one think". But let's resist the temptation to stoop that low. Let's judge Hick's God on its own merits alone.

It is my contention that, when we do that, we will discover that Hick is wrong when he writes that his God—"the transcategorical Real"—is "the ultimate mystery" (Hick 1989, 349). For, if my arguments are sound, there's nothing mysterious about Hick's God at all. It is impossible and, even if it possible, it has no explanatory or religious significance. As such, Hick's God is yet another ideology that belongs in the dustbin of intellectual history.²²

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Permissible Tinkering with the Concept of God

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Abstract In response to arguments against the existence of God, and in response to perceived conflicts between divine attributes, theists often face pressure to give up some pretheoretically attractive thesis about the divine attributes. One wonders: when does this unacceptably water down our concept of God, and when is it, as van Inwagen says, ‘permissible tinkering’ with the concept of God? A natural and widely deployed answer is that it is permissible tinkering iff it does not violate the claim that God is the greatest possible being. Call this the ‘perfect being defense.’ In this paper I lay out some influential uses of the perfect being defense, and then argue that this strategy for defending theism fails.

1 Permissible Tinkering

Typically, arguments against the existence of some entity take the form of arguments that nothing has some property *F*—where it is common ground that, if the entity in question did exist, it would be *F*. Arguments against the existence of God are no exception. Typically, they aim to demonstrate that some property *F* is not, or could not be, instantiated, where *F* is typically counted among the divine attributes.

In response to arguments of this form—as well as in response to perceived conflicts between divine attributes—theists often face pressure to give up some pre-theoretically attractive thesis about the divine attributes. In response,

theists have two options: they can try to find some flaw in the argument in question, or they can accept its conclusion and simply revise their view of God.

Some examples of the second strategy are well known. One might, for instance, weaken one’s view of God’s power in response to perceived conflicts with the necessitation of the law of non-contradiction, or with God’s essential goodness; and one might weaken one’s view of God’s knowledge in response to perceived conflicts with the existence of freedom of the will, or with the existence of essentially first-personal propositions.¹ Other examples are not hard to come by.

This is a risky strategy, for one always runs the risk of unacceptably watering down the concept of God. This is a response that undergraduates often have in response to the claim that God cannot bring about contradictions; they often often inclined to hold, for example, that no being which could not make $2 + 2 = 5$ could qualify as God. But this sort of response can’t always be dismissed as ‘an undergraduate response.’ When, for example, the open theist tells us that God does not know what I will do tomorrow, the worry that we have moved too far from the traditional conception of God deserves to at least be taken seriously.

It would be good to have some principled way of thinking about this topic—some principled way of deciding whether a given way of revising our views of the divine attributes is, as Peter van Inwagen nicely puts it, ‘permissible tinkering’ with the concept of God, and when it is not.² Let’s say that some pre-theoretically attractive

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¹ See, respectively, (among many other places) Mavrodes (1963) and Flint and Freddoso (1983), Morris (1983), Inwagen (2008), and Wierenga (2001).

² Inwagen (2006), 81.

candidate to be among the divine attributes is *dispensable* if a theist can deny that God has that attribute without unacceptably watering down our concept of God, and *mandatory* if not. Then what we seek is a principled way of distinguishing dispensable from mandatory candidates for the divine attributes.

Here it is very natural to—as van Inwagen and others have done—appeal to the Anselmian claim that God is the greatest possible being. This claim is often said to, in some sense, express our concept of God; and, if this is true, it seems as though examination of the notion of a greatest possible being ought to help us figure out when some claim about God conflicts with the core of our conception of God. The aim of this paper to point out some difficulties which attend this initially promising strategy.

2 The Claim that God is the Greatest Possible Being

The claim that God is the greatest possible being has played more than one central role in recent philosophy of religion. One of its roles is a constructive one. According to proponents of perfect being theology, the claim that God is the greatest possible being ‘provide[s] us with a rule or recipe for developing a more specific conception of God.’³ For proponents of this program in constructive theology, it is natural to formulate the claim that God is the greatest possible being as predicating a certain property of God: the property of being such that, for any being in any world other than God, God is greater than that being. If we help ourselves to quantification over possibilities and worlds,⁴ and use ‘ α ’ as a name for the actual world, this claim might be expressed as

$$[\forall x : x \neq \text{God}] \forall w (\text{God in } \alpha \text{ is greater than } x \text{ in } w)$$

We then argue that God has a certain property F by arguing that, if God were greater than any other being in any world, God would be F .

Our aims here are slightly different than the aims of the perfect being theologian. Rather than providing a recipe for deriving claims about the divine attributes, we are interested in formulating the principle that God is the greatest possible being in such a way that it is common ground between the theist and non-theist, and as such suitable to

play a neutral role in arbitrating disputes about the existence of God of the sort sketched above.

There is a familiar way to formulate principles of this sort. To illustrate, consider question of whether witches exist. Let’s say that ‘Wiccanism’ is the belief that there are witches. If we want a debate between Wiccans and their opponents to be productive, we should want to find some neutral way of formulating the condition which would have to be satisfied for witches to exist. Let us suppose that Wiccans and non-Wiccans agree on the claim that for something to be a witch is for that thing to be a woman with evil magical powers—while of course disagreeing over the question of whether anything is a woman with evil magical powers.⁵ Then we might formulate the claim on which they agree as the biconditional

[Witch] There are witches iff there are women with evil magical powers

The debate can then proceed by arguments for and against the right-and side of the biconditional.

Such a debate can then be significantly structured by the content of the right-hand side of the biconditional. For suppose that the anti-Wiccans provide an argument for the claim that nothing is F . The Wiccan may then reply either by finding a flaw in the argument, or by giving up the claim that witches are F . But with a principle like [Witch] in hand, the scope of this second sort of maneuver is constrained in a principled way, for the Wiccan cannot simply concede that nothing is F if so doing would entail that there are no women with evil magical powers.

Given our interest in finding a parallel constructive way to constrain debates between theists and non-theists, we can formulate a similar biconditional which aims to state the conditions under which God would exist:

[GPB] God exists iff $\exists x [\forall y : y \neq x] \forall w (x \text{ in } \alpha \text{ is greater than } y \text{ in } w)$

This says that God exists just in case there is something which is greater than any other thing in any possible world—just in case, that is, the greatest possible being actually exists.⁶ It is reasonable to think that, just as [Witch] provides a Wiccan-neutral account of the conditions under which Wiccanism would be true, so—if the claim that God is the greatest possible being captures the core of our concept of God—[GPB] provides an account of

³ Murray and Rea (2008), 8.

⁴ Obviously, there are good reasons to find quantification over possibilities problematic. We might seek to avoid it in the present context by quantifying over degrees of greatness, or in a number of other ways. I stick with the formulation in the text because it makes things simpler, and because the formulation and defense of the sort of view criticized below is made easier, rather than harder, if possibilist quantification is problem-free.

⁵ Surprisingly, the OED defines ‘witch’ as ‘a woman thought to have evil magic powers’ which would make witch trials paradigms of reliability.

⁶ Many proponents of the idea that God is the greatest possible being might also accept this principle if the right-hand side were strengthened to require, not just that x be greater than any other thing in any world, but also to require that x could not be greater than x actually is. Since nothing in what follows hangs on the difference between these two formulations, I stick with the simpler [GPB] in what follows.

the conditions under which God exists which should be acceptable to theist and non-theist alike.

Of course, to say that this is reasonable is not to say that it is uncontroversial. Not all theists are attracted to the claim that God is the greatest possible being; some take this claim to be inconsistent with, or at least in tension with, the content of revelation. Our question, though, is whether, for those theists that do find the claim that God is the greatest possible being plausible, a principle like [GPB] might serve as common ground between theist and non-theist in debates about the existence of God.

If it can, then—as with [Witch]—it appears that we can use [GPB] to provide the wanted principled distinction between dispensable and mandatory attributes. For suppose that we are considering whether God is *F*. We can ask: would denying that God is *F*—and hence presumably also denying, for attributes of interest, that anything is *F*—entail that there could be a being greater than the greatest actual being? If we answer ‘Yes,’ then it would seem that *F* is a mandatory attribute. For then denying that God is *F* would entail the falsity of the right-hand side of [GPB], which we are (at present) assuming to state the conditions under which God would exist. If we answer ‘No,’ on the other hand, then *F* would seem to be dispensable. For then denying that God is *F* would be consistent with maintaining that the greatest possible being actually exists, and hence (given [GPB]) consistent with the existence of God.

We might state the resulting principle as follows:

[Dispensable] If the proposition that God is not *F* does not entail the falsity of the right-hand side of [GPB], then *F* is dispensable.⁷

[Dispensable] gives us a sufficient condition for a property’s being dispensable, which the theist might then deploy in responding to various arguments against the existence of God. I will call the attempt to use [Dispensable] in this way the *perfect being defense*. Let’s now look at a few instances in which theists have put this sort of strategy to work.

3 The Perfect Being Defense in Action

The perfect being defense is more often deployed than explicitly articulated. But one person who makes the sort of strategy just sketched more than usually explicit is Peter

⁷ Some delicacy is required in understanding what ‘entails’ should mean in a thesis of this sort. It cannot simply mean ‘necessitates,’ since this would, given that most false predications of God will be necessarily false, threaten to trivialize the thesis. The intended interpretation is rather something like ‘has as a clear a priori consequence.’ I ignore this in what follows, since the objections that I raise against the perfect being defense have nothing to do with the threat of triviality.

van Inwagen. To see the form it takes in his work, let’s consider van Inwagen’s discussion of omniscience and freedom of the will in Chapter 5 of *The Problem of Evil*. There van Inwagen is imagining an atheist challenging the free will defense on the grounds that free will is incompatible with omniscience—and that, necessarily, if God exists, then God is omniscient. Here is what van Inwagen says in reply to the atheist:

“Now consider these two propositions:

- (i) X will freely do A at the future moment t
- (ii) Y, a being whose beliefs cannot be mistaken, now believes that X will do A at t.

These two propositions are consistent with each other or they are not. If they are consistent, there is no problem of omniscience and freedom. Suppose they are inconsistent. Then it is impossible for a being whose beliefs cannot be mistaken now to believe that someone will at some future moment freely perform some particular action. Hence, if free will exists, it is impossible for any being to be omniscient. ...” (81)

Let us say that a being is *classically omniscient* iff, for every proposition, that being knows whether that proposition is true. Given that it rules out divine classical omniscience, one might reasonably think that the view that (i) and (ii) are inconsistent is itself inconsistent with theism. van Inwagen suggests another option:

‘why should we not qualify the “standard” definition of omniscience ...? Why not say that even an omniscient being is unable to know certain things—those such that its knowing them would be an intrinsically impossible state of affairs. ...This qualification of the ‘standard’ definition of omniscience is in the spirit of what I contended ...were permissible revisions of the properties in our list of divine attributes ...he will possess knowledge in the highest degree that is metaphysically possible, and will therefore not be debarred from the office ‘greatest possible being.’” (82)

Here van Inwagen seems to be reasoning as follows: if there is a genuine incompatibility between free will and classical omniscience, then having classical omniscience (in a world with free agents) is an impossible property. Hence it is not a property which is such that, were we to deny it to God, we would conflict with the proposition that God is the greatest possible being. And if denying a property to God does not conflict with the right-hand side of [GPB], then [Dispensable] tells us that this property must be (in our terms) an dispensable one. Hence the theist can reasonably deny—if (i) and (ii) really are inconsistent—that God (or anything else) is classically omniscient.

One step in this reasoning deserves slight closer examination. This is the inference from the claim that

The property of having classical omniscience is impossible⁸

to

Denying that God is classically omniscient is consistent with the claim that God is the greatest possible being

One natural way to unpack this reasoning would be as follows. If the property of being classically omniscient is impossible, there is no being in any world which is classically omniscient. But then denying that God is classically omniscient cannot imply that God is not the greatest possible being. For it could do that only if there could be a being which was classically omniscient and, in virtue of possession of this property, greater than God. Since there could be no such being, this possibility is foreclosed.

This is a reasonable line of thought; it does seem that denying God some property could ‘debar God from the office ‘greatest possible being’ only if denying God this property could make some other possible being greater than God. And it does seem that it could have this effect only if there could be some other possible being with the property in question. Since this form of reasoning seems to be general, it appears to be a corollary of [Dispensable] that the following principle is true:

[Impossible] If F is impossible, then F is dispensable.

This is, as van Inwagen’s argumentative strategy makes clear, a useful principle for the theist to have in hand. (One may suspect that it is a bit *too* useful—that it makes things a bit too easy for the theist. More on this sort of worry in the next section).

Other instances of the perfect being defense in action—though typically not as explicit as the example from van Inwagen—are not hard to find. An example—which also focuses on omniscience—can be found by looking at the debate between Alvin Plantinga and Patrick Grim over the question of whether classical omniscience is possible. Grim defends the position that it is not, on the grounds that Cantorian arguments show that there can be no set of, or quantification over, all true propositions, and that this result is inconsistent with the possibility of a being who knows all

true propositions. One of Plantinga’s central lines of reply to this argument is to say that

‘the problem ... is not really a problem about omniscience. Omniscience should be thought of as *maximal degree of knowledge* ... Historically, this perfection has often been understood in such a way that a being x is omniscient only if for every proposition p , x knows whether p is true. ... This of course involves quantification over all propositions. Now you suggest there is a problem here: we *can’t* quantify over all propositions, because Cantorian arguments show that there aren’t any ... propositions about all propositions ... But suppose you’re right: what we have, then, is not a difficulty for *omniscience* as such, but for one way of explicating omniscience, one way of saying what this maximal perfection with respect to knowledge is.’⁹

Unlike van Inwagen, Plantinga is not explicitly relying on the claim that God is the greatest possible being. But that claim seems to be just behind the scenes. For Plantinga’s claim is that we can safely deny that God is classically omniscient if this denial is consistent with the claim that God has the maximal—i.e., the greatest possible—degree of knowledge. And this is presumably ‘permissible tinkering’ with the concept of God because it does not contravene the principle that God is the greatest possible being. After all, if classical omniscience is impossible, there is no fear that some other possible being might, by possessing classical omniscience, be greater than God.

Standard responses to paradoxes of omnipotence proceed in a similar vein. Abstracting from details, a standard line of reply to paradoxes of this sort hold that they illicitly suppose that God’s omnipotence requires God to have an impossible property—like the property of creating a stone that God could not lift. But, so the standard reply goes, this is an impossible property, and hence one which we can deny to God without contradicting the principle that God is the greatest possible being. It is, therefore, dispensable.¹⁰

This is enough, I hope, to show that the perfect being defense is very widely deployed. Recently, this defense has been significantly generalized in the work of Yujin Nagasawa. In his ‘A New Defence of Anselmian Theism,’

⁸ Strictly, the relevant claim is that the conjunction of classical omniscience and coexistence with free agents is impossible; I ignore this complication for simplicity, since it does not affect the general point at issue.

⁹ Plantinga and Grim (1993), 291.

¹⁰ Parallel points could be made about replies to arguments for the incompatibility of omnipotence with essential goodness of the sort given in Pike (1969). Standard replies rely on the claim that these arguments assume that God is omnipotent in a sense which is inconsistent with essential perfect goodness, and hence that the conjunctive property—being omnipotent in the sense presupposed by these arguments and being essentially perfectly good—is impossible, and hence dispensable. Often, of course, this line of defense is buttressed with an alternative account of omnipotence.

Nagasawa distinguishes between the Anselmian Thesis—roughly, the claim that God is the greatest possible being¹¹—and the OmniGod Thesis—the claim that God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent. Nagasawa then points out that arguments against the existence of God typically target the claim that God has one or more of the *omni-properties* rather than the Anselmian Thesis itself. The theist who endorses [GPB] thus has room to resist these arguments by denying the conditional claim that if the Anselmian Thesis is true, then the OmniGod Thesis is true. This point he, says, ‘undercuts existing arguments against Anselmian theism *all at once*.’¹²

The reason why it undercuts these arguments ‘all at once’ is that such arguments all try to show either that one of the divine attributes is individually impossible, or that two or more are jointly impossible. But such arguments inevitably rely on assumptions about just what the attributes of God are supposed to be. Such assumptions are licensed by the OmniGod Thesis—but they are not licensed by the claim that God is the greatest possible being since, as Nagasawa points out, it seems to be epistemically possible that God is the greatest possible being but not the bearer of all of the *omni-properties*.

Nagasawa’s defense of Anselmian Theism is an instance of what I have been calling the perfect being defense. To see this, note that his preferred replacement for the OmniGod Thesis is

The MaximalGod Thesis. God is the being that has the maximal consistent set of knowledge, power and benevolence.¹³

which is equivalent to the conjunction of the claim that God is the greatest possible being with the auxiliary assumption that a being’s greatness supervenes on its knowledge, power, and benevolence. But if the MaximalGod Thesis captures our concept of God, we can see immediately that if, for example, classical omniscience is impossible, then this property is not one which our concept of God requires God to have. That concept, after all, requires only that God have the maximal *consistent* combination of knowledge, power, and benevolence. Hence classical omniscience is, if impossible, dispensable.

¹¹ I say ‘roughly’ because Nagasawa formulates it as the claim that God is the being than which no greater can be thought, rather than in explicitly modal terms. But since his argument (as far as I can see) does not rely on a distinction between what can be thought and what is possible, I stick with the modal formulation for simplicity. Nagasawa’s preferred way of making the Anselmian Thesis more explicit—the MaximalGod Thesis—is given in explicitly modal terms. See Nagasawa (2008), 586. More on the distinction between conceivability and possibility in Sect. 6 below.

¹² Nagasawa (2008), 578. Emphasis in original.

¹³ Nagasawa (2008), 586.

Indeed, the claim that any such impossible property is, in virtue of being impossible, dispensable, is required for Nagasawa’s defense to have the generality he claims for it. His defense is, he says, ‘a radically new and more economical response to Anselmian theism, one that aims to eliminate the force of the arguments against it *all at once*.’¹⁴ But since he does not engage with the details of any argument against Anselmian Theism—indeed, the point of his more economical new defense is to obviate the need for that—Nagasawa’s defense eliminates the force of an argument against Anselmian Theism just in case it enables us to treat the property targeted by any anti-Anselmian argument as dispensable. Viewed in this light, Nagasawa’s ‘New Defence’ is simply the consistent and universal employment of the principles—[Dispensable] and its corollary [Impossible]—characteristic of the perfect being defense.

4 A Reductio of the Perfect Being Defense

Something should strike us as odd about the dialectical situation here. On the one hand, non-theists attempt to provide arguments against the existence of God by showing that one or more candidates for divine attributes are individually or jointly impossible. On the other hand, proponents of the perfect being defense are licensed, for any property demonstrated to be impossible, to dismiss that property as dispensable. The non-theist would thus appear to be in a rather unenviable position; the very success of her arguments is simply grist for the mill of the perfect being defense.

One might regard this as a great victory for the theist. Alternatively, one might think that this shows that there is something fishy about the perfect being defense. I now want to argue that the latter view is the correct one. (I’ll turn in the next section to the question of *why* the perfect being defense goes wrong).

Suppose that the non-theist presents an argument for the inconsistency of the following three theses:

- (a) God is omnipotent.
- (b) God is perfectly good.
- (c) God created a universe which contains some evil.

Arguments of this general form are of course very familiar, as are many standard responses. Often arguments of this sort rely on eminently questionable assumptions, like the assumption that a perfectly good being will always eliminate as much evil as it can, or the assumption that an omnipotent being can create any possible world; and theists

¹⁴ Nagasawa (2008), 585. Emphasis in original.

typically respond to arguments of this form by identifying, and rejecting, the relevant assumptions.

But the perfect being defense would seem to license a much simpler and more general response to this form of argument. She can simply pose the following dilemma to the non-theist: either the conjunctive property

omnipotent & perfectly good & creator of a universe
with evil in it

is possible, or it is not. If it is possible, then the non-theist's attempt to demonstrate the inconsistency of (a)–(c) fails. If it is impossible, then it is not a property of the greatest possible being, and hence is dispensable. Either way, the non-theist's argument fails. Q.E.D.

The non-theist, undaunted, might try again. She might come up with a yet more clever argument for the inconsistency of the following theses:

- (d) God is very powerful.
- (e) God is very good.
- (f) God created a universe with amount *E* of evil.

where it is plausible that the universe in fact contains amount *E* of evil. But, no matter how clever the argument, the perfect being defender is ready with a response. Either the properties attributed to God by (d)–(f) are jointly possible, or they are not. If they are, then the argument for the inconsistency of (d)–(f) fails. If they are not, then the conjunctive property corresponding to (d)–(f) is impossible, and hence dispensable. So again the argument fails.

Nor is there anything special here about arguments from evil. Suppose that our non-theist delivers an argument for the conclusion that the universe satisfies the following description:

Singularity. The universe, of necessity, begins with expansion from a high density singularity. Necessarily, everything that exists is causally 'downstream' from this singularity. In different worlds, the universe unfolds differently—partly due to variation in the laws of nature, and partly due to chance. But the laws can only vary in a tight band, and it is impossible for the laws to be such as to permit the existence of beings significantly more intelligent or powerful than human beings.

Let us say that, if Singularity is true, that the greatest possible amount of power, goodness, and knowledge is *X*. Surely, given the above description, we can see that nothing with property *X* would be God; after all, a being with property *X* would not have more power, knowledge, or goodness than a human being. Given this, if the above description of the universe is correct, then God does not exist. So surely, one thinks, a non-theist in possession of a convincing argument for Singularity has in her possession a good argument against the existence of God.

But, predictably, the perfect being defender has an answer. For if the above hypothesis is correct, then nothing could be greater than something with property *X*. So every other property which would be greater to have than *X* is not possibly instantiated and hence, by [Impossible], a dispensable property.

To put the same point another way, there is nothing in the above story which implies the falsity of the MaximalGod Thesis. (After all, the non-theist has no argument for the claim that nothing with property *X* actually exists.) So if the MaximalGod thesis does indeed capture the commitments of the Anselmian theist, the latter should find an argument for the above view of the universe profoundly untroubling.

It is clear at this point, I take it, that something has gone badly wrong. Things simply can't be this easy for the theist. But, if you agree with this verdict, you must also agree that there is something wrong with the perfect being defense. For if the perfect being defense were legitimate, there would be nothing wrong with the theist's imagined responses to different versions of the argument from evil, or to Singularity. After all, if the perfect being defense is legitimate, then it really is true that any impossible property, just in virtue of being shown to be impossible, is dispensable.¹⁵

The parallels to the the instances of the perfect being defense discussed in the previous section are fairly clear. The dilemma which we just imagined the theist posing to the proponent of various versions of the argument from evil is exactly parallel to the dilemma which van Inwagen poses for the atheist attempting to demonstrate the incompatibility of free will and omniscience. And all of the instances of perfect being defense we discussed rely on the validity of the inference from impossibility to dispensability — which is the only premise required for the envisaged response to the argument from evil, or Singularity, to stick.

Let me emphasize that I am not saying that van Inwagen's response to the incompatibility of free will and foreknowledge, or any of the other instances of the perfect being defense mentioned above, is as implausible as the envisaged response to the problem of evil. On the contrary, classical omniscience does strike me as a much more plausible candidate for a dispensable attribute than the conjunctive properties attributed by (a)–(c) or (d)–

¹⁵ While this argument opposes Nagasawa's 'New Defence' (as it opposes any instance of the perfect being defense) it is worth highlighting the fact that I am agreeing with Nagasawa on one central point: it is epistemically possible (in at least one good sense of that term) that the Anselmian Thesis be true and the OmniGod Thesis false. What Nagasawa misses, I think, is that when one thinks of the range of cases which would falsify the second thesis but not the first, this turns out not to provide a general defense of Anselmian theism, but rather to falsify the characteristic Anselmian claim that our concept of God is the concept of a greatest possible being.

(f) above, or the property of being greater than something with property *X*. What I am saying is that the perfect being defense itself provides no help in making this distinction; it validates the bad response to the problem of evil just as readily as the others.

5 The Perfect Being Defense: A Diagnosis

The argument of the preceding section shows that the use of [Dispensable] and its apparent corollary [Impossible] by the perfect being defender to distinguish mandatory from dispensable attributes should be rejected. But it does not tell us why this promising strategy goes wrong.

The perfect being defender can be thought of as pursuing the following chain of reasoning:

- (i) The claim that God is the greatest possible being captures the core of our conception of God;
- (ii) So, if denying that God is *F* does not contradict the claim that God is the greatest possible being, then denying that God is *F* does not contradict the core of our conception of God;
- (iii) So, if denying that God is *F* does not contradict the claim that God is the greatest possible being, *F* is dispensable;
- (iv) If a property *F* is impossible, then denying that God is *F* won't contradict the claim that God is the greatest possible being, since in that case there will be no possible *F* which could exceed God's greatness;
- (v) So, from (iii) and (iv), it follows that any impossible property is dispensable.

This reasoning fails in two places. The most important of these is the first.

What the *reductio* argument of the preceding section demonstratives is that the claim that God is the greatest possible being does not capture the core of our conception of God. At best, it can capture the core of our conception of God only if it is combined with certain theses about modal space.

The problem is that certain theories about the nature of the universe will, so to speak, 'shrink' modal space. Singularity is one example; but there are plenty of others. Many such hypotheses will entail that it is impossible that there be anything great enough for us to be remotely inclined to regard that being as God. But, despite this, many will be consistent with the existence of a greatest possible being. Singularity, for instance, while clearly inconsistent with the existence of God, is not clearly inconsistent with the existence of a greatest possible being, or a being which has the greatest maximal combination of power, knowledge, and goodness.

The theist, it may be worth adding, is in no position to object that there is something illegitimate about this sort of shrinking of modal space, for the 'possibility' that modal space may be in certain respects smaller than we think is a tool frequently deployed by theists. To take one well-known example: it has been argued (in a number of related ways) that God's omnipotence is inconsistent with God's being essentially perfectly good. For if God is omnipotent, then God can bring about any possible state of affairs; so, it is possible that God bring about some morally prohibited state of affairs; so, God is possibly less than perfectly good, and therefore not essentially perfectly good.¹⁶

The standard theistic reply to this sort of argument is nicely articulated by Thomas Morris. Given God's necessary goodness, Morris says,

'No state of affairs whose actualization ...would be such that God would be blameworthy in intentionally bringing it about or allowing it ...represents a genuine possibility. Thus, on any careful definition of omnipotence, God's inability to actualize such a state of affairs no more detracts from his omnipotence than does his inability to create spherical cubes ...[here] we find an important corollary of the Anselmian conception of God brought to light. Such a God is a delimiter of possibilities. If there is a being who exists necessarily, and is necessarily omnipotent, omniscient, and good, then many states of affairs which would otherwise represent genuine possibilities, and which by all non-theistic tests of logic and semantics do represent possibilities, are strictly impossible in the strongest sense.'¹⁷

The present point is that it is not only the hypothesis that God is a necessarily omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly good being which is a delimiter of possibilities; various anti-theistic hypotheses similarly delimit modal space. And the claim that God is the greatest possible being can only hope to capture the core of our conception of God when it is conjoined with the highly substantive claim that none of these anti-theist modal-space-delimiting hypotheses are true.

Here is a more informal way to see what is wrong with step (i) of the perfect being defender's reasoning. Suppose that one were to hold that the claim that God is the greatest actual being captures the core of our conception of God. One way to show that this is a mistake is to imagine that, at the end of the universe, it turns out that Michael Jordan was the most impressive being to ever have existed. Then atheism is true, because, as it turns out, this universe did

¹⁶ See, among other places, Pike (1969), Resnick (1973), Guleserian (1983).

¹⁷ Morris (1985), 47–48.

not turn out to include any being great enough to be God. Being the best would not make Jordan God; so the claim that God is the greatest actual being does not capture the core of our conception of God.

But just as whether the best thing in the universe is God depends on what the universe contains, so the question of whether the best thing in the pluriverse—the space of all possible worlds—is God depends on what the pluriverse contains. It depends on what is and is not possible.

One somewhat fanciful way to press the point is to imagine a philosopher coming up with a surprising argument, based on some strong actualist premises, for the conclusion that it is impossible that anything be greater than the greatest actual thing. This argument, plus the claim that something in the actual world is such that nothing is actually better than it, should not convince anyone that God exists. It should just convince them (if they don't think that God actually exists) that the pluriverse is depressingly bereft of truly excellent things.

This has all been by way of criticizing step (i) of the perfect being defender's line of reasoning above. But there is another (much less important) problem, which emerges at step (iv). This step lays out the reasoning which led us from [Dispensable] to [Impossible]. The basic idea is that if some property F is impossible, then denying that God is F cannot imply that God is less than the greatest possible being, since one is then simply denying God a property which no possible being has.

What this plausible-sounding argument misses is that it may be the case that some properties are such that their impossibility implies that it is impossible that there be a greatest possible being. That is, it may be that the impossibility of some property F implies that for any object x in any world w , there is some object y and world w^* such that y is, in w^* , greater than x is in w . Suppose, just to pick one example, that we identify the maximum conceivable levels of power, knowledge, and goodness; call these perfections P , K , and G . Now suppose that we find that none of P , K , and G are possibly instantiated. If none of these are possibly instantiated, it might follow that for every possible being, there is another possible being more powerful than it, some other possible being more knowledgeable than it, and some other possible being better than it. And in that case it will plausibly follow from the fact that none of P , K , and G are possibly instantiated that it is impossible that there be a greatest possible being.

This will then falsify the right-hand side of [GPB] and hence—by the lights of the theist who holds that his principle states the conditions under which God exists—entail the non-existence of God. It is, therefore, not dispensable. What this shows is that even if [Dispensable] were acceptable—and the argument of the first half of this section shows that it is not—[Impossible] would still not

follow. This is because denying that some impossible properties holds of God implies that there is no greatest possible being, not by making room for some other possible being with the relevant attribute, but rather by making the property of being the greatest possible being itself impossible.

6 The Greatest Conceivable Being

Let's now consider a modification of the perfect being defense—one which is naturally suggested by the problems which arose from 'possibility-shrinking' non-theistic hypotheses in the preceding section.

While the modal claim that God is the greatest possible being has played quite a prominent role in recent philosophy of religion, historically a much more influential claim has been the claim that God is the greatest *conceivable* being, or that being than which no greater can be thought. This is the sort of formulation which one finds in Anselm, earlier in Boethius, and through the early modern period.¹⁸ If, as is now widely held, certain claims can be in some sense conceivable without being genuinely possible, the claim that God is the greatest conceivable being and the claim that God is the greatest possible being can come apart.

It would be anachronistic to read into Anselm and earlier thinkers a preference for the conceivability claim over the modal claim, since (arguably) there is little or no explicit discussion of the distinction between conceivability and possibility until Descartes. But *we* are in a position to distinguish conceivability and possibility; and this distinction is one which might seem to be of use to the proponent of the perfect being defense.

For one of the central worries of the previous two sections was that it might turn out that certain properties are, even though not possibly instantiated, nonetheless mandatory rather than dispensable. In the case of Singularity, one prominent such property was the property of having more power, knowledge, and goodness than a being with property X —where such a being would not have significantly more power, knowledge, or goodness than a normal human being. But even if Singularity implies that having this property is not possible, it does not imply that having this property is not conceivable. Quite the contrary; no matter what the contours of modal space turn out to be, we can surely imagine, or conceive of, a being with much greater power, knowledge, and goodness than any human being. The shift from possibility to conceivability thus promises to solve the problem illustrated by the too-easy

¹⁸ See Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*, §X; Anselm *Proslogion* §II.

responses to the argument from evil and examples like Singularity discussed above.

It is natural, then, to think that we might formulate our criterion for dispensable attributes in terms of conceivability rather than possibility. And, by adapting the framework developed above, there is a natural way to do this. One who claims that the core of our concept of God is given by the claim that God is the greatest conceivable being will state the conditions under which God exists not with [GPB], but with a principle like the following:

[GCB] God exists iff $\exists x$ (we cannot conceive of a being greater than x is in α)¹⁹

This says that God exists just in case there is something which is such that we can imagine nothing greater—which is such that, there is, nothing greater can be thought.

As above, we can use this principle to state a sufficient condition for a property to be dispensable:

[Dispensable*] If the proposition that God is not F does not entail the falsity of the right-hand side of [GCB], then F is dispensable.

And, if [GCB] does capture the core of our conception of God, this principle is a very reasonable one. For suppose that denying that God (or anything else) is F does not imply that there is no being than which none greater can be thought. Then this denial is consistent with the claim that there exists a being which satisfies the core of our conception of God—and hence the property we are denying God to have must be a dispensable one.

It is notorious that there are many different senses of ‘conceivable.’ The key question for the proponent of the strategy under consideration is: which of these gives the intended interpretation of the term in [GCB] and [Dispensable*]?

I want now to pose a dilemma for the attempt to answer this question in a satisfactory way. On the one hand, the perfect being defender might choose an interpretation of ‘conceivable’ on which the claim that a proposition is conceivable is a very weak claim. To have an example to discuss, let us say that

p is weakly conceivable iff $\neg p$ is not a formal logical truth²⁰

On the other hand, she might pick an interpretation on which the claim that a proposition is conceivable is much

more substantial. Again to have an example to discuss, let’s say that

p is strongly conceivable iff $\neg p$ is not an a priori truth

As the names suggest, everything which is strongly conceivable will be weakly conceivable (at least if all formal logical truths are knowable a priori). But many propositions will be weakly conceivable but not strongly conceivable. The proposition that my pen is bright red and green all over is certainly weakly conceivable (since its negation is not a formal logical truth), but is plausibly not strongly conceivable (since it seems to be knowable a priori that nothing is bright red and green all over).

Suppose first that we go for weak conceivability. The central problem here is that it is so easy for a proposition to be weakly conceivable that virtually no properties will satisfy, on this interpretation, the antecedent of [Dispensable*]. To see this, return to van Inwagen’s argument that if free will and omniscience really are incompatible, then classical omniscience (in a world with free agents) is impossible, and hence not a property the denial of which would entail that God is not the greatest possible being.

That argument relied on [GPB] and [Dispensable]. How might it work with [GCB] and [Dispensable*]? One would have to argue that the property of being classically omniscient is not just impossible, but also not even weakly conceivably instantiated. That, after all, is what would be required for us to be able to infer that the denial of the claim that God is classically omniscient does not entail the falsity of the claim that God is the greatest (weakly) conceivable being. The obvious problem, though, is that if it turns out that classical omniscience is impossible, it is still obviously weakly conceivable that an agent be classically omniscient. The claim that God is classically omniscient is, after all, not the negation of a formal logical truth. Weak conceivability thus renders our sufficient condition for dispensable properties entirely toothless.

So suppose that instead we go for strong conceivability. Here we, at least initially, seem to be on stronger ground. For suppose that classical omniscience is impossible. It is at least plausible that this will be knowable a priori, and hence that the claim that a being is classically omniscient will not be strongly conceivable. And this will be enough (given an interpretation of ‘conceivable’ as ‘strongly conceivable’ in [GCB] and [Dispensable*]) to give us the result that classical omniscience is not a property of the greatest (strongly) conceivable being, and hence dispensable. This is what we want.

The problem, though, is that the attempt to construct the perfect being defense around the notion of strong conceivability runs into exactly the same problems as the does the attempt to construct such a defense around possibility. For recall the reductio of the latter strategy in Sect. 4. The

¹⁹ We could state this in a way more closely parallel to [GPB] by quantifying over conceivable beings and conceivable worlds; the formulation above will be enough for present purposes.

²⁰ Here I am being a bit loose with the distinction between sentences and propositions, since propositions are the things which are conceivable or not, whereas sentences are logical truths or not. Not much hangs on this at present; the definition could be revised to ‘the negation of a sentence expressing p is not a formal logical truth.’

problem there was that, for any candidate divine attribute demonstrated to be impossible, the perfect being defense licenses the theist to dismiss the property as a dispensable attribute of God. But, for many such properties, this conclusion will be quite implausible.

But arguments for the impossibility of certain candidate divine attributes are inevitably a priori arguments. So, in every case in which we have a demonstration of the impossibility of certain attributes, we will also have a demonstration of the fact that the relevant attributes are not strongly conceivable. And, given this, [GCB] and [Dispensable*] will license just the same implausible responses to the argument from evil and the example of Singularity as our original modal formulations.²¹

Furthermore, the diagnosis of this failure given in Sect. 5 will carry over to the present version of the perfect being defense. Just as certain hypotheses about the universe have the effect of shrinking modal space in a way which is problematic from the perspective of the perfect being defense, so certain arguments will shrink the space of strongly conceivable hypotheses about God, leading to just the same problems.

What we want, it seems, is some happy middle ground between weak and strong conceivability. We need, that is, some sense of ‘conceivable’ weak enough to avoid the problems with the modal version of the perfect being defense but strong enough to occasionally show us that certain properties are dispensable. We should also want this middle ground to be a natural enough choice that it does not seem cherry-picked to give us the result we want in a given case. While I have nothing like an impossibility proof, I’m skeptical that we can find a sense of ‘conceivable’ which will satisfy these desiderata.

7 Conclusion

A criterion for distinguishing dispensable from mandatory candidate divine attributes—those which may, and those which may not, reasonably be denied by a theist to hold of God—is something very much worth wanting. It is also prima facie quite plausible that we should be able to derive such a criterion from our conception of God as the greatest

²¹ One might object here: ‘How about arguments from evil? These do not seem to be purely a priori arguments, since they contain at least an a posteriori premise about the existence (or amount, or distribution) of evil in the world.’ This point is correct but I think ultimately irrelevant. The arguments which attempt to establish the incompatibility of evil with the existence of a being with certain attributes are all a priori arguments. And that means that, if such arguments succeed, conjunctive properties like those given by (a)–(c) and (d)–(f) will not be strongly conceivably instantiated—which will license, again quite implausibly, treating these conjunctive properties as dispensable.

possible, or the greatest conceivable, being. But, in the end, the attempt to find such a criterion seems to be a failure.

It would be depressing if this made the sort of dialectic between theist and atheist described at the outset wholly unprincipled. But the failure of the perfect being defense need not quite have this dire consequence. It does, however, suggest that the debate between the theist and the non-theist should be, in a certain way, reconceived.

It seems to me unlikely that there is any principle which can—as [GPB] tries to—neatly state, in a way which avoids substantial theological assumptions, the conditions under which God would exist. This is in a way wholly unremarkable. For consider other philosophical debates about existence—for example, debates about whether anything really has free will, whether things are really colored, and whether abstract objects exist. In none of these cases is it easy to come up with a simple, non-trivial biconditional of the form

x has free will iff ...

which is acceptable to all parties.

Despite this, debates about free will are not completely unprincipled. This is in part because there is some agreement about particular cases—a fact which would not seem to have an analogue in the debate between theist and non-theist. But it is also in part because participants in debates about the existence of free will have tried to structure them by connecting these debates to the sorts of questions that made us care about free will in the first place—like questions about moral responsibility and praiseworthiness.

A similar move can be used to structure the debate between theist and non-theist. When we are asking whether some property is dispensable, we can ask questions like: Could a being without this property be a suitable object of the absolute trust characteristic of religious faith? Or: could a being without this property be deserving of worship?

This is of course not a new idea. Van Inwagen, for example, raises precisely this sort of question when discussing the consequences of his denial that God can know which future free actions agents will perform. He asks,

‘If one believes that human beings have free will and that God does not know how human beings will act when they act freely, does this not imply that God was not in a position to make the promises that (Christians believe) God has in fact made?’²²

If we take questions like this to be more central in giving the core of our concept of God than the formula that God is the greatest possible being, this might have the consequence that the ground rules for debates about the existence of God—that is, our criterion for distinguishing mandatory

²² Inwagen (2008), 228.

from dispensable attributes—may well vary depending upon the particular theological views of the theist in question.

If his were true, then that would give at least some debates in the philosophy of religion less generality than we might ideally like them to have. But that, I think, is preferable to relying on the principle that God is the greatest possible being to play a role which, if the above argument is correct, it is most unsuited to play.²³

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²³ Thanks for helpful discussion to Sam Newlands, Mark Murphy, Mike Rea, Blake Roeber, Meghan Sullivan, the participants in the Philosophy of Religion Workshop at Notre Dame, and an audience at the BGND philosophy of religion conference in 2013.

A Posteriori Anselmianism

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Abstract I argue that Anselmians ought to abandon traditional Anselmianism in favor of Moderate Anselmianism. Moderate Anselmianism advances the view that a being $x = \text{God}$ iff (i) for every essential property P of x , it is secondarily necessary that x has P , (ii) for most essential properties of x , it is not primarily necessary that x has P and (iii) the essential properties of x include omnipotence, omniscience, perfect goodness and necessary existence. Traditional Anselmians have no cogent response to most a priori atheological arguments. But a priori atheological arguments present no serious problem for moderate Anselmians. Unlike traditional Anselmianism, Moderate Anselmianism explains why a priori atheological arguments can be convincing and nonetheless illusory.

Keywords Anselm · Atheological arguments · Conceivability arguments · Traditional Anselmianism

1 Introduction

Incompossibility arguments are a priori atheological arguments according to which the conceivability of certain statements constitutes good evidence against the Anselmian

God.¹ The conceivability of a world so bad that an Anselmian God could not actualize it, for instance, has been persuasively advanced against traditional forms of Anselmianism, and so has the conceivability of a single sentient being leading a pointless and pain-racked existence. There are of course countless other troublesome examples for traditional Anselmians including the conceivability of Godless worlds and even the conceivability of there being nothing at all.²

In Sect. 2 I show that the traditional Anselmian project fails. Traditional Anselmianism as elaborated, for instance, in Anselm, Malcolm, Plantinga and Morris describes a God who possesses the divine attributes as a matter of a priori necessity.³ Traditional Anselmianism does afford a straightforward and valid ontological argument. But traditional Anselmianism cannot accommodate the conceivability of states of affairs impossible with the traditional Anselmian God.⁴ The traditional Anselmian project does not have the resources to explain the persistence of modal intuitions evincing the (at least) epistemic possibility that rabbits suffer pointlessly, people endure pointless abuse, fawns die painful and pointless deaths and so on.

¹ In order to side-step objections from various philosophical positions on propositions, I take the objects of epistemic (and metaphysical) possibility to be statements. But making propositions the object of epistemic and metaphysical possibility would not otherwise affect the argument. Simply for ease of exposition I use interchangeably the locutions ‘conceivability of’ and ‘conceivability that’ and similarly for ‘possibility of’ and ‘possibility that’.

² See Chalmers (1999) esp. sec. 3.3 and Yablo (2008), sec. 2.

³ See Deane (1962), *Proslogium* III, Morris (1987), Malcolm (1960) and Plantinga (1974).

⁴ A reviewer asks whether there can be any a priori argument against moderate Anselmianism. I expect there can be an a priori argument that aims to show that certain typical attributes of an Anselmian God cannot be coinstantiated. It may not show that God does not exist, but it might show that God is unexpectedly limited in attributes.

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In Sect. 3 I introduce *Moderate Anselmianism*. Moderate Anselmianism rejects the traditional position that, for most essential properties of God, it is a priori true that God has those properties. It is not a priori true, for instance, that God instantiates the essential properties of omnipotence, omniscience, perfect goodness or necessary existence.⁵ Moderate Anselmianism can accommodate the conceivability of states of affairs impossible with the traditional Anselmian God. According to moderate Anselmianism it is epistemically possible that rabbits suffer pointlessly and that people endure pointless abuse. These epistemic possibilities constitute a specific sort of modal illusion that I call an *Anselmian Illusion*. Anselmian illusions are genuine, though misleading, metaphysical possibilities.

In Sect. 4 I show how the moderate Anselmian position can accommodate impossibility arguments. In Sect. 5 I defend moderate Anselmianism against several impossibility arguments. I conclude in Sect. 6 that moderate Anselmianism is the most promising Anselmian response to a priori atheological arguments.

2 The Failure of Traditional Anselmianism

Every impossibility proof assumes that there are conceivable statements that are inconsistent with the existence of an Anselmian God. Compare the statement in (1).

1. There exist rabbits enduring pointless pain.⁶

The statement in (1) seems primarily conceivable. Primary conceivability focuses on the way the world might, upon further investigation, turn out to be. If we could discover that there are actual rabbits leading the lives described in (1), then the statement in (1) is primarily possible. The semantics of primary possibility is sometimes elaborated directly as truth at a centered world or scenario and indirectly in terms of a priority.⁷ But an analysis of primary

⁵ Moderate Anselmianism is consistent with it being a priori true that God instantiates the trivial essential properties of being identical to God or not being a prime number. But there is some doubt about whether these trivial properties are essential properties of anything. See, for instance, Fine (1995, 2005).

⁶ The example in (1) is due to Guleserian (1983). The argument that the statement in (1) is impossible with an Anselmian God assumes the standard view on evil. Among those who have defended the standard position on evil is William Rowe.

An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense evil it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.

See Rowe (1996), pp. 1–11.

⁷ See Chalmers (2006), Kaplan (1989) and Stalnaker (1978).

possibility directly in terms of a priority is illuminating. Compare the concept of primary possibility in E1.

- E1. q is primarily possible at w if and only if q is consistent with all a priori truth at w .⁸

According to E1 those statements are primarily possible that are not inconsistent with any a priori truths. We will say that q is primarily necessary just in case $\sim q$ is not primarily possible. Let's stipulate that the statement in (1) is primarily conceivable if and only if the statement is primarily possible in the sense of E1.⁹ We'll say that q is primarily possible just in case q is epistemically possible.

Here's a useful example of primary possibility as I am using it. The epistemic or primary possibility that Hesperus is not Phosphorus is the possibility that something other than Hesperus is actually playing the Hesperus role. It is not the possibility that Hesperus might fail to be identical to itself. It is the possibility that something other than Hesperus has the observable properties and relations that we attribute to Hesperus and that object (of course) is not Phosphorus. It is consistent with something other than Hesperus actually playing the role of Hesperus that it's metaphysically necessary that Hesperus is Phosphorus. It is consistent with something other than Hesperus playing the Hesperus role in w that Hesperus—our Hesperus—also exists in w and is, of course, self-identical.¹⁰

Some impossibility arguments urge that (1) is also true as an assertion of secondary conceivability. Secondary conceivability focuses on a way the world might be counterfactually. Let's stipulate that a statement is

⁸ The concept of primary possibility in (E1) is effectively the notion of deep epistemic possibility. A statement is primarily possible just in case its negation is not entailed by the set (or class) of all a priori truths. See Chalmers (2011). See also Jackson's (1998). I do not offer a further analysis of a priori truth, but an analysis would likely be in terms of the truths that could be known a priori.

⁹ Throughout I use 'conceivable' for 'ideally conceivable' in cases of both primary conceivability and secondary conceivability. These are serious issues, of course, but too large to address in the scope of this paper.

¹⁰ Strictly, if it is epistemically possible that G is not M , then it is not metaphysically necessary that G is M . Let W be a scenario in which G is not M . Recall that scenarios are centered worlds considered as actual. Suppose it is metaphysically necessary that G is M . It is true in every world in which G exists, whether the world is considered as actual or as counterfactual, that G is M . But of course G exists in W , so G is M in W , and that's impossible. The assertion that it is epistemically possible that G is not M is in fact the assertion that something *other than* G might actually play the role G is playing. David Chalmers makes, I think, the same point in another way. A possible world might *verify* the statement that H_2O is not water but no possible world *satisfies* the statement that H_2O is not water. But that's just to say that something other than the stuff we call 'water' might (*metaphysically* might) be playing the watery role. See Chalmers (2011)

secondarily conceivable if and only if it is secondarily possible. And let's understand secondary possibility as consistency with all necessary truth at a world.

E2. q is secondarily possible at w if and only if q is consistent with all necessary truth at w .

A statement q is secondarily possible if and only if it genuinely might have been the case that q . So q is secondarily possible if and only if q is metaphysically possible.¹¹

According to traditional Anselmianism we can know a priori most (and certainly the most important) of the essential properties of God.¹² So it is primarily impossible, for instance, that God should not have the essential property of moral perfection or the essential property of necessary existence. It is impossible, that is, that we should discover that what plays the role of God fails to be essentially morally perfect and necessarily existing. It is indeed a conceptual impossibility on the traditional view that God should not have these essential properties. In *Proslogium* III Anselm expresses the position characteristic of traditional Anselmianism that it is a priori that God has, among other essential properties, the property of necessary existence.

And it so truly exists that it cannot be conceived not to exist. For it is possible to conceive of a being which *cannot be conceived* not to exist; and this is greater than one which can be conceived not to exist. Hence, if that, than which nothing greater can be conceived, can be conceived not to exist, it is not that than which nothing greater can be conceived. But this is a contradiction. So truly, therefore, is there something than which nothing greater can be conceived, that it cannot even be conceived not to exist; and this being thou art, O Lord, our God.¹³

Norman Malcolm too defends what I am calling the traditional Anselmian conception of God.

It may be helpful to express ourselves in the following way: to say, not that omnipotence is a property of God, but rather that necessary omnipotence is; and to say, not that omniscience is a property of God, but rather that necessary omniscience is... Necessary existence is a property of God in the same sense that

¹¹ In (E2) I have in mind consistency with all broadly logically necessary truth. I assume throughout that secondary possibility and secondary necessity are governed by a version of S5 that does not validate the Barcan Formula.

¹² If there are world-indexed properties that are essential to God, then of course most essential properties are not knowable a priori. But, most importantly, the traditional divine attributes are known in this way.

¹³ See Deane (1962), *Proslogion* III, pp. 54–5. My emphasis.

necessary omnipotence and necessary omniscience are His properties... The a priori *proposition* "God necessarily exists" entails the proposition "God exists," if and only if the latter also is understood as an a priori proposition... In this sense Anselm's proof is a proof of God's existence.¹⁴

On the traditional Anselmian conception of God, then, anything identical to God satisfies the conditions in TA.

TA. A being $x = \text{God}$ only if (i) for most essential properties P of x , it is primarily necessary that x has P , and (ii) the essential properties of x include omnipotence, omniscience, perfect goodness, and necessary existence.¹⁵

According to TA, it is primarily or a priori necessary that God is, at least, essentially perfectly good, essentially omnipotent, essentially omniscient and necessarily existent. We could not discover that God's nature was different with respect to these attributes. We could not discover that the being Anselmians have been worshiping all along was importantly different with respect to these, or any other, essential properties. Were we to discover that the best possible being is a necessarily existing, omniscient, less-than-omnipotent, less-than-morally perfect being, then we would discover that 'God' refers to nothing at all. God would not exist. Were the being that called Abraham and spoke to Moses to inform us directly that he is not omnipotent in the sense that traditional Anselmians understand omnipotence, then traditional Anselmians would have to conclude that the being that called Abraham is not God. It is a priori impossible that God should fail to be omnipotent in the sense that traditional Anselmians understand omnipotence.

But even the weaker position that it is metaphysically impossible that God should fail to be omnipotent (or fail to have any of the traditional attributes) is indefensible on traditional Anselmian assumptions. In defense, traditional Anselmians sometimes assert that we have good grounds for simply rejecting the metaphysical possibility of any state of affairs impossible with God's essential

¹⁴ See Malcolm (1960), pp. 50–51. Malcolm adds,

... [W]hen the concept of God is correctly understood one sees that one cannot "reject the subject." "There is no God" is seen to be a necessarily false statement. Anselm's demonstration proves that the proposition "God exists" has the same a priori footing as the proposition "God is omnipotent".

Alvin Plantinga also defends a traditional Anselmian conception of God. See Plantinga (1974) esp. Chapter X, Section 7. For another defense, see also Morris (1987). My emphasis added.

¹⁵ If we assume there are world-indexed properties, then clause (i) in TA would have to be changed to 'for most non-world-indexed essential properties P of x , it is primarily necessary that x has P '.

possession of such properties such as the possibility that rabbits suffer pointless pain. Thomas Morris and Alvin Plantinga, for instance, have argued that modal intuitions that normally evince metaphysical possibility are not in general reliable for traditional Anselmians. But neither Morris nor Plantinga advance any explanation for why just those intuitions supporting states of affairs impossible with the traditional Anselmian God are all unreliable for traditional Anselmians. There is no explanation why the particular recalcitrant intuition that rabbits might suffer pointless pain or, for that matter, that people might endure pointless abuse or fawns might die painful deaths, and so on, are all unreliable.¹⁶ There is no credible explanation for why the Anselmian theist is justified in marking out intuitions about God's nature as reliable and intuitions about the possibility of pointless suffering as untrustworthy.

¹⁶ Plantinga observes that there seem to be properties whose instantiation in any world is impossible with the instantiation of maximal greatness in any world. We don't know that the impossible property of there being no maximal being is not possibly instantiated. But Plantinga maintains that there's nonetheless no epistemological need to abandon the position that maximal greatness is possibly exemplified. We are offered no explanation from Plantinga as to why we have the intuition that such a property is possibly instantiated.

And (36) [the premise that maximal greatness is possibly exemplified] ... is not of this sort. A sane and rational man who thought it through and understood it might nonetheless reject it, remaining agnostic or even accepting instead the possibility of no-maximality... Well, then, why accept this premise? Is there not something improper, unreasonable, irrational about doing so? I cannot see why.

See Plantinga (1974) op.cit. p. 220. Thomas Morris, on the other hand, says that Anselmians might not share the intuitions of non-Anselmians. In defense of the reliability of Anselmian intuitions Morris offers the following.

Against this backdrop of general doubt about the status of many metaphysical intuitions... I believe the *Anselmian theist to be justified in marking out some few intuitions about metaphysical matters as trustworthy*... The Anselmian intuitions about God, or more broadly, all those intuitions which together yield the Anselmian conception of God, generate without intentional contrivance an overall belief-set in which it makes sense that there should be such intuitions and that they should be, at least a core of them, reliable. For if an Anselmian God exists, and creates rational beings whose end is to know him, it makes good sense that they should be able to know something of his existence and attributes without the need of highly technical arguments accessible to only a few.

See Morris (1987) op. cit. pp. 67–8 (emphasis added). Certainly if you justifiably believe that the traditional Anselmian God exists, then you should regard your Anselmian intuitions as reliable. But obviously the very point in question is whether traditional Anselmian conception of God is correct. It is that traditional conception that is being challenged, so it just begs the question to invoke that conception in defense of that conception.

Peter van Inwagen has marked out modal intuition generally—Anselmian and non-Anselmian—as largely unreliable. Modal intuitions do not evince metaphysical possibility in all of the more interesting disputes—in particular those in philosophical theology—in which we do rely upon them.

...[we] do not and cannot know (at least by the exercise of our own unaided powers) modal propositions like the crucial modal premises of our three possibility arguments. I have called this position “modal skepticism.” This name was perhaps ill-chosen... It should be remembered, however, that there has been another sort of skeptic: someone who contends that the world contains a great deal of institutionalized pretense to knowledge of remote matters concerning which knowledge is in fact not possible... It is in this sense of the word that I am a modal “skeptic.”¹⁷

The possibility arguments that van Inwagen has in mind include arguments that attribute properties to God.

1. It is possible for there to be a perfect being (that is, a being that has all perfections essentially).
2. Necessary existence is a perfection hence,
3. There is a perfect being.¹⁸

van Inwagen urges that it is possible to invert the premises of this possibility argument and reasonably (or, as reasonably) assert that it is possible for there not to be a perfect being. If so, then we cannot confidently arrive at our conclusion in (3). We cannot, according to van Inwagen, simply rely on our unaided powers of modal intuition to know that either (1) or (2) is true.

My own view is that we often do know modal propositions, ones that are of use to us in everyday life and in science and even in philosophy, but do not and cannot know (at least by the exercise of our own unaided powers) modal propositions like the crucial modal premises of our three possibility arguments.¹⁹

Van Inwagen's modal skepticism is of no use to the traditional Anselmian. The traditional Anselmian urges that we can know a priori that God exists necessarily and that God exemplifies all of the traditional attributes. But this is just what van Inwagen denies. Our knowledge of God's existence and attributes is something we cannot acquire through our unaided powers. But it is knowledge that we might acquire a posteriori.

¹⁷ See van Inwagen (1998).

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 67.

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 68.

It is plausible to suppose that one can learn from the testimony of others what one could not learn by the exercise of one's own unaided powers. It would be therefore consistent with my thesis for me to affirm, say, that I knew that a perfect being was possible because God existed and had informed me that He was a perfect being...²⁰

If there are exceptions to the general reliability of modal intuition, we should expect that they constitute a special class of intuitions: for instance, modal illusions of some sort. The conceivability of rabbits suffering pointless pain, for instance, might describe the genuine possibility of some state of affairs that we mistake for the genuine possibility of rabbits suffering pointless pain. But what explains the illusion for the traditional Anselmian? The illusion cannot result from mistakenly conflating the epistemic possibility of rabbits suffering pointlessly with the metaphysical possibility of them doing so since, on the traditional view, it is also epistemically impossible that rabbits suffer pointlessly. The illusion cannot result from conflating the epistemic possibility that God permits suffering that he ought to prevent with the metaphysical possibility that God does so since traditional Anselmianism entails that it is epistemically impossible that God permits any suffering he ought to prevent. The illusion cannot result from the absence of proof that it's a priori impossible that rabbits suffer pointlessly. We can give a proof that it's a priori impossible on the basis of principles traditional Anselmians cannot abandon.²¹ But the modal intuitions that rabbits might suffer pointless pain, that fawns might die a pointless death, that people might endure pointless abuse, and so on, remain powerful and persistent.

Traditional Anselmians might sharply distinguish between the metaphysical status of what's conceivable and the metaphysical status of what's genuinely possible. But this approach too is unhelpful to the traditional Anselmian project. Traditional Anselmianism entails not merely that it's metaphysically impossible that something should suffer pointless pain, but that it's *inconceivable* that anything should do so. So we cannot explain the modal intuition that rabbits might suffer pointless pain by appealing to a broad set of non-genuine, epistemic possibilities. Traditional Anselmianism is committed to the position that a rabbit suffering pointless pain is not

included even among the expansive epistemic, non-metaphysical, possibilities.²²

Traditional Anselmianism offers no good reason to believe that the intuition that rabbits might suffer pointless pain or that fawns might suffer painful and pointless deaths or that human beings might suffer pointless abuse constitute modal illusions. So they offer no reason to believe that these intuitions are in any way misleading or unreliable.²³

3 Moderate Anselmianism

Moderate Anselmianism rejects the thesis that the essential properties of God are primarily necessary. If the essential properties of God are primarily necessary then no other being could have been the referent of 'God'. It is a priori necessary that God is just that being in each world that satisfies the attributes that traditional Anselmianism describes. But moderate Anselmians reject the initial clause in TA above. According to moderate Anselmianism anything identical to God satisfies the description in MA.

MA. A being $x = \text{God}$ only if (i) for every essential property P of x, it is secondarily necessary that x has P, (ii) for most essential properties P of x, it is not primarily necessary that x has P, and (iii) the essential properties of x include omnipotence, omniscience, perfect goodness, and necessary existence.

Clause (i) in MA is unsurprising. It entails that, for every essential property P of God, it is metaphysically necessary

²² A referee asks why the advocate for traditional Anselmianism needs to appeal to a more general illusion. Why isn't this sufficient for the rabbit case: we can conceive of rabbits suffering pointless pain because we can conceive of them suffering pain and we can imagine that there is no more to the story. The problem is that a traditional Anselmian cannot have such a conception. It is conceptually impossible that rabbits suffer and there is no more to the story. It is a conceptual necessity for traditional Anselmianism that rabbits suffer *only if there is a point to the suffering*. The referee adds that once one understands that one can conceive of the metaphysically impossible—rabbits suffering pointlessly—one won't have the inclination to continue to think that what is conceived is possible. The problem is that this is just what the traditional Anselmian cannot say. It is not merely metaphysically impossible that rabbits suffer pointless pain, it is for them a conceptual impossibility.

²³ A referee notes that one might think of the Anselmian conception as a kind of working hypothesis about what God's nature is like, but with the referent of "God" being fixed in a non-descriptivist way. One could think that, but this is not what the traditional Anselmians believe. They believe, as Anselm and Malcolm seemed to believe, that it is an a priori truth that God is maximally great. We can know a priori not only that God exists—that is, exists necessarily—but also that God has all of the maximal properties. Believing that God might fail to be omnipotent, for traditional Anselmians, is roughly like believing that triangles might be four sided. It's a conceptual error.

²⁰ Ibid. Footnote 4.

²¹ We might explain why a particular theorem looks a priori possible, even if it isn't, by appeal to the absence of a proof that it is a priori possible. That line of argument is not available to traditional Anselmianism.

that God has P. It is clause (ii) that is most distinctive about moderate Anselmianism. (ii) Entails that, for most essential properties P of God, it is not a priori that God has P. Moderate Anselmians allow that we do know a priori the trivial essential properties of God such as being identical to God, not being a prime number, and so on. But we do not know a priori any non-trivial essential properties of God.²⁴

Supposing that M collects all of the essential properties of the Anselmian God, moderate Anselmianism endorses E3. \Box_1 and \Box_2 represent primary and secondary necessity respectively, G stands for God.

E3. $\Box_2 M_G \ \& \ \sim \Box_1 M_G$

It is a major advantage of moderate Anselmianism that it easily resists the patently false conclusion that it's inconceivable that rabbits suffer pointless pain. Moderate Anselmians agree that it is epistemically possible that rabbits and fawns are suffering pain for which there is no God-given point or purpose. It is epistemically possible that people endure abuse for which there is no God-given point, and so on. There seems no question that these states of affairs are conceivable.

Moderate Anselmians deny, on the other hand, that it's metaphysically possible that rabbits suffer pointless pain. So they must provide an explanation for the persistence of the modal intuition that these states of affairs are genuinely possible. The moderate Anselmian explanation is that the intuition results from mistakenly conflating the epistemic possibility that rabbits suffer pointless pain with the metaphysical possibility that rabbits suffer pointless pain. This conflation constitutes a cogent explanation of the modal intuition only if the epistemic possibility has two properties: (i) it must describe a *genuinely possible* state of affairs that appears exactly as it would were rabbits actually suffering pointlessly. Clause (i) explains the modal error. And (ii) the epistemic possibility must be consistent with the existence of the moderate Anselmian God. According to moderate Anselmianism, God exists in every world, so any genuinely possible state of affairs has to be consistent with the Anselmian God. Call epistemic possibilities that satisfy (i) and (ii) *Anselmian illusions*.

Of course, there are strong modal intuitions evincing the metaphysical possibility of many other states of affairs that are impossible with the moderate Anselmian God.

Moderate Anselmianism must show that these modal intuitions also constitute Anselmian illusions. There is, for instance, the modal intuition that an omnipotent being might command a morally wrong action, that there are worlds in which God does not exist, that there are evils that God does not or cannot prevent, and so on. Moderate Anselmianism provides an explanation for all of these intuitions. In addition moderate Anselmianism offers an explanation for the persistent a priori disagreement on the nature of God.

4 Defending Moderate Anselmianism

Moderate Anselmians advert to the class of Anselmian modal illusions. As noted above, an Anselmian modal illusion that p is an epistemic possibility that describes a genuine metaphysical possibility which is consistent with the existence of the moderate Anselmian God and qualitatively equivalent to p.

According to moderate Anselmians, 'God' is a name that is introduced and fixed to, for instance, *the being who called Abraham*. The reference fixing description sets some conceptual limits to the properties that we might discover God instantiates. But considerable room is left for a priori disputes about the properties instantiated by anything that might qualify as the referent of 'God'. The moderate Anselmian position is that we in fact discover a posteriori that the being that called Abraham has the property of maximal excellence. The property of maximal excellence entails, at least, the properties of essential omnipotence, essential omniscience, essential perfect goodness and necessary existence. The epistemic position is that the only evidence available that something has maximal excellence is a set of inductive arguments for God's existence and nature.²⁵ So, for most essential properties of God, it is a posteriori necessary that God instantiates those properties.

Unlike traditional Anselmianism, moderate Anselmianism makes it primarily possible that God fail to instantiate the property of maximal excellence. The primary possibility that God is not maximally excellent is the possibility that something other than the Anselmian God is playing the God role. Something other than the Anselmian God has

²⁴ By the trivial essential properties I have in mind the properties that God uncontroversially (and uninterestingly) exemplifies. These include being identical to God, not being a prime number, but also properties like being the sole member of the singleton {God}, and being diverse from the Eiffel Tower. Though God uncontroversially exemplifies these properties, I don't claim that these properties are uncontroversially essential. Kit Fine, for instance, would deny that they're essential properties of anything. See Fine (1994). But see also Cowling (2013).

²⁵ The only cogent arguments for the Anselmian God are a posteriori arguments. Of course, most theists would include, in addition to such arguments, the evidence of various forms of revelation. The a posteriori arguments include the cosmological argument, the argument from religious experience, the teleological arguments, fine-tuning arguments, etc. I'm not claiming here that there is no disagreement over the value of these arguments. I'm claiming that such arguments afford the Anselmian a route to the a posteriori necessity of the Anselmian God, and it importantly advances the position of Anselmians to take this route.

many of the contingent properties that the Anselmian God actually instantiates.

Moderate Anselmians take seriously the possibility—the primary possibility—that God is somewhat less good than we have been led to believe. They take seriously the primary possibility that we have gotten our theological views quite wrong. The being that called Abraham was capable of injustice and unfairness. These outcomes are impossible, according to the moderate Anselmian, but they are not inconceivable.

There is notable disagreement about what contingent properties the Anselmian God instantiates, but certainly there are worlds in which something other than the Anselmian God calls Abraham or Isaiah or Jeremiah, and so on. There are worlds in which the work of prophets, disciples and others are inspired by something other than the Anselmian God. It's conceivable that the Anselmian God did not create any contingent objects at all. It is also conceivable that the Anselmian God produces no miraculous events. In those worlds no miraculous event is attributable to the being playing the God role.

Let's consider whether moderate Anselmianism is consistent with the genuine possibility that rabbits suffer pointless pain. According to moderate Anselmianism there is a scenario at which 'God' does not refer to any existing being. Perhaps the reference of 'God' did not satisfy the initial reference fixing description or perhaps 'God' was fixed to a now non-existent being. Suppose, for instance, the reference fixing description is 'the being that called Abraham' and we are in a world where Abraham does not exist. No being satisfies that description and so 'God' does not refer to anything. It is true in that world that there is no God-given point or purpose for suffering rabbits or suffering fawns or, for that matter, suffering human beings. Moderate Anselmians will add that there is no God-given point or purpose for any suffering in that world, despite the fact that the Anselmian God exists in that world. 'God' does not refer to the Anselmian God in that world. The Anselmian God does not play the God role in every world in which it exists, just as water does play the role of water in every world in which it exists.²⁶ The state of affairs of

there being no God-given point for the suffering of rabbits and others is an epistemic possibility that is consistent with the existence of the Anselmian God.

It is not difficult to see how that mistake might have been made. What we find conceivable is indeed metaphysically possible. What we find conceivable is that the being playing the God role—the being to whom we are praying, the being we are honoring, worshipping, and petitioning—offers no God-given point to the rabbit's suffering. Suppose, for instance, the being playing the god-role for us is the Zoroastrian god, Ahura Mazda, or the Greek god, Zeus, and suppose those gods do not exist. Such gods cannot give a point to suffering, since they (by hypothesis) do not exist.

We thought we found conceivable that the Anselmian God offers no God-given point to the rabbit's suffering. The state of affairs that the being playing the God role offers no God-given point to the rabbit's suffering is genuinely possible. The state of affairs obtains in at least some worlds where the moderate Anselmian God exists. So, the epistemic possibility that there is no God-given point to the rabbit's suffering is an Anselmian illusion.²⁷

Similarly we find it conceivable that water is not H₂O. And what we are conceiving is something that is genuinely possible: namely, that the stuff playing the water role is not H₂O. It is metaphysically impossible that water is not H₂O. But it is not metaphysically impossible that the stuff playing the water role is not H₂O. It is the analogous for the moderate Anselmian God. It is metaphysically impossible that God provides no point or purpose for the rabbit's suffering. But it is not metaphysically impossible that the being playing the God role does not provide such a purpose.

It is primarily possible that God should have lacked the divine attributes or should have failed to exist altogether. That is just to say that the being playing the God-role might have lacked the divine attributes or failed to exist. So, it is primarily possible that rabbits suffer pointless pain. But it's a mistake to conclude that it's metaphysically possible that the Anselmian God failed to provide a point to the rabbit's suffering.²⁸ More generally, for any primarily possible

²⁶ The point is more complicated than it looks. On the semantics of 'God' we are assuming, there are worlds in which God (the maximally great being in our world) exists, but where 'God' does not refer to such a being. In that world, when someone utters the sentence, God gives a purpose to everything; what they express is something we, in our world, misinterpret as being about God. But in fact the proposition they express is not about our God, since 'God' is empty in that world. They in fact say something false, and we should agree that it is false. In that world, the referent of 'God' does not play the role of God in our world, since of course there is no referent of 'God' there. But could 'God' have a referent that does not play the God role that our God plays? Moderate Anselmians want to affirm this, while agreeing that the Anselmian God necessarily exists. If a

Footnote 26 continued

less than perfect being is playing the God role—these are worlds in which our Anselmians would complain that an idol has replaced God—then the Anselmian God exists in that world, but everyone is worshipping, petitioning, and glorifying another being.

²⁷ Compare Soames (2007).

²⁸ A referee asks: if (i) it is primarily possible that rabbits suffer pointless pain and (ii) it's a mistake to conclude that it's metaphysically possible that the Anselmian God failed to provide a point to the rabbit's suffering, then it appears that there's no quantity/quality of pain and suffering can ever undermine the author's Moderate Anselmianism. This seems to make Moderate Anselmianism unfalsifiable. I think this is a good question. My claim is only that the

statement *q* inconsistent with the essential properties of the moderate Anselmian God, it is an Anselmian illusion that *q* is secondarily possible.

Moderate Anselmianism leaves room for a priori disputes about the nature of the properties of omnipotence, omniscience and perfect goodness. We discover a posteriori that God has the essential properties of omnipotence, omniscience and perfect goodness, but the exact nature of those properties is largely a matter of a priori investigation. And certainly Anselmians can disagree about the nature of those properties.

Finally, moderate Anselmianism is consistent with the widespread position among theists that the nature of God is largely known, if it is known at all, a posteriori. The familiar epistemology is that facts about God are primarily the subject of inductive inference and various forms of revelation. For moderate Anselmians, a priori investigation focuses mainly on finer disagreements about the exact nature of omnipotence, omniscience, perfect goodness and so on.

5 Advantages of Moderate Anselmianism

There are many a priori arguments against the existence of the Anselmian God. Moderate Anselmianism offers major advantages over traditional Anselmianism in managing these arguments. Nelson Pike, John Mackie and many others have argued that it is a priori impossible that the Anselmian God have the essential property of omnipotence. It is a priori true that omnipotent beings can perform any possible action and among the possible actions, of course, are morally wrong actions.²⁹ But it is a priori impossible that an Anselmian God might perform a morally wrong action. So it is a priori impossible that an Anselmian God is omnipotent.

Traditional Anselmians are forced to conclude either that it is a priori impossible that an Anselmian God is omnipotent or that we do not know a priori that omnipotent beings can perform morally wrong actions.³⁰ Moderate Anselmians, on the other hand, agree it's a priori true that omnipotent beings can perform any possible action. But they deny that it's a priori impossible that the moderate

Anselmian God perform a morally wrong action. Indeed there are many worlds in which the being playing the God-role performs morally wrong actions, and that establishes the primary possibility that the Anselmian God performs morally wrong actions. It is, in fact, genuinely possible that the being playing the God role performs morally wrong actions. Since it is primarily possible that the Anselmian God performs morally wrong actions, it is not a priori impossible that the Anselmian God is essentially omnipotent.

It has also been persuasively argued that it is a priori impossible that the Anselmian God actualize possible worlds with widespread gratuitous evil.³¹ There are worlds so bad that it is a priori impossible that the Anselmian God actualizes it. According to traditional Anselmians, the modal intuition that there are worlds with widespread gratuitous evil must be mistaken. The space of metaphysical possibility cannot include such worlds. But traditional Anselmianism offers no explanation at all for the persistence and power of the modal intuition that there are such worlds.

Moderate Anselmians, on the other hand, deny that it's a priori impossible for the Anselmian God to actualize a world with widespread gratuitous evil. Indeed there are many worlds in which the being playing the God role provides no point or purpose for existing evil. It is, in fact, genuinely possible that the being playing the God role provides no point or purpose for widespread evil. In such worlds I speak truthfully when I utter 'God has provided no point or purpose to any existing evil'. And the existence of worlds in which the being playing the God-role provides no point or purpose for widespread evil establishes the primary possibility that the Anselmian God provides no purpose for widespread evil.

Some have objected that Anselmianism entails that it is a priori impossible that God fail to exist. It's central to the ontological argument, for instance, that it is a priori impossible that God fail to exist. But the modal intuition that God might not exist is, again, powerful and persistent. Moderate Anselmians agree that it is not a priori impossible that God fail to exist. There are worlds in which the reference of 'God' is not fixed to any existing being at all; some of these are worlds in which the reference-fixing description does not describe any existing thing and some of them are worlds in which the referent of 'God' has ceased to exist. In those worlds I speak truthfully when I utter the words 'God does not exist'. The primary possibility that the Anselmian God might have failed to exist is established by the existence of worlds in which 'God' does not refer to anything playing the God role.

Footnote 28 continued

existence of evil—however extensive—is not inconceivable, given moderate Anselmianism. So, we do not know a priori that the Anselmian God does not exist, given the possibility/observation of evil. But it does count as evidence against a particular view of the nature of the Anselmian God.

²⁹ See Pike (1998), pp. 283–293.

³⁰ Some Anselmians retreat to the position that God has the power to perform a morally wrong action, but that power is necessarily unexercised. See Senor (2006).

³¹ See in particular Guleserian (1983).

There is widespread and persistent disagreement concerning whether God is an eternal being or a being in time. Moderate Anselmians observe that it is not a priori true that God is an eternal being and it is not a priori true that God is in time. There are worlds in which the being playing the God role is eternal and there are worlds in which the being playing the God role is in time. The disagreement persists because the question cannot be settled a priori.

In general a priori atheological arguments and disagreements present no serious problem for moderate Anselmians. Moderate Anselmians maintain that there are a posteriori facts about God that might have turned out differently. There are a posteriori facts about the possibility of suffering rabbits, God's existence, God's goodness, God's nature, widespread evil and so on that might have turned out differently. Disputes about the nature of God, and states of affairs compossible with God, persist because they simply cannot be settled a priori. These are metaphysical issues that can be settled only by a posteriori discovery.

6 Concluding Remarks

Anselmians have a persuasive argument that the Anselmian God is necessary a posteriori. Among the advantageous implications of an a posteriori necessary Anselmian God is that a priori atheological arguments in general lack cogency. Moderate Anselmians concede that, conceivably, rabbits lead pointless, pain-racked lives in the same way that, conceivably, Kripke's wooden table is made of ice. We could discover that each of these is true. But, as a matter of fact, it is genuinely impossible that rabbits lead pointless, pain-racked lives and genuinely impossible that Kripke's table is made of ice.

Among the disadvantages of an a posteriori necessary Anselmian God is an extensive modal defeasibility. The essential properties of God determine the shape of metaphysical possibility. But there seems almost no limits to what we might discover concerning the essential properties of the Anselmian God. So, there are almost no limits to what we might discover concerning the shape of metaphysical possibility. Among the surprising facts about the shape of metaphysical possibility is that it is not metaphysically possible that rabbits suffer pointlessly. Equally surprising is the discovery that it's genuinely impossible for some omnipotent beings to perform wrong actions and the discovery that there are no worlds bad enough that an Anselmian God could actualize it. None of these is metaphysically possible, though each of them is a priori possible, and we retain an illusion that they are metaphysically possible. The extensive modal defeasibility of Moderate

Anselmianism entails that the exact breadth of Anselmian illusion is an open question.

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The Divine Attributes and Non-personal Conceptions of God

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Abstract Analytical philosophers of religion widely assume that God is a person, albeit immaterial and of unique status, and the divine attributes are thus understood as attributes of this supreme personal being. Our main aim is to consider how traditional divine attributes may be understood on a non-personal conception of God. We propose that foundational theist claims make an all-of-Reality reference, yet retain God’s status as transcendent Creator. We flesh out this proposal by outlining a specific non-personal, monist and ‘naturalist’ conception of God, which we call the ‘euteleological’ conception of God, and then considering euteleological interpretations of omnipotence (implicating divine agency, will and freedom), omniscience (implicating divine intellect and intelligence) and divine goodness.

Keywords Euteleology · *Telos* · Omnipotence · Omniscience · Divine goodness · Concepts of God

1 Introduction

Within analytical philosophy, it is widely assumed that, for theism, the divine attributes are attributes of a supreme personal being. The God of the monotheist traditions is typically taken to be ‘the personal omniGod’, a

supernatural immaterial personal agent who creates all else that exists and who possesses the ‘omni-properties’ (such as omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence). On this view, God’s attributes are the attributes *of a person*, albeit of essentially unique status. Thus omnipotence ascribes to God to an unlimited degree the same kind of power of agency that belongs to finite agents; omniscience, the same sort of knowing; and omnibenevolence, the same sort of (moral) goodness. We grasp God’s being all-powerful, all-knowing and all-good by extrapolation from our understanding of what it is for finite persons to be powerful, knowing and good.

The classical theist tradition, however, ascribes *further* attributes to God that do not fit comfortably with the view that God is a person. For example, classical theism takes God to be simple, atemporal, immutable, impassible and necessary. None of these metaphysical attributes could apply to finite persons: they may thus seem essentially *non-personal*. Unsurprisingly, then, philosophers who have developed the personal omniGod understanding of divinity have had difficulty accommodating these further metaphysical attributes, modifying them and, sometimes, effectively abandoning them, or at least some of them. For example, Richard Swinburne abandons them all, although he accepts weak immutability in the sense that God cannot change in character.¹ Open and process theists reject divine

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¹ On ‘weak immutability’, see Swinburne (1993, p. 219). He thinks (1994, Ch. 4 and p. 139) that the timeless view of eternity is incoherent. In (1991, p. 8) he says it is difficult to make any sense of it, and for reasons given in (1993, Ch. 12), says it is an unnecessary burden for the theist. Swinburne thinks that God’s existence is logically contingent, but ‘factually necessary’ (1991, p. 93). He often speaks of a ‘simple’ or ‘very simple kind’ of God, but he does not mean this in anything like the traditional sense of the doctrine of divine simplicity. See, e.g., his (1991, pp. 93 and 283).

simplicity, timelessness, and impassibility.² William Alston rejects (absolute) simplicity (understood as ‘having no composition of any sort’), while allowing the coherence of the notion of an infinitely perfect, timeless and immaterial person.³ Brian Leftow does his best to retain the classical metaphysical attributes, but is not sure that there could be a simple person that acts through will and intellect.⁴ William Wainwright (1988, pp. 12–19) doesn’t reject timelessness or immutability, but thinks that simplicity must be qualified, and impassibility as well if there are any contra-causally free creatures. Hoffman and Rosenkrantz (2002, pp. 19, 67–81, 90 and 107) accept simplicity if understood as ‘being without parts’, but reject it if understood to imply that God is identical with his essence. They accept impassibility (just in the sense that God cannot have a sensation of pain), but hold that God is neither atemporal nor (strongly) immutable.

These manoeuvres reveal a strong tendency to give priority to preserving God’s status as a personal being over sustaining the classical metaphysical attributes. This tendency stems primarily, we think, from the conviction that understanding God as a person is essential to a religiously adequate construal of the theist traditions.⁵ It is notable that some philosophers who seek to accommodate most if not all of the classical attributes make significant compromises with their understanding of God as a person, retaining it

² For the Open theist view, see, e.g., Hasker (2004, p. 97) and his Ch. 4 in Pinnock et al. (1994). For the Process view, see, e.g., Hartshorne (1948, 1964, 1984). Both open and process theists endorse weak immutability in the same manner as Swinburne, as God’s being essentially ‘steadfast in character’ or ‘righteous’. Some philosophers appear to endorse an even weaker sense of immutability: for example, Davis (2008, p. 162, note 4) defines ‘weak immutability’ as always (i.e., as a matter of fact, but not of necessity) retaining one’s nature, being true to one’s word, keeping one’s promises, never wavering in one’s purposes, etc.

³ See Alston (1989), especially Chs. 2–4. In Ch. 6 he offers a ‘mixed’ conception of God which combines some of the classical attributes (including atemporality and immutability, but not absolute simplicity) with Hartshorne’s ‘neoclassical’ attributes.

⁴ In personal concordance, Leftow says it’s unlikely that a simple being could have freedom involving the ability to do otherwise, and it couldn’t have a mind in the sense of a system of many distinct causally involved mental states within itself. But maybe its one mental state could be what makes it true that it thinks and wills various things. Others, including, e.g., Wynn (1997, p. 100) and Mann (1983), appear less troubled by the notion of a simple personal God.

⁵ In some cases, however, classical attributes are modified or rejected more on philosophical grounds than purely from considerations of religious adequacy. Sometimes attributes are rejected because they are thought to be individually incoherent (typically, simplicity or timelessness), and sometimes because they are thought to be inconsistent with other attributes: for example, on the alleged incompatibility of omniscience and immutability, see, e.g., Kretzmann (1966); and on the alleged incompatibility between omniscience and atemporality, see, e.g., Wolterstorff (2010) and Davis (1983, p. 29).

only in a stretched or pared down sense. Alston (1989, especially ‘Divine and Human Action’) perhaps comes closest to acknowledging this, admitting (p. 101) that his account of a person isn’t adequate for the practice of the religious life.⁶

This sort of compromising about the sense in which God is a person nicely introduces our main concern in this article, which is to consider how the divine attributes may be understood on an avowedly *non-personal* conception of the God of theism. If attempts at respecting the classical metaphysical divine attributes put pressure on the view that God is, literally and metaphysically, an immaterial supernatural person, then one obvious path to fidelity to the classical attributes will be to straightforwardly deny that God is to be understood as a person of the same kind as finite human persons, albeit vastly more exalted.

On any such non-personal conception of divinity, *none* of the divine attributes are attributes of a person, and that implication may prove problematic. Proponents of non-personal conceptions of divinity face the mirror-image of the difficulty that, as we have been remarking, confronts theorists of a personal God. While those theorists have to accommodate the apparently non-personal traditional divine attributes (often thereby stretching or paring down the notion of a person), non-personal understandings of divinity have to develop a plausible enough line on the apparently intrinsically personal attributes of God. They will, for example, need an alternative to understanding the omni-properties as extrapolating univocally (or even partially univocally, to use Alston’s terminology) from properties of finite persons; and they will need somehow to construe references to God’s agency, will and intellect so that they do not refer to the capacities of a personal agent. Most if not all personal omniGod theorists doubt that this can be done coherently or adequately.

Our aim in this article is to offer some discussion of this ‘mirror-image’ problem. We wish to begin to explore how traditional divine attributes might be accommodated on a conception of God under which God is not a person. Such an exploration, we think, contributes a valuable perspective

⁶ Helm, who appears to retain all of the classical metaphysical attributes, also comes close to this admission in his (2008), though not so clearly in his (2010). He complains (2008, pp. 140–141) that the distinction between the Creator and creatures is blurred by regarding God as a person in much the same sense as humans are. He chides Swinburne in particular for this and notes that even he resorts to analogy at the end of *The Coherence of Theism* when considering the idea that a personal God in some sense necessarily exists, with the result that ‘it turns out after all [for Swinburne] that God is a person in a rather stretched sense of that term’. Leftow (2009, p. 299) seems less troubled than others by the notion of a timeless person: though he says that a timeless person ‘won’t be your common or garden variety person’, he thinks that ‘a being that has knowledge and will is person enough for philosophical and theological purposes’.

to philosophical inquiry into the divine attributes that may easily be neglected if the inquiry simply takes for granted the assumption, standard for most analytical philosophers of religion, that God is a person, albeit immaterial and of unique status.

The wider enterprise to which we are contributing, of course, is the quest for an adequate philosophical understanding of the concept of God as found in the theist traditions. Since the adequacy of a conception of God must include *religious* adequacy—in the sense of its fitness to play the role that the concept of God plays in the form of life distinctive of theist traditions—we need to extend our introduction by briefly considering why one might reasonably think that a non-personal conception of God could possibly meet this criterion of religious adequacy.

2 How Could a Non-personal Conception of God Possibly be Viable?

The use of personal language to refer to God in Scripture, prayer and liturgy is so pervasive in the theist traditions that it may seem pointless even to entertain the suggestion of a non-personal conception of God. It is common enough, indeed, to *define* theism as belief in a personal deity,⁷ so talk of non-personal divinity seems to change the subject, shifting into something decisively different from theist religion and worldview. But must this be so?

For a start, we think it important not to confuse the psychological and spiritual aptness of relating to God as if he were a person—and accordingly using personal language to describe God—with the intellectual necessity of understanding God actually to be a person. It is quite coherent, we think, to relate to God as person in prayer and worship, and to accept that this way of relating is fitting for the human condition, while maintaining that God in reality is not a person and transcends personhood. Furthermore, our status as persons created in the image of God does not entail that God is a person. Indeed, typically, the kind of reality an image has differs from the kind of reality that belongs to what it ‘images’.⁸

These considerations are more persuasive when combined with an important positive religious reason for rejecting an understanding of God as a person, however apt it may be for us to relate to God in personal ways. That religious reason is the desire to respect God’s *transcendence*, and avoid potentially idolatrous confusion in our

understanding of the proper object of our worship.⁹ Arguably, thinking of God literally and metaphysically as a person cannot avoid failing to respect divine transcendence, even if we do not stint in affirming how vastly great a person God is in comparison to created persons. This is a significant reason why some philosophers have defended a non-personal interpretation of theism, often appealing in doing so to the classical metaphysical attributes of the divine.

Brain Davies is a case in point. Davies distinguishes classical theism from what he calls ‘theistic personalism’, and claims that ‘according to classical theism, God is not a person’. In fact, he goes further, saying that for classical theism ‘God is not an individual belonging to any kind’ and observing that ‘[c]lassical theists have sometimes expressed this point by saying that God is entirely simple’.¹⁰ To say that God is simple is essentially to deny that God has any ‘composition’. In particular, God lacks ‘the composition of essence and existence’ required for all finite individuals who are instances of some specific kind (for those individuals to exist, existence has to be ‘added to’ the essential nature they thereby instantiate). But God, the transcendent source of all existence, is not himself an instance of some kind (for, then, he would stand in need of something else to add existence to his essence).

Furthermore, as Davies goes on to explain, ‘[a]ccording to the teaching that God is simple ... attributes or properties of God are ... the same as God himself. ... God does not ... *have* attributes or properties. He is identical with them.’¹¹ This teaching invites the objection—made for example by Alvin Plantinga (1980)—that God turns out to be identical with a property, an abstract object. As Eleonore Stump (2014, p. 36) puts it—in relation to the identification of God with *esse* (being), which she takes to be a way of making sense of divine simplicity—it is ‘religiously pernicious’ to take God to be an abstract universal.¹² No such pernicious *reductio* will follow, however, if reference to divine simplicity is

⁹ One example of this idolatrous confusion is a version of the problem of evil that wrestles with the need to hold a personal God ultimately morally responsible for the serious suffering of creatures. In our view, such wrestling may reasonably lead to the conclusion that no such God can exist. See our (2011).

¹⁰ See his (2004, p. 8). Davies, a rigorous contemporary proponent of classical theism, is probably the most vocal critic of anthropomorphism in contemporary philosophy of religion. See, e.g., his (1987, 2000, 2003, 2004, 2010).

¹¹ Davies (2004, p. 9). Davies here refers to Anselm’s *Monologion*, Ch. 17, to support this claim.

¹² Although Stump quotes Aquinas as holding that ‘God himself is neither universal nor particular’ (*ST* Ia q.13 a.9 ad 2.), she suggests an interpretation of divine simplicity in which, at least with respect to apt ways in which we may speak of God, God is *both* universal (*esse*) and particular (*id quod est*). She compares this theological situation with the understanding of light in contemporary physics as somehow both a particle and a wave.

⁷ Examples include Owen (1967, p. 97), Hick (1973, pp. 4–5), Swinburne (1996, p. 3), Evans (2009, p. 32) and Wainwright (1988, p. 10, 2013, p. 1). Many think this belief is essential to Christianity, if not to theism itself.

⁸ For more discussion, see our (2016c).

primarily apophatic, making a claim about what God is not. God's not being distinct from his attributes, in other words, may just be a way of asserting, in defence of divine transcendence, 'the failure of all predicative attribution in language about God', as Tanner (2013, p. 138) puts it. To respect God's transcendence, then—the argument goes—we must recognise that God is not 'a thing' belonging to some genus, that 'has' existence and may be ascribed attributes in accordance with the usual substance-attribute schema: that schema cannot properly be applied to God.

'God is transcendent', of course, is a perfectly good subject-predicate grammatical sentence, and one whose truth has important implications which we have here been noting. Clearly, then, we must not interpret 'the failure of all predicative attribution in language about God' in such a way as to render meaningless that very claim about divine transcendence! Tanner says that God's not being a thing of any kind 'implies that talk about God systematically violates *the usual canons of sense making*' (2013, p. 138, our emphasis). Strictly, then, it is only the *usual* kind of predicative attribution that she is claiming to fail in relation to God. Although the conclusions Tanner herself draws from this observation are perhaps overdramatically stated,¹³ we hold fast to the thought that, though the usual canons may not apply, the possibility of meaningful attribution to the divine need not be lost altogether. We agree that we will not do justice to the meaning of 'God is transcendent' by taking it to be the claim that *a transcendent entity* must belong to a theist's ontology (in the way personal omniGod theists straightforwardly find it acceptable to do, dismissing, or remaining oblivious to, the insight that 'entity-hood' inevitably implies limitation). It does not follow, however, that there is no better way to express what is meant by God's transcendence.

3 How to Speak Meaningfully of a God Who is Not a Person, Nor any Kind of 'Thing'

If attributing properties to God does not follow the usual semantic canons for describing and asserting the existence of entities, how is such attribution possible at all, and how should we understand it?

¹³ Tanner concludes that there is a 'failure to mean that haunts all theological claims, in the uncloseable gap between the recognition *that* theological claims signify and the inability to specify *what* it is, conceptually, that they convey.' Accordingly, she maintains, 'no set of concepts or images is proper to theology', which must '[make] do with whatever categories are at hand, twisting and violating them according to its own fundamentally non-semantic purposes' (2013, p. 139), producing 'a seemingly anarchic bricolage, fundamentally "disciplined" by only a thoroughgoing refusal of sense, by the systematic repudiation of all ordinary canons of sense making' (p. 140).

A possible answer is to retreat to understanding descriptions of the divine as metaphorical, even to the extent of insulating God from counting as a (real) entity by taking him to be a fictional one. In our view, however, going anti-realist for the sake of honouring divine transcendence is a step too far. In transcending existing entities and kinds, God doesn't altogether transcend *reality*, but is transcendentally *real* (and therefore real to the fullest extent). If apt divine attributions are metaphorical, then, the metaphors must be conveying claimed truths *about reality*. But in that case it will at least remain open that some understanding is possible of what those metaphors convey that does not simply re-echo the metaphors themselves.

The mediaevals appealed to analogical predication in accounting for meaningful attribution to the transcendent divine. Descriptions whose meaning we grasp from their application to creatures may be applied to God by analogy, and convey important truths. This doctrine, at its most sophisticated and robust in the work of Aquinas, is worthy of careful attention.¹⁴ For our purposes here, our main comment about this doctrine is similar to that just made in relation to metaphorical attributions: the possibility will remain open of some understanding of the divine, not itself analogical, that captures *what it is* that may be understood through apt analogical predications. The potential for such understanding will doubtless be limited—with some attributes of the divine open to positive characterization only by means of analogy—but it isn't *ab initio* clear that it is limited to nothing.

In effect, our point is that the question remains whether it is proper to aim at a *positive* (though limited) metaphysics of divinity. If the classical metaphysical attributes function apophatically,¹⁵ ruling out taking God to be a person or any kind of entity, does it then follow that positive metaphysics of the divine are blocked altogether? Must we depend only on metaphors, analogies, and Tanner's 'anarchic bricolage', if we are to gain any understanding of the nature of the One we know through the revealed tradition (as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who brought Israel out of Egypt, and is the Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ—to use Christian descriptions)? We think that positive divine metaphysics *are* feasible, though they must respect the limitations of divine 'incomprehensibility', the doctrine, not that God is unintelligible, but that God may not be *fully* grasped in the compass of any finite mind.

¹⁴ For good discussions of Aquinas on analogical predication, see, e.g., Klubertanz (1960) and McInerny (1996).

¹⁵ Some of these attributes—immutability, atemporality, impassibility—wear apophaticism on their sleeves. We have construed simplicity in an apophatic way, and would suggest that the other superficially 'positive' attribute—divine necessity—should also be construed as essentially apophatic. We return to this topic below.

If apparently predicative attributions to the divine are not actually functioning to assert properties of an entity of some kind, then it is a natural move, familiar from contexts prone to inept ‘reification’, to hold that the grammatical structure of attributions of properties to God fails to mirror the ontological structure of what makes them true, if they are true. We suggest a move of just that kind.

Our specific proposal is that claims about the divine—or, at least, the key foundational ones—are to be understood as claims about Reality as a unified whole. We use ‘Reality’ with a capital ‘R’ here to emphasise that what is referred to is all of concrete reality, the entire spatio-temporal universe or ‘multi-verse’ of such universes as the case may be (we will also use ‘the Universe’ with a capital ‘U’ with this same referent). We are not implying, however, that God is to be identified with concrete Reality as a unified whole—that pantheist identification, after all, would arguably give God the status of an entity, albeit ‘an entity’ in the limiting case and necessarily the unique instantiation of its kind. Our proposal holds that foundational theist claims make an all-of-Reality reference, yet aims to retain God’s status as the transcendent Creator. Attributions to the divine are thus, under this proposal, more like ‘feature-placing statements’ (such as ‘It’s raining’ or ‘It’s Tuesday’) than genuine substance-attribute predications, though they lack the implicit indexicals in the given examples. ‘It’s God-ing all over’ may sound wacky, but it has a form that points in what we take to be the right direction.

4 A Euteleological Conception of the Divine

How might our proposal be materially filled out? What might an interpretation of foundational theist claims as having a whole-of-Reality reference look like?

Given the prominence it affords apparently non-personal descriptions of the divine, classical theism might reasonably be thought to have (at its foundations) an overall stance on Reality, rather than a claim about the existence of a perfect being. Given the diversity of classical theism, and the wide reception of interpretations of it as founded on ‘perfect being’ theology (with ‘perfect being’ typically understood as the personal omniGod), it would be a foolish project to try to show that ‘the’ classical view of God conforms to *our* proposal and materially completes it. We think it is likely that there are several interpretations of the nature of God consistent with classical theism, and that more than one of them may reasonably be accepted as exceeding the threshold of basic viability, both philosophically and from the point of view of religious adequacy.

Our more modest approach will be to outline a non-personal, monist and ‘naturalist’ conception of divinity,

inspired by a particular feature of the classical theist tradition, namely the idea that creation exists to achieve a divine purpose and that God is the ‘end’ or *telos* of existence as well as its ultimate source. This account—previously proposed elsewhere¹⁶—may be consonant at least to some significant extent with classical theism, but we offer it independently of any grand hypothesis about how classical theism is best understood. This ‘euteleological’ conception of divinity will serve in the present context to provide material for testing whether the traditional divine attributes may be coherently understood on our whole-of-Reality approach to interpreting foundational theist claims.

A good way to embark on materially filling out a whole-of-Reality approach is to analyse the statement that, for theism, Reality as a whole is a divine creation. Euteleology claims that Reality’s being a divine creation amounts to its being *inherently* directed upon the realization of the supreme good as its end or *telos*. This claim draws on a plainly central element of theism, for which it is essential that Reality—all that exists—forms a unity in virtue of the divine purpose in creation. On the euteleological view, however, there is no *Director*: Reality’s purpose is not the purpose of any supreme personal agent with Reality under its overall control.

Theism is committed to there being an ultimate explanation for the existence of everything that exists, and, indeed, for the fact that there is something rather than nothing. Euteleology takes the ultimate explainer to be the very fact that Reality’s *telos*, the supreme good, is indeed concretely realized. The claim is, in other words, that all that exists does so ultimately just because the Universe contains within it full realizations of the supreme good—and, of course, that claim can be true only if there really are such realizations. It is thus essential to a euteleological theism that it identify such realizations, which will in turn depend on a specification of what the supreme good is. In the context of Christianity, these requirements are met by an interpretation which understands the supreme good to be revealed as agape-love, fully realized in Christ and whenever there is obedience to his new commandment that we love one another as he has loved us. A Christian euteleology, then, claims that the entire Universe exists just because of the actual existence within it of the love which is its ultimate purpose.

This key explanatory claim of euteleology is prone to be met either with incomprehension or blank incredulity. This reaction is understandable: on our usual assumptions about causation, something highly evolved within the Universe can hardly be the ultimate cause of the Universe’s actuality in the first place! Theism’s commitment to the claim that the Universe is a divine creation cannot be reduced to a

¹⁶ See our (2014, 2016a, b, c).

claim about the Universe's final cause (even if theism must hold that the Universe does indeed have a final cause). Theism takes the Creator to be the ultimate *efficient* cause of the Universe, where an efficient cause is what explains the very actuality of the effect. Now, our most salient paradigm of efficient causation is *productive agency*: the agent that produces an outcome or product is its efficient cause, explaining why that outcome or product is actual. The traditional emphasis on divine creation as, uniquely, creation ex nihilo should, however, warn of a trap in understanding the Universe as a divine product and God as its producer. It is widely agreed that, *pace* St Paul's image of the potter and the clay,¹⁷ God is not to be understood as one who produces the created Universe *from* what already exists. It is a howler to read creation ex nihilo as creation 'out of' nothing, as if nothing were some pre-existing material. Euteleology, however, rejects the idea of God as an agent-producer *altogether*, even in a putative attenuated sense of a producer who neither produces from anything pre-existent, nor (if time itself is created) produces through some temporal process. Euteleology takes its being ex nihilo to imply that creation isn't even production somehow 'from' God's own necessary and immaterial being, but to signal that divine efficient causation is not strictly *any kind of* producing by an agent. That stance requires, of course, a viable causal pluralism—and, in particular, a pluralism about *efficient* causation. But can there be efficient causes that are not makers of their effects in the sense of being agents that produce those effects?

Causal pluralism about efficient causation is not implausible. Anyone who thinks that Humean event-causation is a kind of efficient causation, for example, has accepted that efficient causes are not always agent-producers. A less familiar example is to be found in Leslie's (1979, 1989) Platonist 'extreme axiarchism', which takes the Universe's existence to be ultimately due to its being good that it should exist. If axiarchism is coherent, and we think it is, we see no good reason to deny the coherence of euteleology, which proposes that the Universe's existence is ultimately explained because it concretely realizes its *telos*, the supreme good. In any case, on anyone's understanding of theological explanation, an ultimate explanation of the Universe's existence may be expected to have unique features. So, even if euteleology's account of the ultimate efficient cause of all that exists appeals to a kind

¹⁷ Romans 9:21. Biblical accounts of creation generally do not make the notion of creation ex nihilo explicit, and sometimes suggest, to the contrary, that God creates by bringing order to some pre-existing state of chaos. We will proceed on the assumption, however, that divine creation ex nihilo is required to capture the fullness of the divine transcendence.

of efficient cause not exemplified in any other context, that is not enough to show that the explanation is incoherent.¹⁸

The scholastic tradition followed Aristotle and Aquinas in holding that, in efficient causation, an agent's action is located in the patient (effect); it just *is* the patient's being acted upon.¹⁹ Now, creation ex nihilo is not like ordinary efficient causation, since there is no passive potency (prior substance or prime matter) on which God acts and which is changed in creating. Nevertheless, the emphasis on the 'patient's' being acted upon might still be applied by holding that God's creative action *just is* creation's dependence on God for its existence.²⁰ In *that* sense, then, Creation may be a product or production, a being-made; but its status as such need not amount to dependence *on a separate entity*. As euteleology maintains, then, the Universe may be created ex nihilo and yet not be produced *by an agent-producer*.

We conclude, then, that our euteleological account is coherent: what is dependent in the order of ordinary productive efficient causation (realizations of the supreme good) may belong to the ultimate efficient cause of existence itself, including the existence of its own producers. Such a possibility is not coherent if efficient causality *must* be a matter of production *by a separate agent*, but our claim is that there are different kinds of efficient causality, and that there can be this kind of 'boot-strapping' dependence applicable to the ultimate efficient causation of Reality-as-a-whole. It is notable that boot-strapping dependence of this sort is familiar and orthodox in Christianity, which endorses the notion that the divine Word, without which 'was not anything made that was made', comes to birth 'late in time', incarnate within the created order.²¹

¹⁸ For a fuller presentation of our argument in this paragraph, see our (2016b).

¹⁹ Clarke (1994, p. 190) emphasises the importance of keeping this point in mind.

²⁰ See Freddoso (2001) for a discussion of this understanding of divine action in Suarez, and for a more thorough discussion of the scholastic view that (transeunt) action exists in the patient.

²¹ Mark 12:35–37 shows Jesus himself teaching about the Messiah: though the Messiah is David's son, David nevertheless calls him 'Lord', so how can he be his son? Compare Revelation 22:16, where it is said that Jesus is *both* the source (root) *and* offspring (descendent) of David. Consider too the doctrine, affirmed at the Council of Ephesus (431CE), of Mary as *theotokos* (God-bearer), the one who gives birth to her own creator.

It is interesting to note that, in defending his claim that God is both ultimate final and efficient cause against the objection that, if that were so before and after must exist in God and he must thus be prior to himself, which is impossible, Aquinas (at *ST* I, q. 44, a. 4) replies that the first principle of all things is one in reality, though there's a distinction of reason: some things about God we come to know or think before others.

5 Accommodating the Divine Attributes on the Euteleological Conception

Any non-personal conception of God will need to give a viable interpretation of every divine attribute agreed to be essential, where viability is not just coherence, but also religious ‘fitness for purpose’. If a particular essential divine attribute cannot be accommodated under a given non-personal conception of God, that will constitute an objection against accepting that theism may reasonably be interpreted under that conception.

Does euteleology succeed in accommodating all divine attributes deemed essential? We shall here consider euteleological interpretations of omnipotence (implicating divine agency, will and freedom), omniscience (implicating divine intellect and intelligence), and divine goodness. While there is room for debate about the full list of essential divine attributes, an understanding of God would surely be lacking if it could not offer a viable interpretation of those just listed. Our efforts here will be confined to sketching some lines along which a viable euteleological interpretation of each of these attributes might be developed: we do not claim to have produced completed accounts.

5.1 The Classical Metaphysical Attributes as Interpreted on the Euteleological Conception

Before considering the omni-properties, however, it is worth checking that the classical metaphysical attributes, which seem well suited to any non-personal conception of divinity, do indeed have viable interpretations under euteleology.

Euteleology is monist, rejecting any ultimate division of reality into a supernatural and natural realm. Euteleology thus rejects the idea that the perfect being eternally dwells in a separate realm, from which ‘he’ produces ex nihilo an ontologically distinct natural order with which he can then interact and in which he can intervene. But, it might be argued, if a separate supernatural realm is repudiated, surely God cannot be atemporal, immutable or impassible. On the euteleological view, the only ‘place’ for God to be is in the natural Universe, which is through and through temporal and mutable.²²

This objection may be met by interpreting atemporality, immutability and impassibility as characterizing divine transcendence apophatically rather than as specifying the special kind of entity that God is as perfect being. Only the latter view gives rise to locating the divine in a

supernatural realm, free of the changes that characterize the natural Universe. A query remains, however, as to how God *is* to be located on euteleology’s monist view, given that he does not reside in an atemporal immutable realm and yet also—on the apophatic interpretation of divine simplicity—cannot be identified with any entity or kind within the natural Universe. One might suspect that, under euteleology, God in reality turns out to be nothing at all! We will take up this query in discussing omnipotence, since that attribute appears to imply that God is an agent, and must *in some sense* be located as such.

The same argument against euteleology’s ontological monism might be made specifically in terms of divine necessity—the last of our mentioned classical metaphysical attributes, and the one not so far discussed. To hold that God is a necessary being surely does *eo ipso* mark him off ontologically from all contingent beings, and rules out a strictly monist interpretation of theism. Once again, in reply we recommend apophaticism. The divine necessity amounts to God’s *not* being a contingent entity, and leads to dualism only if taken to refer positively to a unique kind of entity that exists ‘of necessity’.²³

Under euteleology, then, God is not a necessarily existent entity, yet (if euteleological theism is true) certain substantive truths about concrete reality do hold necessarily. The foundational euteleological claims will be necessarily true if they are true at all. Euteleology maintains that it is impossible that nothing at all should exist, although everything that does exist, including the actual concrete whole-of-Reality, exists contingently (what’s necessary is *that something should exist*, not *the existence* of any particular thing). It’s also impossible for euteleology that anything should exist that does not belong to Reality as directed upon the supreme good *and* in which that good is concretely realized.²⁴ The same underlying query remains, however: how is God to be identified, and reassurance given that he has not evaporated in the impersonal austerity of the euteleological worldview? Keeping this query in

²² What is at issue, of course, is whether *God* can be atemporal, immutable and impassible. *Manifestations* or *incarnations* of God are evidently not so.

²³ We are inclined to follow Findlay (1948) in rejecting the very possibility of necessary entities, but block what Hughes (1949) called his ‘Ontological disproof’ by refusing the cataphatic reading of divine necessity it presupposes.

²⁴ The nightmare of Lewis-style modal realism—that there are subsisting possible worlds in which evil and suffering are dominant or all-pervasive—is thus dispelled (as must follow from any viable interpretation of theism). Euteleology is thus aligned with interpretations of theism on which God is free neither to refrain from creating nor to create evil. Compare Geach (1973), who rejects God’s being omnipotent (understood as power to do all things) in favour of his being ‘almighty’ (understood as power over all things or the source of all things) because he takes the former, but not the latter, to imply that God has the power to do evil. We consider the question of what euteleology can make of divine freedom in the following section.

mind, we turn our attention to euteleological interpretations of omnipotence and omniscience.

5.2 A Euteleological Interpretation of Divine Omnipotence and Omniscience

If God is not a personal being, how may we interpret his all-powerfulness, his exercising effective power through sovereign will and omniscient intellect? (Ascribing will, intellect and activity to God is standard fare. Kretzmann (1997, p. 197), amongst others, thinks that having or exercising intellect and will are jointly sufficient for personhood.)²⁵

We have already defended the claim that euteleology accommodates an ultimate efficient cause of all that exists. Reality, as inherently directed on the supreme good is actual because the supreme good is realized within it. May we now simply add that, since the euteleological interpretation of theism secures the claim that Reality has an ultimate efficient cause, it *thereby* accommodates divine omnipotence?

That suggestion, by itself, seems inadequate. Theism asserts divine freedom, and omnipotence enables God to have created any possible world, or even not to have created at all. How may euteleology accommodate God's freedom? If it repudiates personal agency, is it not stuck with the alternative 'emanationist' view, according to which the creation issues of necessity from its ultimate source?

Under euteleology God is not a personal agent, and has no 'free will' in the sense in which personal agents do. God's will is unchanging: it can have no other end than the good, and is thus radically unlike all finite wills. Instead, therefore, references to the divine will may be construed as references to the inherent directedness of everything that exists upon the realization of the supreme good. On the euteleological view talk of the divine will amounts just to talk of Reality's inherent teleological direction.

Yet euteleology is not emanationist. The emanationist picture is either pantheist, or it presupposes radical ontological dualism, both of which euteleology rejects. Concrete Reality's being as it is, in every particular, is ultimately a matter of contingency, though there are law-

governed naturally (or nomically) necessary connexions between contingent existents. The divine freedom thus consists for euteleology in the fact that the way Reality is, and the way the supreme good actually comes to be realized, could have been different from the way they are (although there may be no way of knowing just how different they could have been).

How does euteleology understand God's will as not only unchanging but also *effective*? Reality's *telos* is achieved. But how can this be so, if not by the exercise of powers of understanding and agency possessed by a personal agent?

Given that its *telos* is realized, it follows that Reality must possess (i.e., there must really be) powers capable of producing concrete realizations of the supreme good, and, hence, of satisfying the very conditions of Reality's own actuality under euteleology's version of the ultimate theological explanation of all existence. These powers may properly be described as divine powers, since they are essential to Reality's counting as a divine creation on the euteleological view. We may rightly understand them as *analogous to* a supreme agent's powers, but on euteleology's non-personal account of divinity, they do not actually consist in agential powers but belong *inherently* to Reality as a whole. (Here it is worth remarking that a non-personal conception of divinity need not render God 'impersonal' by interpreting him as *less than* an all-knowing and all-powerful supernatural and immaterial personal agent; instead the interpretation may be urging that God is *more* than such a being, 'transpersonal', if you like. Thus, for euteleology, the divine powers inherent in Reality are analogous to, *and greater than*, those of any possible personal agent, and actual finite persons, with their limited knowledge and agential powers, simply bear *the image* of those greater powers.)

What do the divine powers, inherent in Reality, consist in, according to euteleology? They are the powers whose 'exercise' makes it the case that Reality is successfully directed upon the supreme good. What can be known about what these powers actually are and what it is for them to be exercised, given that—as we have just argued—they are only analogous to, and greater than, supreme agential powers?

On the euteleological view, the exercise of divine power achieves the realization of the supreme good. Now, concrete realizations of the supreme good are natural states of affairs, arising through the operation of the powers of nature. Those natural powers, then, must be *included* amongst the divine powers, and our natural scientific knowledge must impart knowledge of divine operations. (This is so, of course, only from the euteleological perspective: scientific knowledge does not *as such* disclose itself as a 'general revelation' of divine understanding and activity.) The euteleological view thus recovers a sense of

²⁵ Consider also Leftow's remark, already quoted above (note 6). In discussing whether Aquinas must agree that God is a person, Davies (2010, pp. 38–39) conjectures that by saying that God is a person Plantinga (1980) might merely be stressing that knowledge, will and agency can be ascribed to God. Aquinas, Davies says, would certainly agree, but he cautions us that these ascriptions must of course be understood in the light of Aquinas's doctrine of divine simplicity. In ascribing will, intellect and the like to God, then, one is not really saying that there is an individual, God, who has the properties of having will, intellect, etc. Davies does not think Aquinas has to agree that God is a person.

the forces of nature as imbued with divine purpose, as wonderfully expressed in Psalm 104, for example.

Our knowledge of natural powers, however, leaves it open that—as naturalist/atheists maintain—even though states of affairs we regard as supremely good are on occasion produced through the operation of natural powers, there is no teleology, inherent or otherwise, that makes it the case that these natural powers exist for the sake of realizing these worthwhile states, let alone that these powers exist, ultimately, only because such states are realized. The euteleological theist, who holds both these last mentioned claims to be true, therefore seems committed to holding that Reality possesses *further* powers whose exercise makes it the case that the overall concretely real context in which the natural powers operate is one of fulfilled ('eu') teleology with the supreme good as its most final end.

What are these 'further' divine powers, inherent in Reality and analogous to, but greater than, supreme agential powers of understanding and acting? Under euteleology's monism, they are not supernatural powers operating from without on created Reality. What they positively are is not fully comprehensible, though the character of divine power may be the subject of 'special' revelation (for example, Christianity holds that the power of agape-love as incarnately experienced reveals the authentic nature of divine power). We may affirm, however, that all creaturely power, including that of finite persons, is God's power²⁶—and that implication provides a further euteleological construal of divine omnipotence. Natural beings and their powers owe their very existence to their having, and contributing to, a fulfilled overall *telos*, the supreme good, and it is in that sense that, in exercising the power properly described as their own, they participate in the exercise of divine power.

What we think of analogously as divine (personal) agency is thus accommodated in two intrinsically connected ways on the euteleological view. First, divine agency *in creating* amounts to Reality's existing ultimately because its *telos*, the supreme good, is realized within it. Second—and this is entailed by the first—the exercise of powers within Reality capable of generating realizations of the supreme good constitutes divine agency *within creation*. Divine power exercised in creating is not the power of an agential producer, but divine power exercised within creation does include the exercise of the powers of created

agents, including personal agents. Understanding God as source (*arché*) without being agent-producer, makes God intimately present in the exercise of all agent-productive power, and shows that power to be ultimately God's.²⁷

Euteleology thus avoids familiar problems arising from the relationship between a personal-agent Creator and created personal agents (for example: does God create agents whose agency he cannot then control?). Under euteleology, a created person's exercise of powers cannot *compete* with God's exercise of power, given that the created power and its exercise exist only *through* and *as* God's own exercise of power in the senses that euteleology admits.²⁸ This very compatibility of creaturely and divine exercises of power gives rise, however, to an obvious problem about the relationship between God and evil, which we take up briefly in our penultimate section.

We complete this section first, however, by noting that divine omniscience may be interpreted consistently with our proposed euteleological view of omnipotence. Divine omniscience may be understood as the 'know-how' needed for the actualization of Reality through its realizing the supreme good, just as divine omnipotence is understood as consisting in the powers that give effect to this know-how. ('Know-how' does, of course, literally imply a knower who possesses it, so we are here using the term analogously to refer to what is an inherent, hidden, feature of Reality as a whole.)

A further analogy may be used to understand all that exists as 'known' (in the 'knowledge by acquaintance' sense) from the divine perspective, yet there is no 'knowing subject', no mind that supposedly knows all true propositions (something which, anyway, is doubtfully coherent). Divine omnipresence is thus also accommodated. Euteleology says that everything that exists does so for the sake of the good and only because the good is realized. That's what it is for every existent to be God's creature, and that's what it is for the grand overall feature-placing statement, 'It's God-ing all over', to be true. Given that nothing belonging to Reality falls outside this statement's scope or escapes creatureliness, God is indeed omnipresent.²⁹

²⁷ Euteleology, though not pantheist, might thus seem fairly described as panentheist, where this connotes that the natural world is 'in' God. It might be better, though, to describe euteleology as 'the-en-pan-ist', since, as we are currently noting, it holds that God's power is exercised in and through all natural exercises of power.

²⁸ We note that euteleology avoids a competitive view of the relation between divine and creaturely power in a different way from process theism, which retains a personal God but abandons omnipotence for something weaker that involves God's developing along with the natural world, and exercising only persuasive power in relation to free created persons.

²⁹ We think that it follows that divine transcendence coincides with the most pervasive divine immanence. Tanner (2013, pp. 147–149) cogently elaborates this theme.

²⁶ Cf *Summa Contra Gentiles* III, Ch. 67, whose Chapter heading is 'God is cause of activity [another translation has 'operation'] in all active agents', and which affirms that 'every agent acts by the divine power'.

Saying that all power is divine power doesn't mean that God has all the power and there are no genuine secondary causes. Euteleology isn't occasionalism: finite creatures are genuine productive agents.

But now we must finally deal with the objector's query: what *is* God on the euteleological picture; *with what* may God be identified? Our reply is that this query assumes that God is some kind of, uniquely special, entity—an assumption that euteleology explicitly denies. The objection thus begs the question. More sympathetically, we may add that, if euteleology's whole-of-Reality claims are grasped, *that is all there is* to understanding what God is on this conception. Is it too bold to recall here Jesus's reply to Philip's request to be shown the Father: 'anyone who has seen me has seen the Father' (John 14:8–9)? We will be guilty of hubris, we think, only if we fail to add that the knowledge of the Father that Christianity claims we have through Christ is far richer than any metaphysical understanding of who or what God is, important as it is for those who reflect to strive to do well in metaphysical understanding.³⁰

5.3 Euteleology and Divine Goodness

If all creaturely power is divine power (as our account of omnipotence holds), a seemingly intractable problem of evil arises for euteleology. All evil doing will count as the exercising of divine power: so, for example, the torturer will exercise divine power in inflicting terror and agony on his victim. If divine power can be exercised in this way, God can hardly be perfectly good.

What is meant by the claim that the torturer's power is divine power is that the torturer has his power, and exercises it—and, indeed, himself exists—only ultimately for the sake of fulfilling the divine will and because that will is fulfilled in concrete realizations of the supreme good. The way God is implicated in the torturer's actions is not, however, by way of being their ultimate agential producer (as would be the case on the standard personal omniGod view). No responsibility for the evil exercise of creaturely power can be transmitted to God, since God is not a personal agent, who must then be regarded as belonging to our moral community if it is to be meaningful to describe him as perfectly good.³¹ The torturer's power is God's, but *God*

isn't doing any torturing! What it is for God to exist, on the euteleological view, is for the whole of Reality necessarily to be 'the God-way' (for 'it to be God-ing all over'). That the actions of the torturer occur in the context of Reality that is the God-way, and that he exercises power that is divine in so far as that power exists only for the sake of realizing the good, highlights the full horror of his actions. Those actions are shown to be evil, not simply because they are of a kind of which we strongly disapprove, nor just as failing to maximise utility, or as contravening authoritative commands or self-issued categorical imperatives, but as *perversions* of the very purpose for which everything exists, including himself, his powers and their exercise. The torturer is totally at odds with the inherent purpose of the Reality to which he belongs, exercising powers in ways directly contrary to the fulfilment of that purpose. As 'God sees' the situation, the torturer's 'immortal soul' sustains terrible damage. Nevertheless, God unswervingly loves that same soul, seeking no revenge but unchangeably willing that it achieve that for which it was created, and so, in Cranmer's phrase, 'desir[ing] not the death of a sinner, but rather that he may turn from his wickedness and live'.³²

How, though, can evil occur at all if Reality is necessarily the God-way on the euteleological interpretation of what that means? Evidently, a version of the Argument from Evil may be mounted against euteleological theism. We think that a satisfactory response will need to combine an account of evil as privation with a variation on the so-called 'skeptical theist' position in theodicy. Here we confine ourselves to three brief elaborating remarks.

First, it is reasonable to hold that we cannot fully grasp the limits there may be to the possible ways in which a Reality realizing the supreme good can be actualized. Concrete realizations of the supreme good plausibly need to emerge through an evolutionary and historical process, and, for all we know, there necessarily could not be such a process that did not implicate evil, even (through the need for individual free will, and for collective action) evil of the most perverse kind. That evil should exist, then—and this is our second remark—does not belong to Reality's *telos*,

³⁰ Compare also Kevin Hart's observation that God the Father does not 'appear', but that references to the Father make sense through a 'phenomenology of the *basileia*'—the 'Kingdom' as preached, and lived out, by Jesus (Hart 2014, Ch 6). In our (2016b) we argue that there are three distinct salient euteleological identifications of the divine, none of them adequate in itself, and each implicating the others without limit.

³¹ Adams (1999, especially Part Two) argues that God may not properly be regarded as a member of our moral community. Yet she remains committed to the personal omniGod understanding of divinity—see, e.g., (1999, p. 81) and (2016). We find this puzzling. Davies (2008, pp. 113–115) adopts a more clearly consistent view, we think, in denying that God is a person as well as a moral agent. Once one takes God to be a person, making covenants with created persons,

Footnote 31 continued

issuing commandments, and so on, it seems arbitrary to deny that God is a member of our moral community who may properly be held morally responsible. (We think that Davis (2008, p. 164) would agree.) The sense that this conclusion trespasses against a proper recognition of divine transcendence—which we share with Adams—seems to us clearly to favour the view that God is not a person.

³² The phrase is from the absolution pronounced by the priest at Morning and Evening Prayer in the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*. In all likelihood the torturer will be in the thrall of 'worldly principalities and powers', so that the transformation God desires for him requires the defeat of those powers and the collective, institutional, evil that characterizes them. Christianity proclaims that these powers are defeated through the death and resurrection of the Christ.

but it is implicated in the concrete fulfilment of that *telos*: that explains the traditional claim that evil is consistent only with God's 'permissive' will while remaining contrary to his 'positive' will. The fact that evil does not belong to Reality's *telos* implies a theory of evil as the privation of what is ultimately 'meant to be', and we think it possible to develop such a theory that duly recognises the reality and power of evil. The evil-as-privation theory is often disparaged for trivializing evil by denying its reality. In contrast, understood euteologically, it in fact ramps up the scandal of evil.

Our third elaborating remark is that, though we think we can rebut, along the lines just sketched, an Argument from Evil to the effect that euteological theism is inconsistent with the existence of (certain types of) evil, we accept that evil's existence provides evidence against the truth of euteological theism. It is far from clear that, from an initially neutral stance, the evidence for euteological theism (as marshalled, for example, in a suitable version of the teleological argument) will outweigh the countervailing evidence constituted by the existence of evil. From an initially neutral perspective, the hypothesis that Reality-as-a-whole has no *telos*, and is indifferent to the good, may be better supported than our—or any—interpretation of theism. It is a further question, however, whether there is an epistemology that exhibits as reasonable a faith-commitment to the truth of the euteological—or any—interpretation of theism, even if the independent evidence is insufficient to make the acceptance of its truth generally rationally persuasive.

How is God's perfect goodness to be understood on the euteological view? It is not the unlimited goodness of a personal being, so may not be understood as perfect moral goodness or unimpaired virtue. Neither is it the supreme good itself, since God is not to be identified with an abstract universal, nor with a real, Platonic, form (since this would be a supernatural item). Taking God to be goodness itself as an immanent concrete universal—constituted by all the concrete realizations of the supreme good—has some appeal as an interpretation of divine goodness on the euteological view.³³ This identification does fit with several claims central to Christian theism—the revelation that, where there is love, there is God; the claim that the full character of divine goodness is made known in human experience through incarnation; and the claim that God is the source of all goodness in a way that entails that

³³ Previous work by Bishop (2007) took this possibility seriously. Adams considers this interpretation of our euteological view in her (2016, pp 135–6). Her critique of our alternative positive conception of divinity and her discussion of the 'neglected option' of Rolt's (1913) Platonist understanding of God as the love that is the final (but not productive) cause of the universe, deserve a fuller consideration than we have space for here.

creaturely goodness (though truly belonging to the creatures themselves) is a participation in the divine goodness. Yet—while each of these claims may be retained—the view that God is to be identified with goodness understood as an immanent, scattered, concrete universal does not capture the euteological conception of divinity. This is because euteology retains our usual assumption in interpreting theism that God, and God's manifestations, cannot be straightforwardly identified since manifestations are *of* the one who is made manifest. Manifestations—indeed, incarnations—of the divine can be identified on the euteological view, but not the One who is thereby manifest. This is because the God who is manifest cannot, according to euteology, be identified as any kind of entity: 'God exists' can be understood only by grasping the key euteological whole-of-Reality claims. It may also be argued that to identify God with the sum total of concrete realizations of the good fails to respect God's transcendence. Reality's inherent teleology, though fulfilled in the particular concrete realizations of the good that it contains, transcends each and all of these particulars, since there is no limit to the potential for further realizations and further fulfilment of Reality's *telos*.³⁴

On the euteological view, then, God is not to be identified either with any good particular or with universal goodness.³⁵ Nevertheless euteology places goodness at the heart of its whole-of-Reality stance. The concrete realization of the supreme good is that for the sake of which all Reality exists, and the fact that the good is realized is what ultimately explains the existence of everything that does exist. For these claims to be true is surely a way for there to be 'the sovereignty of the good', which, on anyone's interpretation, is a key tenet of theism. We conclude, then, that euteology can provide a viable interpretation of perfect divine goodness.³⁶

6 Conclusion

We have tried to show in this article how some of the core divine attributes may be accommodated on a non-personal conception of God. In particular, we have considered a

³⁴ It seems, then, that concrete Reality must be infinite with respect to potential concrete realizations of the good—grounds for a theological endorsement for the multi-verse posited by some cosmological theories.

³⁵ Euteology is thus clearly distinct from theological axiarchism, since it does not identify God with the good as *arché*.

³⁶ Classical theism takes God's being and God's goodness to be the same. Euteology can be taken as endorsing this claim, since it holds that making sense of 'God exists' and of 'God is good' can be achieved only by appeal to one and the same fundamental fact—namely, that Reality is inherently directed upon the supreme good and exists because this *telos* is fulfilled.

euteleological conception, according to which talk of God is not talk of a supreme person or perfect being, nor, indeed, of any kind of entity, but is rather to be construed as having a whole-of-Reality reference affirming inherent ultimate teleology and a theological explanation of existence as due to the concrete realization of the supreme good which is Reality's *telos*. We have argued that potentially viable interpretations of divine power, knowledge and goodness look to be available on this non-personal conception of God, while also accommodating the classical metaphysical attributes—atemporality, immutability, impassibility, necessity and simplicity—which receive primarily apophatic interpretations. We think our considerations suffice to show that it is worthwhile to examine further the philosophical and religious adequacy of euteleology, and, more generally, interpretations of classical theism that differ from the personal omniGod interpretation prevailing amongst analytical philosophers.

We close with a final remark on the impression which readers may have formed that euteleology, with its 'non-entity' view of God, has much in common with theological anti-realism. It is true that euteleology does have in common with anti-realism the claim that the term 'God' doesn't have any entity, natural or supernatural, as its real referent. But anti-realism takes talk of God to be purely mythic, apt to the degree that it enshrines key values and encourages commitment to them, but wholly a matter of human construction or projection. Euteleology therefore differs importantly from anti-realism in holding that humans use the 'construct' of God as personal creator to express a certain stance on Reality as a whole, a stance that is emphatically true or false quite independently of how human minds may construct things. Those committed to theological realism need not, therefore, just for that reason, encounter any barrier to accepting that the euteleological worldview may be adequate as an interpretation of the metaphysical content of theism, and of Christian theism in particular.

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The Power to Do the Impossible

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Abstract Several recent arguments purport to show that omnipotence is incompatible with the possession of various necessary properties. These arguments appeal to one of two plausible but false principles about the nature of power: (1) that if it is metaphysically impossible for a being to actualize a state of affairs, then that being does not have the power to actualize that state of affairs, or (2) that if it is impossible given some contingent facts about the world that a being actualize a state of affairs, then that being does not have the power to actualize that state of affairs. I pose several problems for both principles, thereby undermining the plausibility of these arguments. I then consider the implications of rejecting these principles for related principles in the free will debate. These implications suggest important differences between having the power to bring about a state of affairs, having a choice about whether it obtains, and being able to bring it about.

Keywords Omnipotence · Necessary properties · Power · Free will · Impossible worlds

Several arguments purport to show that omnipotence is incompatible with the possession of other necessary properties. For example, some argue that omnipotence is incompatible with necessary moral perfection, as a morally perfect being cannot possibly do evil, and thus does not have the power to do so. Lacking this power, such a being

cannot be omnipotent.¹ The first task of this paper is to show that all arguments of this type can be rejected, as they rely on a false principle about the nature of power: that an individual cannot have the power to actualize a state of affairs if there is no metaphysically possible world in which he does so. In Sect. 2, I consider arguments that appeal to an even stronger principle, that an individual has the power to actualize a state of affairs only if there is a metaphysically possible world sharing additional contingent features with the actual world at which she does so. This principle faces all of the problems of the first, as well as some additional problems of its own. In Sect. 3, I suggest an alternative method for reasoning about the compatibility of omnipotence with necessary properties, and in Sect. 4 I find that the problems raised for these principles about power do not extend to similar principles about choice or ability. This has the surprising result that what one has the power to do is distinct from what one has a choice about or is able to do.

1 Incompatibility Arguments

Various arguments for the incompatibility of omnipotence with different necessary properties can be generated by filling in the schema (IA), where x , P , and A range over individuals, properties, and states of affairs, respectively:

(IA)

- 1) If x has P necessarily, then there is no possible world in which x actualizes A .
- 2) If there is no possible world in which x actualizes A , then x does not have the power to actualize A .

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¹ Morrision (2001) and Funkhouser (2006) both make roughly this argument.

- 3) If x does not have the power to actualize A , then x is not omnipotent.
- 4) Therefore, if x has P necessarily, then x is not omnipotent.

For example, filling in ‘omniscience’ for P , Metcalf (2004) argues that an omnipotent being cannot be necessarily omniscient, as there would be no possible world in which she learned anything. Similarly, Sobel (2004) argues that an omnipotent being cannot exist necessarily, as he could not commit suicide in any possible world. Even certain formulations of the Paradox of the Stone make use of a dilemma of two instances of (IA), filling in ‘omnipotence’ for P , and either ‘creating a stone that x cannot lift’ or ‘lifting a stone such that x cannot lift it’ for A .

Those who advance these incompatibility arguments appeal to the following principle to support instances of (2):

- (PP) Necessarily, for all x and all A , if there is no possible world in which x actualizes A , then x does not have the power to actualize A .²

Though (PP) may have some initial plausibility, it faces several problems. The first problem is an intuitive one. (PP) rules out what we might otherwise have thought was a metaphysical possibility: a being who has a power, but necessarily never exercises it.³ It is certainly possible to have a power and not exercise it, as I am not currently exercising my power to stand. Further it is possible to have a power and *never* exercise it, as James Garfield never exercised his power to veto a bill. It also seems possible to extend the idea of not exercising one’s power to every time at every possible world. Suppose, for example, that some being were necessarily indifferent to the state of the world and so never bothered to actualize any states of affairs in any possible world. It does not obviously follow from this description that this being does not have the power to actualize any particular state of affairs—perhaps such a being has the power, but necessarily chooses never to exercise it. If (PP) is true, however, then no such being is possible; if a being has a power, it *must* be exercised in some possible world. This oddity poses a *prima facie* challenge for (PP).⁴

² (Morrison 2001): “...[O]ne necessary condition of P ’s having the power to do A at t is that it is possible that P does A at t . In the language of possible worlds, there must be at least one possible world in which P does A at t .” (144).

(Metcalf 2004): “If S is capable of T , then there is a possible world in which S performs T .” (291).

³ As far as I know, the first mention of this possibility in a discussion of omnipotence is in Conee (1991).

⁴ (PP) leads to similarly counterintuitive results when comparing the powers of two beings. Imagine two beings that are equal in power,

(PP) has more serious problems, though, as many tasks are impossible to perform for reasons that are unrelated to any individual’s power.⁵ Suppose, for example, that Ted is a maximally excellent hunter, such that he has the power to kill any possible beast, no matter how elusive or ferocious. Since it is impossible for there to be a deer that has exactly three and exactly four legs, however, at no possible world does Ted kill such a deer. Intuitively, this does not prevent us from considering or even assenting to:

- (i) Ted has the power to kill a deer that has exactly three and exactly four legs.

Given Ted’s supreme abilities as a hunter, it seems reasonable to accept (i), even when we concede that there is no possible world where Ted exercises this power. If (PP) is true, however, then (i) is not only false, but obviously and uninterestingly false, since, as it is obvious that a deer cannot have exactly three and exactly four legs, none of these deer exist at any possible worlds to be killed by Ted.⁶ This is true even if we stipulate that, whatever actions would be required to kill a three-and-four-legged deer (shooting an arrow with sufficient accuracy and velocity, for example), Ted has the power to do them. Indeed, we can put Ted in a circumstance where he kills (and thus has the power to kill) a creature that intuitively requires no more power to kill, such as an ordinary four-legged deer, and yet we would still have to conclude, according to (PP), that Ted does not have the power to kill a three-and-four-legged deer. This poses a problem for

Footnote 4 continued

except for their ability to actualize a particular state of affairs S . While one being is necessarily indifferent to whether S obtains, and thus in no world actualizes S , the other necessarily lacks the power to actualize S . It seems clear that the former being may have the power to actualize S , while the latter certainly does not, but (PP) denies this possibility.

⁵ Wielenberg (2000) gives several examples of this, though not all are problems for (PP). Many of his examples are only problems for (PP’), considered below.

⁶ An anonymous referee has suggested that (PP) may fare better if the variable ‘ A ’ is restricted to accept only contingent states of affairs. If Ted does not actualize A in any possible world, but other people do, it might seem especially odd to say that Ted has the power to actualize A . After all, A can be brought about, but it is impossible for *Ted* to bring A about. Similar cases can be generated using contingent states of affairs, however. Suppose that a necessary omnipotent being necessarily wants to prevent Ted (and only Ted) from killing any ordinary, four-legged deer. So, in any possible world in which Ted attempts to kill a deer, this being intervenes and thwarts him. Others kill many deer in many possible worlds, but Ted does not. Does Ted still have the power to kill a deer? It seems to me that he does, since if he did not, the omnipotent being would not need to intervene to prevent him from doing so.

(PP), as the impossibility of killing such a deer does not seem sufficient to ground a lack of power in Ted.⁷

(PP) is also inconsistent with some other very plausible principles about power. Imagine three beings A, B, and C, such that necessarily, A exists at a world only if C does not, but B exists at all worlds at which either A or C exists.⁸ Now consider the relation ‘has the power to overpower’, where ‘to overpower’ means to overcome in a direct contest of power. Let w_1 be a world at which both A and B exist and w_2 a world at which both B and C exist, and let us stipulate that:

- (a) A is more powerful than B in w_1
- (b) B is more powerful than C in w_2 , and
- (c) B is no less powerful in w_1 than in w_2 .

On the very plausible assumption that, necessarily, for all x and y , if x is more powerful than y , then x has the power to overpower y , we should conclude from (a) that A has the power to overpower B in w_1 and from (b) that B has the power to overpower C in w_2 . Given (c), it is also plausible that B has the power to overpower C in w_1 as, even though C does not exist in w_1 , B has the power to overpower C in w_2 , and is no less powerful in w_1 .⁹ On the also plausible assumption that ‘has the power to overpower’ expresses a transitive relation, we can conclude from this that A has the power to overpower C in w_1 .¹⁰ If (PP) is true, however, A

cannot have the power to overpower C, because there are no possible worlds in which A and C coexist, and thus no worlds where A overpowers C. But we cannot give up the claim that A has the power to overpower C without also giving up either the claim that ‘has the power to overpower’ is transitive or that x ’s being more powerful than y is sufficient for x ’s having the power to overpower y . Since both of these seem true, we ought to reject (PP).

2 Other Incompatibility Arguments

Even if (PP) were true, however, this would not be enough to ground all incompatibility arguments.¹¹ Consider again arguments for the incompatibility of omnipotence and necessary moral perfection. This type of argument fills in some evil state of affairs for A—Morrison’s (2001) example is “an innocent child’s being maliciously tortured”—and moral perfection for P. However, as is familiar from discussions of the Problem of Evil, there may well be possible worlds in which a morally perfect being does actualize an evil state of affairs: worlds where either a sufficiently greater good is achieved or a sufficiently greater evil avoided by actualizing A.¹² So, the problem is not that moral perfection is incompatible with actualizing this state of affairs, but rather that, because of certain contingent features of the world (that no greater good is achieved and no greater evil avoided by actualizing A), a morally perfect being would not actualize A in any world sharing those contingent features. Thus, though that being may be omnipotent in other worlds (or even at other times, before the world acquires these contingent features) it is not omnipotent in *this* world, because it cannot actualize A in worlds relevantly like this one.

Arguments that appeal to contingent facts in this way require a principle about power something like the

⁷ There is further support for this conclusion about Ted if we think of the powers of persons as just a certain sort of disposition. Jenkins and Nolan (2012) have argued convincingly that there are some non-trivially true sentences of the form ‘X is disposed to ϕ in C’ where C is some metaphysically impossible condition, such as ‘Jane is disposed to be surprised when there is a detectable round square object in front of her’. If powers are just dispositions, then Ted’s case is not unlike Jane’s. He is disposed to succeed in killing a three-and-four-legged deer upon attempting it, for example, and if this sort of disposition is all a power is, then Ted has the power to kill a three-and-four-legged deer.

⁸ It is reasonable to wonder whether any three beings can possibly be related to each other in the way that A, B, and C are described to be. Here is a seemingly possible story about how A, B, and C could satisfy these relations: suppose that A and C are necessarily descended from B, but B necessarily has only one offspring in any world. B would thus exist at every possible world where either A or C exist, but A and C would co-exist at no possible worlds.

⁹ To make it even clearer that B has the power to overpower C in w_1 , we can add to the case that C is more powerful in w_2 than in any other world.

¹⁰ Two concerns are worth noting here. First, one might doubt that ‘has the power to overpower’ is strictly transitive. Suppose A has more overall power than B, and C more overall power than either A or B, but B has the power to exploit some peculiar weakness of C’s. Then we might think that A has the power to overpower B, and B the power to overpower C, but A does not have the power to overpower C. However, this case relies on misinterpreting ‘overpower’. I may be able to win an arm-wrestling contest by poking my opponent in the eye, but I will not thereby have overpowered him. Similarly, if B overcomes C by any method other than exerting greater overall power, then B will not have overpowered C. With this in mind, it

Footnote 10 continued

remains plausible that the relation is transitive. A second concern is that ‘has the power to overpower C’ is ambiguous between possessing the abstract object or property which is the power to overpower C and having *sufficient* power to overpower C. So, one might claim that A has the right *amount* of power, but not the specific power in question. It seems plausible to me, however, that having sufficient power to do something entails having the specific power to do it, as it is hard to see what else could be required.

¹¹ It would be enough for some, of course. There really are no possible worlds in which a necessarily existent being ceases to exist.

¹² The idea that a morally perfect being would never allow a particular evil, either because no subsequent good could be good enough and no avoided evil bad enough to justify it, or because the moral status of permitting an evil is not always determined by its consequences, is not without merit. However, on the assumption that the consequences of an action matter somewhat in determining its moral status, there will be *some* evils that a morally perfect being will not actualize because of their bad (contingent) consequences.

following, where w is a possible world, and S is a set of states of affairs that obtain in w :

(PP') If at no possible world w' sharing S with w does x actualize A , then x does not have the power in w at t to actualize A .¹³

Some version of this principle is also initially plausible, as we might think, for example, that given various contingent facts about the past, no one has the power now to make it the case that Aristotle traveled to the moon. As long as those facts are included in S , (PP') can account for this, even though there are metaphysically possible worlds that do not share S at which Aristotle does travel to the moon.

(PP') can thus be used to generate incompatibility arguments that incorporate contingent facts, using this schema:¹⁴

- (IA')
- 1) If x has P necessarily, and S includes A , then at no w' sharing S with w does x actualize B .
 - 2) If at no w' sharing S with w does x actualize B , then x does not have the power in w at t to actualize B .
 - 3) If x does not have the power in w at t to actualize B , then x is not omnipotent in w at t .
 - 4) Therefore, if x has P necessarily, and S includes A , then x is not omnipotent in w at t .

So, if we include in S states of affairs that obtain in w which are sufficient to guarantee that A is a gratuitous or all-things-considered evil, then any necessarily morally perfect being will not actualize A in any worlds where every member of S obtains. From that, by (PP'), we can conclude that any morally perfect being would not have the power in w at t to actualize B , and thus could not be omnipotent in w at t .

As before, however, (PP') can be rejected as a general principle, thus undermining the rationale for (2) in (IA'). The first problems for (PP') are the problems previously raised for (PP), as any reason to doubt the latter is also a

reason to doubt the former—if it is not necessary for x to have the power to actualize A that there be *any* possible world in which she does so, then it is obviously not necessary that there be a possible world sharing S in which she does so. Nevertheless, there are additional, independent reasons to doubt (PP').

One problem for (PP') is that a being can have a power that it does not exercise due to the members of S obtaining, and so does not exercise in any world sharing S . Consider an extremely powerful genie who, nevertheless, can only actualize states of affairs that his master, whoever possesses the genie's lamp, wishes for. In w_1 this genie has a master of incredible appetites and imagination, and so the genie actualizes many exotic states of affairs. In w_2 , however, the genie is bound to a different master, who lacks the imagination to think up any of the states of affairs actualized by the genie in w_1 . If the genie's being bound to this dull master is included in S , then we must conclude, according to (PP'), that the genie lacks the power to actualize these states of affairs in w_2 . But this seems wrong. If we need evidence of the genie's power to do these things, we need only look at w_1 , in which he actually does them, despite intuitively being no more powerful. Though it is certainly not generally sufficient for a being to have a power that there be some possible world where he exercises that power (as an individual's power may vary from world to world), in this case it seems implausible that the genie has many powers in w_1 that he does not have in w_2 . Indeed, we may stipulate that the only differences between w_1 and w_2 are those entailed by the difference in who has control of the genie, and still (PP') would still force us to conclude that the genie differs in power in these two worlds, despite having exactly the same (presumably immaterial) constitution.

A more serious problem arises if we consider the genie at different times in the same world. Suppose the imaginative master is the genie's first, but he then gives the genie's lamp to the second, dull master at t . According to (PP'), if S includes facts about the past that include the giving of the lamp, then the genie will have many powers before t that he does not have after t . But this seems to violate the following plausible principle:

(DP) If x has the power (in w) to actualize A at t_1 , then x does not have the power (in w) to actualize A at a later time t_2 only if x 's power decreases in the interval from t_1 to t_2 .¹⁵

¹³ The addition of the variable 'S' makes (PP') schematic for a much wider variety of principles than (PP), as there is disagreement about exactly which contingent facts are relevant to a being's power at a time. Candidates include all facts included in w 's initial segment (Wierenga 1983), and all facts included in w 's history as well as all counterfactuals of freedom which are true in w (Flint and Freddoso 1983). In order to make the case that God does not have the power in the actual world to bring about some particular evil, we would likely also need to include some contingent facts about the future.

¹⁴ Morriston explicitly acknowledges this feature of his incompatibility argument: "If a person P possesses this two-way power with regard to an act A at a time t , then *as things are* at t , it must be possible for P to exercise this power by doing, or by refraining from doing, A at t ." (144, original emphasis).

¹⁵ Note that the decrease in power need not be an overall decrease in power. x 's power may decrease in some respects and increase in many others, resulting in greater overall power at t_2 . (DP) requires only that there be some gross decrease in x 's power.

Let t_1 be before the exchange of the lamp, and let t_2 be after. If (PP') is true, then the genie has the power to bring about some exotic state of affairs, call it 'U', at t_1 but not at t_2 . According to (DP), this can be true only if the genie's power has decreased in the interval from t_1 to t_2 , but, intuitively, the genie has suffered no such decrease in power. It is true that, given the genie's new master, he will not actualize U, but that seems to have no impact on what the genie has the *power* to do. The genie's power remains constant across masters, even though which states of affairs the genie will actualize in worlds and at times where he has a particular master changes with each master. To emphasize this point, consider a thief who desires to steal the lamp from the dull master. What could this thief's motivation be, other than the belief that the genie has the power to grant his more interesting wishes? It seems false to say that, when the lamp is stolen, the genie will undergo a sudden dramatic increase in power, but (PP') has this consequence, as well. Thus, (PP') should be rejected, both because of the problems raised for (PP) and because of its violation of (DP).

3 Could God Be Omnipotent?

The purpose of arguments following (IA) and (IA') is to show that God cannot both be omnipotent and have the relevant property necessarily. From this, one can go on to conclude either that God is not omnipotent, that God has the relevant property at best contingently, or that God does not exist. Given the falsehood of (PP) and (PP'), however, we need some other way to evaluate whether it is possible for God to exist and have all of the necessary properties he is alleged to have.

When filling in moral perfection for P and a contingently evil state of affairs for A, it seems obvious that God could have the power to actualize A. After all, supposing that God exists, there are other possible worlds where God is seemingly no more powerful than in the actual world, in which he does actualize A. Furthermore, these worlds are plausibly the nearest worlds in which God attempts to actualize A, and in these worlds he succeeds. That gives us good reason to think that God has the power to actualize A, as long as we have no reason to think that God is more powerful in the worlds where he actualizes A.¹⁶ Similar

¹⁶ It does not give an infallible reason, however. It may be, for example, that at the nearest worlds where God attempts to actualize A, he is assisted by some other being and succeeds, despite not having the power on his own. Considerations of this sort give good reason to reject simple counterfactual accounts of power, such as Morrision's (CP): "A person P has the power to actualize a state of affairs S = df if P were to choose to actualize S, she would succeed in actualizing S." (154).

considerations apply to other instances of (IA'). If x does not attempt to actualize B in any world sharing S, but x does actualize B in the nearest possible worlds where x attempts to actualize B (and x is intuitively no more powerful in these worlds than in w), this gives us some reason to think that x does have the power in w to actualize B.¹⁷

Things are slightly more complicated for arguments that follow (IA). Consider Metcalf's argument for the incompatibility of omnipotence and necessary omniscience. Since there really are no possible worlds in which an omniscient being learns any proposition, we seemingly cannot appeal to any possible world to support the claim that God could have the power to learn. But since (PP) is false, this lack of possible worlds does not guarantee that God lacks this power. How, then, do we evaluate the claim that it is possible for God to have the power to learn? I propose that we gather evidence about this claim in much the same way that we did in the preceding case, with the exception that we also consider *impossible* worlds. Supposing God exists, at the nearest impossible worlds where God is just as powerful as in the actual world and he attempts to learn something, does he succeed? I think the intuitive answer to this question is 'yes', as God, roughly speaking, would have what it takes to learn a new fact. That is, though there are no possible worlds in which God, being necessarily omniscient, learns anything, I suspect he would have the intellectual capacity to learn something in the impossible scenario in which he encountered a true proposition that he did not already know.

The answer in Sobel's case of necessary existence is less obvious. In the nearest impossible worlds where God attempts suicide, does he succeed? Unlike learning a new fact, ending God's existence may be a very difficult task, and it may be that impossible worlds in which God attempts it and fails are nearer than those in which God attempts it and succeeds. Thus, we do not have the same sort of evidence in favor of God's having the power to actualize the end of his own existence. In fact, it may be that consideration of various impossible worlds in which God attempts suicide gives us a reason to think that God does not have the power to commit suicide, but *not* on the basis of any argument following (IA). More generally, it may be that there are some states of affairs that it genuinely seems God does not have the power to actualize, in which case, if not having this power counts against omnipotence,

¹⁷ The 'nearness' appealed to here is intended to be roughly the same as the nearness of worlds used in evaluating counterfactuals, meaning that it has something to do with overall similarity of worlds in the relevant respects. How exactly this similarity should be calculated is a complex issue, especially when impossible worlds are among those being evaluated. I rely here only on intuitive judgments of overall similarity for evaluating nearness.

we should think that God cannot be omnipotent. These states of affairs must be evaluated based on something other than their metaphysical compatibility with various necessary properties, however.

Incorporating impossible worlds into our evaluations of power in this way allows us to preserve the intuition that power is in some sense a modal concept that we ought to be able to analyze in terms of non-actual worlds. To say that someone has the power to do something is not, after all, to say that she in fact did or will do it. It is instead to say that she has something like the potential to do it in some relevant kind of scenario. By expanding the relevant scenarios to include metaphysically and logically impossible worlds, we can preserve this way of thinking without accepting the false principle (PP).

4 Power, Choice, and Ability

Rejecting (PP) and (PP') has consequences not only for our understanding of omnipotence, but also for any other area of philosophy where the powers of individuals matter. For example, rejecting these principles gives us reason to doubt some formulations of principles about free will. Consider rule α from the Consequence Argument for incompatibilism,¹⁸ where ' \Box ' expresses metaphysical or logical necessity:¹⁹

α : $\Box p \vdash Np$

The operator ' N ' can be defined in several ways, such that Np is equivalent to any of the following:

(P) No one has, or ever had, the power to make p true or false.

(C) No one has, or ever had, a choice about whether p is true or false.

(A) No one is, or ever was, able to render p true or false.

It is tempting to use (P), (C), and (A) as interchangeable ways of expressing the idea that the truth of p is not "up to" anyone. As it seems plausible that metaphysically or logically necessary truths are not "up to" anyone, then, α looks pretty good. However, if we read ' Np ' as (P), then α is invalid, as any case that is a counterexample to (PP) is

¹⁸ The argument, very roughly, is that, given Determinism, it is a necessary truth that the distant past and the laws of nature materially imply any true proposition about the future. So, by α , no one has the power/choice/ability to make it true or false that the laws of nature materially imply any true proposition about the present. Since no one has the power/choice/ability to change the past or the laws of nature, by two applications of β , no one has the power/choice/ability to make any propositions about the future true or false. For extended discussion see van Inwagen (1983).

¹⁹ Thanks to Andrew M Bailey for suggesting to me the connection between (PP) and rule α .

then also a counter-instance to α . Ted, for example, has the power to kill a three-and-four-legged deer and thus the power to make false the proposition that Ted never killed a three-and-four-legged deer. But the proposition that Ted never killed a three-and-four-legged deer is metaphysically necessary, since there are no possible three-and-four-legged deer at any possible worlds for Ted to kill. So, α , when ' Np ' is read as (P), is invalid.

In contrast, if ' Np ' is read as (C), a counterexample to (PP) need not be a counter-instance to α . Though Ted has the power to kill a deer with exactly three and exactly four legs, it does not seem that he has a choice about whether he does so. The proposition that Ted never killed a three-and-four-legged deer will be true, and Ted will not have any say in the matter, despite having the power to kill such a deer should he come across one. Ted has the power, but there are no possible opportunities for him to exercise it, and so he has no choice about whether he does so.

For similar reasons, the case of the genie serves as a counter-instance to the Consequence Argument's rule β when ' Np ' is read as (P):

β : $[Np \ \& \ N(p \rightarrow q)] \vdash Nq$

Let p be the conjunction 'the genie is eternally bound to the dull master, and the dull master never wishes for U ' and assume that neither the genie nor anyone else has power over the truth of this proposition, so Np , read as (P), is true.²⁰ Letting q be the proposition that the genie never actualizes U , further assume that no one has power over the genie's servile nature, and thus $N(p \rightarrow q)$ is also true. From these assumptions, it does seem to follow that the genie will never actualize U , but not that the genie does not have the power to make it false that the genie never actualizes U . After all, the genie still has 'what it takes' to actualize U , should whoever commands the genie ever wish for U —all that follows from Np and $N(p \rightarrow q)$ is that the genie will never be in a position to even attempt exercising this power.²¹ Since the genie's actualizing U would make false the proposition that the genie never actualizes U , the genie seemingly has the power to make this proposition false. So, it does not follow from no one having the power to make p or $p \rightarrow q$ true or false that no one has the power to make q true or false.

²⁰ Note that this requires us to assume that the dull master does not have the (presumably intellectual) power to wish for U , and that no one else has the power to make him wish for U .

²¹ Another interesting consequence of this case is that a person may have the power to actualize a state of affairs without thereby having the power to actualize a state of affairs that "includes" it. The genie seems to have the power to actualize U , but does not have the power to actualize 'the genie actualizes U against its master's wishes'. While the genie has what it takes to actualize U , it does not have what it takes to disobey its master.

Also for similar reasons, this case does not seem to generate counter-instances to β when 'Np' is read as (C). Assuming no one has a choice about the fact that the genie is eternally bound to the dull master and the dull master will never wish for U, and that no one has a choice about whether if this is true, then the genie never actualizes U, it *does* seem that no one has a choice about whether the genie never actualizes U. No one other than the dull master has a choice about it, since the genie is eternally bound to serve only him, and the dull master has no choice about it, since he cannot even entertain U. Although the genie has the power to actualize U, then, in virtue of its eternal servitude to the dull master, it has no choice about whether it will do so. In fact, it has no choice about whether it will even *attempt* to do so. So, this case does not serve as a counter-instance to β when 'Np' is read as (C).

The prospects for counter-instances to α and β if 'Np' is read as (A) are less clear.²² Given that he has the power to kill a three-and-four-legged deer, it does seem that Ted is able *under certain impossible conditions* to render the proposition that Ted has killed a three-and-four-legged-deer true. As those conditions will necessarily never arise, however, Ted is not able, under any *possible* conditions, to render this proposition true. Thus there seems to be one sense in which Ted is able to render this proposition true and one sense in which he is not. Similarly, though the genie has the power to actualize U in various possible, but not actual, conditions, a contingent feature of the world (its service to the dull master) prevents it from doing so. So, it seems that in one sense, given some possible conditions, the genie is able to actualize U, but given the conditions the genie is actually in, it is not able to. There are various ways of trying to resolve this tension. Following Lewis's (1976) account of 'can', we might think that instances of (A) are context-sensitive, such that they are true relative to one set of facts (e.g. just the facts about Ted's hunting abilities), but false relative to another set (e.g. all of the facts, including that three-and-four-legged deer are impossible). Alternatively, we might think that instances of (A) are ambiguous between instances of (P) and (C). On this view, in some contexts, 'able' is used to talk about what individuals have the power to do, but in others it is used to talk about what agents have a choice about. The key point, however, is that (A) seems to have a flexibility that (P) and (C) do not, and so it is not equivalent to either—there is a difference between having the power to make something true, having a choice about whether it is true, and being able to make it true.

²² Spencer (manuscript) argues for reasons different from those discussed here that at least some sentences of the form 'S is able to ϕ ' are true even when it is metaphysically impossible for S to ϕ . If this is right, then α is invalid when 'Np' is read as (A).

This distinction between power and choice has philosophically significant consequences. It allows, for example, for an agent to have the power to actualize some state of affairs even if she does not have a choice about whether she does so. This is a desirable consequence in any situation in which actions are predetermined. A time traveler visiting the past, for example, does not have a choice about whether her grandfather lives to reproduce—her existence is enough to metaphysically guarantee that he does. Nevertheless, she may find herself in the past with the power to kill him; it is merely a power that she cannot choose to exercise. Similarly, if we have no choice about our actions in the future because they are already determined by fate, the laws of physics, or divine foreknowledge, we can still account for the intuition that we have the power to take various other actions.²³ I have the power to read a book or not read a book tomorrow, for example, even if it has already been determined which of those powers I will exercise. Finally, the distinction between choice and power carries over to *maximal* choice and *maximal* power. Since having the power to actualize a state of affairs does not entail having a choice about whether that state of affairs obtains, an omnipotent being may nevertheless be limited in what it can choose to do, which is a surprising result. This allows, for example, the view that God has the power to do evil, but he nevertheless cannot choose to because of his moral perfection. I suspect that this distinction also has interesting consequences for other philosophical questions involving power, which are worth investigating.

So, we have good reason to doubt that it is necessary for an agent to have the power to actualize some state of affairs that it be possible, or possible given some further contingent facts, for that agent to actualize that state of affairs. In addition to undermining the support for a key premise in incompatibility arguments, rejecting these principles gives us counter-instances to one version of rules α and β of the Consequence Argument and sheds light on what we should think about the relationship between powers, choices, and abilities.

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²³ Whether any of these kinds of predetermination is compatible with having a choice in the first place is another question. The point is that they all seem compatible with having the power to perform other actions.

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God is Where God Acts: Reconceiving Divine Omnipresence

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Abstract In classical theism, God is typically conceived of as having the attribute of omnipresence. However, this attribute often falls prey to two puzzles, the immateriality puzzle and the intensity puzzle. A recent explication of omnipresence by Hud Hudson falls short of solving these puzzles. By attending to key narratives in the Hebrew Scriptures, I argue that one ought to conceive of God's presence at a location as God's acting at that location. Thus, God's omnipresence is God's acting at all locations.

Keywords Divine attributes · Omnipresence · Narrative · Biblical philosophy

Classical theists have tended to hold that among the various “omni-” attributes, God possesses the attribute of being omnipresent. On an Anselmian perfect being conception of God, where God is said to possess those qualities or attributes that it would be better to have than not and God possesses them to a maximal degree, one can easily come to a rational appreciation of God's omnipresence. Would it be better for God to be here or there? Would it be better for God to be both here and there? If it would be better for God to be both here and there, it would seem it would be best for God to be every “where.” Yet the conception of God being present at all locations runs into potential conflict with another standard, classical conception of God, that of God being immaterial. If, “location” denotes a specific region of space (or spacetime), and space is a material entity, then it might seem impossible for God to be in any

real sense related to a, or any, location. We might call this the “immateriality puzzle” and this has been the main worry that has troubled philosophers in the tradition and in the recent literature.

However, it seems as though there is another puzzle in the neighborhood, one based upon the experience of the faithful practitioners of the religions associated with classical theism. For the faithful occasionally report God as being *more* in certain places and at certain times in a manner of greater intensity than his presence at other places and at other times. For instance, the shrines of saints are popular sites of devotion for Christians, the Temple Mount is a significant location of prayer for Jews, the Kaaba is the quintessential pilgrimage location for Muslims. These places are locations where for the faithful God “shows up,” so to speak, where God's presence is felt more intensely, where God is. But if God is everywhere, how can it be that God could be more any “where”? Let us call this the “intensity puzzle.”

I will argue that Hud Hudson's recent work on the divine attribute of omnipresence, while commendable and sophisticated, fails to give a satisfactory response to either the immateriality puzzle or the intensity puzzle. Rather, I argue that in order to address these twin presence puzzles we ought to conceive of God's presence in the cosmos not as occupancy, as on Hudson's theory, but as action. That is, God is where God acts. This argument will proceed as follows. First, I will discuss the biblical–philosophical methodology employed in making this case. Second, I will offer some biblical data for God's presence that classical theists ought to take account of. Next, I will present Hudson's view with some critical commentary. This will then lead to a constructive examination of paradigmatic divine presence passages in the Hebrew Scriptures, the exposition of which will show Scripture as training our

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minds to conceive of God's presence as God's action. Finally, I offer some reflections on how this view of God's presence engages with debates about Special Divine Action and the notion of God as *actus purus*.

1 Biblical–Philosophical Methodology

I propose that in addition to working out the rational implications of the Anselmian conception of God, another data source from which classical theists draw are the narratives of the Hebrew Scriptures. Certainly there are some theists that stand outside the stream of the world's three main monotheistic religions. But most classical theists of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim affiliation of the past few millennia have taken the narratives of the Hebrew Scriptures as a central source for training one's mind to contemplate God.¹

Let me expand on the latter phrase. I wish in this paper to view the biblical narratives not as stories from which one distills a list of premises to be employed in a syllogism, but rather as training grounds on which to exercise the mind. Perhaps we might call this an intellectual virtue-oriented interpretive scheme. The question is not so much, "what is X?" as it is "how ought we think about X?" Narratives with God as a key character invite us to conceive of God as God is portrayed in the narrative. They invite us to stand face-to-face with God in a manner as the human characters in the narratives do, learning about God what they learn, shaping our ability to interact with God by attending to their interactions with God. While we are interested downstream in the question "what is divine omnipresence?" the narratives and poems here explored help to train our minds to approach this question, and thus they function preliminarily as an answer to the question, "how are we to think about God's presence?" In this effort, I will look at some paradigmatic examples of God's presence in the Hebrew Scriptures. The move is to extrapolate a general theory of God's presence in the entire cosmos as we learn principles elucidated from narratives about God's presence at specific locations.

2 Biblical Data for Omnipresence

The Hebrew Scriptures offer a rich and varied presentation of the nature of God. Rarely is this done in simple propositional terms, rather we are asked to enter into narrative and poetic contexts to intuit God's attributes. A few

¹ I think that the interpretive scheme sketched in the following paragraph and utilized in this paper is akin to the narrative approach to philosophical reasoning that Stump employs in her *Wandering in darkness* (2010). A similar approach is taken in Hazony (2012). See also Gericke (2012).

such passages offer specific support to the notion that God enjoys the attribute of being everywhere present. For instance, in Psalm 139, the psalmist seems to praise God for being in all places when he writes:

Where shall I go from your Spirit?
Or where shall I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there!
If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!
If I take the wings of the morning/
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me (Psalm 139:7–10).

That God is in all places is of great comfort to the psalmist for there is no place where he can flee from God's watchful presence and guidance. If we were to ask a question of the poem like, "what state of affairs would evoke in the psalmist the feeling that he cannot flee from God's presence?" God's possessing the attribute of omnipresence would fit that bill. Of course, that is not the only possible state of affairs. The Spirit of God could be attached to the psalmist's shoulder, and thus go wherever the poet goes. But this does not fit the entirety of the poem. The psalmist is clearly in awe of God's immensity and ability to be anywhere the psalmist can conceive. Thus, the pedagogical impact of taking an attitudinal stance like that of the psalmist is to likewise think that there is no place in the cosmos that one could go where God is not.

Similarly, in the context of God telling Jeremiah that God knows all about various false prophets who have been operating in the name of the God of Israel, Jeremiah records this conversation with God:

"Am I a God who is near," declares the LORD, "And not a God far off? Can a man hide himself in hiding places, so I do not see him?" declares the LORD. "Do I not fill the heavens and the earth?" declares the LORD (Jeremiah 23:23–24).

In this narrative, God seems to be encouraging Jeremiah to conceive of God as being both here and everywhere. This of course is in the context of Jeremiah having developed some unhelpful epistemic practices, such as doubting God's presence in certain locations, like the location Jeremiah found himself. God here attempts to change Jeremiah's habits so that he might take comfort in the God who was present to him.

Finally, for this section, Solomon offers this reflection in his prayer at the dedication of the Temple, "heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, how much less this house which I have built!" (1 Kings 8:27). This view is interestingly echoed in Isaiah, when God utters, "Heaven is My throne, and the earth is My footstool. Where then is a house you could build for Me?" (Isaiah 66:1). These

utterances occur in the context of narratives that have God's presence as an underlying theme. A temple or a house of worship might have the unintended effect of encouraging the participants in that religion to conceive of God as *only* located in that temple. Indeed some of Israel's neighbors in the Ancient Near East had just these epistemic habits; their gods were only located in the idol or temple of the god. Thus, in relation to the God of Israel, the people might likewise have been tempted to form the beliefs and habits associated with God being only located at a certain place. In the stories, where a house dedicated to the worship of God is discussed, it becomes incumbent upon Solomon and God to attempt to stave off ideas that God is only located there and not everywhere. These passages and others have trained the minds of their audiences to conceive of God as possessing the attribute of omnipresence, and this conception has passed quite readily into the traditional classical theist conception of God.

3 Occupancy Account of Omnipresence

The narratives and poems of the Hebrew Scriptures commend the practice of conceiving of God as being present everywhere. Yet, given the immateriality puzzle and the intensity puzzle, we might still wonder how we are to think about God's presence. Hudson (2008) has provided one of the, I think, more sophisticated treatments of divine omnipresence in recent philosophical theology. There is much to commend in his article. Let me offer a brief summary before I probe with my critique.

3.1 Hudson on Location and God's Location

Hudson sets up omnipresence as a standard feature of traditional western theism wherein "God is said to enjoy the attribute of being everywhere present" (199).² This he takes to entail that God possess the relation "being present at" to every place (199). Hudson asserts his position as a "literal occupation account of omnipresence" (205, henceforth "OAO"), which entails that God is wholly and entirely located in the cosmos as a whole and in all possible subregions of the cosmos. He then describes some "occupation relations" drawing on his monograph *The Metaphysics of Hyperspace* (2005) in which is also interacts with the work of Parsons (2003, 2007) on location. Hudson offers these definitions and distinctions³:

² For a similar line of inquiry see Pruss (2013). Further recent discussion with a survey of historical material in the Christian philosophical tradition can be found in Inman (forthcoming).

³ Let me note that early in the article Hudson commits himself to four-dimensionalism, thus the term "spacetime".

' x is entirely located at r ' = df x is located at r and there is no region of spacetime disjoint from r at which x is located.

' x is wholly located at r ' = df x is located at r and there is no proper part of x not located at r .

' x extends' = df x is an object that is wholly and entirely located at a non-point-sized region, r , and for each proper subregion of r , r^* , x is wholly located at r^* (206).

The term "extends" will sound strangely familiar for those up to speed on philosophy of time discussions. Here, "entending" in spatial discussions is akin to "enduring" in temporal discussions. Of course, these terms are plays on the word "extend" which means being located in multiple places, either wholly or partly (Parsons 2003, 1). I currently am an object that is located in multiple places; I thus bear the relation "being present at" to multiple locations. Part of me is down there near the floor, part of me is about five and a half feet above the floor, part of me is tapping away at keys on a keyboard. Entension is such that the same object is wholly and entirely multiply located.

After working through these location definitions, Hudson makes the move to apply this reasoning to God. Thus, regarding the divine nature, we can characterize Hudson's OAO as "ubiquitous entension" (209). Hudson writes, "to entend is to be wholly and entirely located at some non-point-sized region (in the case of omnipresence, at the maximally inclusive region) and to be wholly located at each of that region's proper subregions (in the case of omnipresence, at every other region there is)" (210). Implicit in this account is another traditional position of classical theism, that God is a mereological simple. God has no parts, so all of God is wherever any of God is. God literally occupies the cosmos by being wholly and entirely located at every region and every subregion via entension.

3.2 OAO and the Twin Presence Puzzles

Recall that I observed that practitioners of the religions associated with classical theism have two puzzles with respect to divine omnipresence, the immateriality puzzle and the intensity puzzle. It seems that OAO is not able to solve either puzzle, and thus is not a helpful way for conceiving of the nature of God's presence according to classical theism.

On the immateriality puzzle, OAO cannot find a solution. Hudson himself hints at the fact that his account of divine omnipresence may not square with the classical theist intuitions that motivate the immateriality puzzle. Hudson offers a statement of this worry and his response:

How can something occupy a region and fail to have a body? My own view of the matter is that anything that occupies a region is a material object, and that

the occupier inherits the shape, size, dimensionality, topology, and boundaries of the region in which it is entirely located. Anyone similarly attracted to the simple occupancy analysis of ‘material object’ and these related theses has a bullet to bite if he wants to endorse an extension-based reading of omnipresence, for God will then exemplify the shape, size, dimensionality, topology, and boundaries of whatever is the most inclusive shape...it will seem that some kind of embodiment will turn out to be an unavoidable cost of the present hypothesis (210–211).

The unavoidable cost of Hudson’s view is to conceive of God as a material object. It should be noted that Hudson here does not suggest a limited form of embodiment as some classical theists or some pantheists have suggested.⁴ Rather, Hudson is explicit that his view of presence, and thus omnipresence, entails that God is a material object. The view in question here does not even posit some sort of God-world embodiment relation akin to the mind–body relation so familiar in discussions of philosophy of mind.⁵ Rather, because a material object is that which occupies some region, and on Hudson’s view God occupies the region of the entire cosmos (and each subregion), then God is material.

Clearly, then, the immateriality puzzle collapses. There is no puzzle to solve for how an immaterial God could be located at material places, since on this conception God is not immaterial. Yet, this seems to me akin to solving a puzzle by sweeping all the pieces off the table onto the floor. Surely there is no longer an incomplete puzzle on the table, but we would hardly say the puzzle has been solved. Further, classical theists of traditional Christian, Jewish, and Muslim adherence would hardly countenance a view of God that entailed God was a material object.

The Hebrew Scriptures continually describe God as spirit. For instance, we have the already mentioned passage from Psalm 139, which links God’s presence to God being spirit:

Where shall I go from your Spirit?
Or where shall I flee from your presence?

Likewise, Psalm 51 includes this connection between God as spirit and God’s presence:

Cast me now away from your presence/
And take not your holy Spirit from me.

One could also point to the prohibition against making images as evidence against God’s materiality, God cannot be materially depicted because God is not material.⁶ This, in fact, is what the escapees from Egypt attempted to do whilst Moses was atop the mountain, to physically portray the god who had taken them out of captivity.⁷ In this vein, Jewish philosopher Lenn Goodman comments on the charge of atheism leveled against Jews from the ancient Romans, “The Jews were atheists not just in their God’s exclusivity but in his incorporeality” (Goodman 1996, 31). Thus, a theory of God’s omnipresence that entailed God being a material object would not seem to be tenable from a Hebrew biblical–philosophical perspective.

Likewise, a brief excursus will show this certainly to be the case in the Christian tradition. I offer just a few selections from this tradition to show the nervousness of classical theism with respect to conceiving of God as a material object.⁸ For instance, the second-century Christian theologian Theophilus writes that God is, “by no means to be confined in a place; for it he were, then the place confining him would be greater than he; for that which contains is greater than that which is contained. For God is not contained, but is himself the place of all” (*To Autolytus, Ante-Nicene Fathers* 2:95, in Allison 2011, 212). Now, Hudson might be able to nuance his position a tad to get out of Theophilus’ accusation. For Hudson might say that if the “most inclusive region” is co-extensive with God, then God is not properly *contained* by that region, rather they share their boundary. Further, he might argue suggest that because God is infinite and the most inclusive region is infinite it is not conceptually possible for containment to obtain.⁹ Still, I think another second-century Father, Clement of Alexandria, captures the sense of the tradition when he writes, “God is not in darkness or in place, but above both space and time, and qualities of objects. Therefore neither is he at any time in a [particular] place, either as containing it or as being contained, either by limitation or by section” (*Stromata* 2.2, *Ante-Nicene Fathers* 2:348, in Allison 2011, 212). For Clement, God’s non-bodiliness is due to his being beyond space. The understanding of God’s presence that I sketch below will account for God’s ability to be at a

⁴ For a classical theist embrace of limited embodiment, see Swinburne (1977, 102–104). For a thorough studies of pantheism see the work of Clayton especially *Pantheism: the other god of the philosophers* (2006).

⁵ See, for instance, Lowe (2004, 37), where he conceives of embodiment as “a unique kind of relationship in its own right, one which can be reduced neither to a mere causal relationship, nor to identity, nor to composition”.

⁶ Exodus 20:4.

⁷ Exodus 32:4; see also Deuteronomy 4:15–19.

⁸ I offer these as just some from one current in the classical theist stream. Similar sentiments can be found expressed in literature from the Jewish and Muslim currents in that stream.

⁹ He gestures toward this move on pg. 210.

location, while still being beyond location in the sense the Father's think.¹⁰

Like the immateriality puzzle stumps OAO, it also does not seem as though OAO is able to solve the intensity puzzle. For if God ubiquitously extends all locations in the cosmos, then there is not a coherent way to explicate greater concentrations of God's presence, as the experience of the faithful indicates. If God is all at some location, *l*, he cannot be more at location, *m*. Yet if this is the case, then it makes no sense for the faithful to utter anything like, "God is there" in any sense other than a truism.¹¹ And the ability to utter this seems to be an important part of the classical theist tradition.

For instance, the narrative of Elijah's experience of God's presence from the book of 1 Kings seems to capture this sentiment. After Elijah had routed the prophets of Baal, fled the threats of Jezebel, and retreated to a wilderness cave, verses 9–13 capture a vignette of Elijah's encounter with the presence of God. We pick up the narrative of 1 Kings 19 in verse 9:

[Elijah] came to a cave and lodged in it. And behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and he said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He said, "I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away." And he said, "Go out and stand on the mount before the LORD." And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire the sound of a low whisper. And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him and said,

¹⁰ My supposition is that a passage looming in the minds of the Fathers is John 4:24a, "God is Spirit." Further, one might see similar sentiments from an even narrower quarter of the Christian classical theism current, in the Reformation creeds and confessions. Article 1 of the Church of England's Thirty-Nine Articles states God is "without body, parts, or passions"; so too the Augsburg Confession asserts that God is "without body." Also, the Westminster Catechism affirms the immateriality of God when it teaches that "God is a Spirit." Further reflections and arguments against divine materiality can be found in Taliaferro (2010) and Wainwright (1974).

¹¹ It might "make sense" for the faithful to say this because they are in a different psychological state to be sensitive to the divine presence that ubiquitously extends, but the thrust of the narratives seem to push against a purely psychological explication of the intensity of God's presence.

"What are you doing here, Elijah?" (1 Kings 19:9–13).

First, I might note that this pericope is bookended by questions pertaining to location and presence ("What are you doing *here* [*poh*]?"). This flags the reader to attend to issues related to presence. Although it is Elijah's location that God calls the reader's attention to, God's location becomes the leitmotif throughout the vignette. Secondly in the episode, once Elijah follows God's command to go onto a mountain, the passage describes the Lord as "passing by (*ober*)."¹² A specific location is delineated for where the Lord was. Then what follows is a series of physical phenomena that is expressly declared as not the location of God: "the Lord was not in the wind...the Lord was not in the earthquake...the Lord was not in the fire." If God is omnipresent, as classical theists hold, these statements are patently false. Or perhaps if these statements are apt descriptions of God's relation to those locales, then God is not omnipresent. Or perhaps, this narrative and others in the Hebrew Scriptures train us to think of God's presence as a degreed attribute. God can be *more* in certain locales than others. But if this latter is the case, OAO cannot account for this and the intensity puzzle is not solved.

Now, perhaps Hudson is not concerned with staying within the mainstream of classical theism; that may be all well and good. I am not arguing that Hudson's God is logically impossible or incoherent. Rather, I am simply arguing that the picture of God that one develops when being tutored by the Hebrew Scriptures is not one where God turns out to be a material object or ubiquitously extends. Attention to the manner in which God is described in the narratives as being at specific locations, will help us to conceive of how to think about God's presence at all locations.

4 Omnipresence as Action in Instances of Special Presence

As I indicated, I think the way forward in a constructive manner is to notice how the narratives attune our minds to conceive of God's presence at a location as an instance of divine action at that location. In order to construct this, I want to look at a few key instances in the Hebrew Scriptures where God is said to be more present than usual. Often instances of the appearance of God are called "theophanies."¹² But in order to satisfy the intensity puzzle, it seems that the narratives of the Hebrew Scriptures commend us to think of theophanies as occurring in a

¹² On theophanies and their covenantal structure, see Niehaus (1995).

degreed manner, there can be more or less intense theophanies; thus, *strong theophanies* and *weak theophanies*. I hope to show that the presence-as-action motif accounts for a whole spectrum of types of divine presence: from weak theophany to strong theophany to omnipresence. I think this distinction between strong and weak theophanies can be quite readily seen in one of the most important theophanies in the narratives of the Hebrew Scripture, that of the appearance of God to Moses in the Burning Bush.

In Exodus 3 Moses is tending some flocks in the desert of Horeb when he sees a bush that is on fire but is not burning up; naturally, he investigates the phenomenon. At this point, verse 4, “God called to him out of the midst of the bush and said, ‘Moses, Moses!’” (Exodus 3:4). This location, the middle of the Burning Bush, seems to be a particular theophanic concentration of the divine presence, a strong theophany. Yet, God then says, in verse 5, “Do not come near here; take off your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground” (Exodus 3:5). It seems that the ground around the bush is weakly theophanic, there is a greater concentration of divine presence at that region than there is at, say, a rock or bush a few meters away, but less of a concentration than is enjoyed by the region of “the midst of the bush.”

This concentration of divine presence is simply a concentration of divine activity. God is at the location of the middle of the bush because God is acting at the location of the middle of the bush: speaking to Moses, causing fire to appear, preventing the bush from being consumed by the flame, etc. Moreover, the ground around the bush becomes holy because of its close proximity to a particular location of divine action. The divine activity causes the ground around the bush to change, to become “holy” (*qodesh*); that is a weaker action than occurs at the strong theophanic location, but is nonetheless an action. We might even say that the divine presence radiates out from the center of action to the surrounding physical plane. Further, the adjective used to describe the ground as “holy,” *qodesh*, is often used to describe instances of radiating, or weakly theophanic, presence-as-action.

These themes of divine presence as divine action and the reverberating nature of the action seem also to occur at another important theophanic location: the Mercy Seat above the Ark of the Covenant. Exodus 25 conveys a number of God’s instructions to the ancient Israelites for the construction of their worship space. Included in this are instructions for making the Ark of the Covenant, including this description:

You shall make a mercy seat of pure gold. Two cubits and a half shall be its length, and a cubit and a half its breadth. And you shall make two cherubim of gold; of hammered work shall you make them, on the two

ends of the mercy seat [...] And you shall put the mercy seat on the top of the ark [...] *there I will meet with you*, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you about all that I will give you in commandment for the people of Israel (Exodus 25:17–18, 21a, 22, emphasis added).

God seems to be saying, colloquially, “I’ll be *there*.” Right between the gold cherubim, just above the Ark, God says that he will be present in a special way. God’s description of his presence here just seems like God will be acting at that particular location. That point will be the locus for meeting with God, God will speak from there, he will command from there, he will be there as he acts there.

As with the Burning Bush and the ground around it, God’s presence-as-activity radiates out from the Mercy Seat. Uzzah’s death in 2 Samuel 6 is an indication that the very Ark itself became a locus for divine activity.¹³ Typically, the Ark rested in the “Holy of Holies,” which was more holy than the “Holy Place.” Moreover, the radiating holiness continues to the Court and then the perimeter of the Tabernacle itself. In sum, I think this meditation on these theophanic passages shows that (a) divine special presence is a particular concentration of divine action and (b) that concentration of divine activity can be greater or lesser and can radiate from a center of action.

As noted, the meaning of *qodesh* is “holy” and holy objects, such as the ground around the Burning Bush and the locations around the Mercy Seat, become holy due to the concentration of divine presence at a location of divine action. Moreover, in verb form *qodesh* receives the translation of “to consecrate” or “to sanctify,” that is, basically, “to make holy.” I think if we attend to the practice of making holy, we will also see the notion of divine presence-as-action in play as well. This theme seems to emerge by focusing on a couple other passages in Exodus.

For instance, the end of Exodus 29 records God’s instructions for establishing the practice of daily offerings at the tabernacle. After stating the details of the components of the offering, God says:

It shall be a regular burnt offering throughout your generations at the entrance of the tent of meeting before the LORD, *where I will meet with you, to speak to you there*. There I will meet with the people of Israel, and *it shall be sanctified by my glory. I will*

¹³ 2 Samuel 6:6–7: “And when they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, Uzzah put out his hand to the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen stumbled. And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Uzzah, and God struck him down there because of his error, and he died there beside the ark of God.” See the prohibition of touching the Ark in Numbers 4:15.

consecrate (qadash) the tent of meeting and the altar (Exodus 29:42–44, emphasis added).

We see here some familiar themes. First, God indicates a particular location where his presence will be, and his presence will be for the purpose of specific actions: meeting with and speaking to the people. Secondly, God's presence will be holy-making such that the region where his presence will be will be consecrated.¹⁴ The process is such that God will act at a location, *l*, entails God will be present at *l*, and this presence consecrates *l*, such that, ultimately, *l* becomes holy.

The notion of radiating holiness also emerges from attention to consecration. Recall that holiness is not just at the location, *l*, of divine activity, but there is some sort of ripple effect extending to the regions that encompass *l*. For instance, in God's instructions to Moses regarding some of the tabernacle accoutrements (the burnt offering altar, the utensils, the basin, etc.) includes this description, "You shall consecrate them, that they may be most holy. Whatever touches them will become holy" (Exodus 30:29).¹⁵ These items become holy themselves and they are somehow able to transmit their holiness to other items. On my construal, it must be the case that God indicates that as these holy objects will be locations of his activity, so too will locations these items come in contact with be locations of divine activity.

5 Divine Action: Special and Pure

It might strike the reader that this account of divine presence as divine action might weigh into discussions of divine action as it relates to the study of Special Divine Action (SDA).¹⁶ The literature on divine action in the world has tended to divide God's action into, what has been termed, "general" divine action and "special" divine action.¹⁷ However it is not entirely clear that the categorizing of particular examples of purported divine action can have been uniformly distributed into either category. Colloquially speaking the division between general and special might more be a relativistic distinction between what one takes to be God's "normal" or "regular" or "common" activities and what one takes to be "unique" or "irregular" or "out of the ordinary." Sometimes theories of the latter,

special, kind of divine activity are divided into "interventionist" and "non-interventionist" models. When "non-interventionist" models of divine activity are employed, the specialness of a particular instance of divine activity is wholly dependent upon the perspective of a human perceiver and interpreter of this activity.

It may be that the distinction between "intervention" and "non-intervention" is not entirely helpful. Thomas Tracy (2008) divides SDA into three categories. (1) "*subjectively*" special wherein "an event may be distinguished from other events because it particularly discloses to an individual or a community God's presence and purposes in the world" (603). (2) "*Materially*" special wherein "an event realizes or advances God's purposes in an especially significant way" (603). (3) "*Objectively*" special wherein an event is special "because God acts directly at a particular time and place within the world's history to create the conditions for its occurrence" (603). The latter might be conceived of as holding that there was nothing about the natural history of the world up to the point of this event that would have entailed the occurrence of this event. Suppose there are a bush growing in the wilderness, there is nothing about the natural history of the world that would indicate that it would suddenly catch fire, and yet not burn. Yet this is just what the Burning Bush narrative invites us to conceive, and this was due to a particular instance of divine activity that was God's presence. What is important from the point of view of my theory of omnipresence, and perhaps the contribution this view makes to the SDA conversation, is that one conceives of the diversity of actions as differences in *degrees* not *kinds*. So, this view would hold that there is not one kind of action, general divine action (or conservation), and a second kind of action, SDA. Rather the distinction between the two is only a matter of intensity. This tenet would aim to allow for material and objective SDA in those instances (and places) where God chose to intensify God's activity for a particular purpose.

This view of divine omnipresence as activity might also seem to be harmonious with a conception of God as pure act, the *actus purus* notion of a theologian like Thomas Aquinas.¹⁸ While I do not think the account of omnipresence I offer here entails or requires a conception of God as *actus purus*, there are interesting dovetails between this view and the view of omnipresence that the Angelic Doctor himself proffers. For Thomas writes, "God is in all things; not, indeed, as part of their essence, nor as an accident, but as an agent is present to that upon which it works" (1920, *Summa Theologiae* [ST] Ia.8.1 r). In Thomas' theology, God is both pure act and the very ground of being. Thus, an object, say the wood of the Ark of the Covenant, exists because God acts on that object in such a way as to maintain its being. This, then, is how God is fundamentally

¹⁴ On God's glory (*kabod*) as his identity/presence/self, cf. Deut. 5:24; Ex. 33:13, 16:10, *inter alia*.

¹⁵ Note also the degreed holiness that the divine action theory of presence accounts for more easily than the occupancy account. On the touching of holy items see also Leviticus 6:18, 27.

¹⁶ See, for instance, the series of articles on the subject in the *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 7.3 (Autumn 2015) and 7.4 (Winter 2015).

¹⁷ See here Göcke (2015).

¹⁸ I thank an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this theme.

at the location of the wood of the Ark of the Covenant, because he is exercising causal power at that location; minimally (though this is no minimal feat), sustaining that object in existence.¹⁹

Thomas also gives this dictum, “Incorporeal things are in place not by contact of dimensive quantity, as bodies are, but by contact of power” (ST Ia.8.2 ad 1). Now, frankly, if this is true, then I think all one needs for omnipresence is the conjunction of this premise and the premise of God’s sustaining all things in existence. Thomas goes on to describe God as being present at all locations due to his “essence, presence, and power.” That may be true, but it seems to me superfluous with respect to the requirements of the doctrine of omnipresence. All that is needed for omnipresence is that God possess the “being present at” relation to all locations. But if God is sustaining all locations in existence by his power, it seems to me that is enough to secure his presence at those locations. I think the argument can be stated as such:

1. God is present at some region r at time t just in the case that God acts at r at t .²⁰
2. No r exists at any t without God’s acting at that r at t .
3. Thus, at every t at which r exists, God is present at that r .

(1) Seems just to be a restatement of Thomas’ dictum that incorporeal things are in a place by contact of power. It seems logical enough that if an incorporeal thing acts at a corporeal location, that incorporeal thing is there. (2) Is an extension of the conception of God as first cause, the ground of all being, and the sustainer in existence of all things that exist. Add this to the idea that, as Thomas says, “place is a thing” (ST Ia.8.2 r) and all places are sustained in existence by God’s power, then God is everywhere, God is omnipresent. The theme here, for our purposes, is that God is present at a location because he is acting at that location. Locations of divine activity are locations of the divine presence. Thus, it may be that this view derived from the Hebrew Scriptures is conveniently harmonious with a traditional classical theistic view of God as *actus purus*.

6 Conclusion

The narratives surveyed teach that God is present at a location because God is acting at that location. According to these vignettes, we are to attune our minds to God being located because of God’s activity at that location. But since

¹⁹ See also ST Ia.8.2 r: “He is in every place as giving it existence and locative power.”

²⁰ I add “at t ” even though Hudson, my main interlocutor, does not. I think adding this specification makes this argument generic enough that it would work on A- and B-theories of time and for 3D or 4D theorists on the relation between space and time.

the narratives and poems discussed at the outset teach that God is located everywhere, we ought to combine these observations to come to hold that God is located at all locations because God acts at all locations. With respect to the immateriality puzzle, the narratives surveyed might not actually have a very satisfying answer. They do not give clear indication *how* God who is immaterial interacts with material locations, they only take it for granted *that* God does so. If it were in fact impossible for an immaterial God to interact at material locations, then none of the narratives or poems presented would make any sense. This indicates that those who attuned their minds to the manner of thinking implicit in the narratives will indeed conceive of God as acting on and interacting with the material world. Any pursuit of how God does this must keep this conception as necessary. On the intensity puzzle, these narratives clearly imply that God is able to act more or less in certain locations. This will allow the statements of the faithful (“God is there”) to be expressions of the recognition of a particular concentration of divine activity, rather than the expression of a psychological state. The theorist who take seriously the tutoring of the narratives of the Hebrew Scriptures will conceive of God’s omnipresence as God’s action, thus avoiding the pitfalls of OAO.

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Divine Causation

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Abstract This paper compares the doxastic credentials of the claim that nothing comes from nothing with the doxastic credentials of the claim that there is no causing without changing. I argue that comparison of these two claims supports my contention that considerations about causation do nothing to make theism more attractive than naturalism.

Keywords Naturalism · Theism · Cosmological argument · Nothing comes from nothing · No causing without changing

Many theists suppose that God belongs to the causal order. In particular, many theists suppose that God is the ultimate cause of everything else: everything else that exists, and everything that happens.

A good many theists suppose that considerations about the causal order provide reasons for thinking that God exists. Famously, Aquinas provided several proofs of the existence of God drawn from considerations about the causal order. According to Aquinas, it can be established that there is an unchanging cause of change—and that unchanging cause of change is God.

A good many theists also suppose that Aquinas' proofs are securely founded in Aristotelian principle: *ex nihilo nihil fit*. Since nothing comes from nothing, naturalistic worldviews—which maintain that the causal order is exhausted by the natural order—stand refuted.

Often enough, theists observe that the Aristotelian principle is universally confirmed by experience: none of us ever observes things popping into existence uncaused. Sometimes, theists maintain that no principle has stronger support from experience than the principle that nothing comes from nothing.

However, there are other causal principles that are also universally confirmed by experience, and which are in tension with widely accepted theistic claims. In particular, it is plainly true that none of us has ever observed a case in which one thing causes a change in a second thing without itself undergoing any change. In the domain of putative fundamental explanatory principles, no *causing without changing* is just as well-credentialed as *nothing comes from nothing*. And this fact has various interesting consequences. Or so I shall argue.

1 Craig

Craig (1979) provides a three-fold defence of the principle that *nothing comes from nothing*. He argues: (1) that it is intuitively obvious that nothing comes from nothing; (2) that Hume's attempt to show that the universe could have come from nothing fails to show this to be a real possibility; and (3) that the principle that nothing comes from nothing admits of two more elaborate defences.

First, he says that the principle is so intuitively obvious—particularly when applied to the entire universe—that no one really believes it to be false. 'That something should spring into existence out of nothing is so counter-intuitive that to attack Maimonides and Aquinas at this point seems to colour one's intellectual integrity. The principle *ex nihilo nihil fit* appears to be so manifestly true that a sincere denial of this axiom is well-nigh impossible.'

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Second, he says that it is a mistake to suppose that imaginability entails real possibility. ‘We can, in our mind’s eye, picture the universe springing into existence uncaused; but the fact that we can construct and label such a mental picture does not mean that the origin of the universe could really have come about in this way.’

Third—the first of the two ‘more elaborate defences’—he claims that the principle that nothing comes from nothing can be defended as an empirical generalisation based on the widest sampling of experience. ‘Constantly verified and never falsified, the causal proposition may be taken as an empirical generalisation enjoying the strongest support experience affords.’

Fourth—the second of the two ‘more elaborate defences’—he claims that the principle that nothing comes from nothing, while synthetic, is knowable a priori. ‘Since the categories are objective features of both thought and reality, and since causality is one of these categories, the causal relation must hold in the real world, and the causal principle is a synthetic a priori proposition. It is a priori because it is universal and necessary, being a pre-condition of thought itself. But it is synthetic because the concept of an event does not entail the concept of being caused.’

2 Imitation

As a warm-up exercise, we note that we can provide a rather similar—and clearly no less compelling—defence of the principle that there is *no causing without changing*. We shall claim—in synchrony with Craig—that: (1) it is intuitively obvious that there is no causing without changing; (2) Humean attempts to show that the universe could have been caused by something that never changes fails to show this to be a real possibility; and (3) the principle that there is no causing without changing admits of two more elaborate defences.

First, the principle that nothing brings about effects without itself undergoing change is so intuitively obvious—no matter to which subject matter it is applied—that no one really believes it to be false. That something should cause something else without itself changing is so counter-intuitive that to deny this principle seems to colour one’s intellectual integrity. The principle that nothing brings about effects without itself changing appears to be so manifestly true that a sincere denial of this axiom is well-nigh impossible.

Second, it is just a mistake to suppose that imaginability entails real possibility. Sure, in our mind’s eye, we can picture God bringing the universe into existence without there being any change in God. But the fact that we can construct and label such a mental picture does not mean that the universe could really have come about in this way.

Third—the first of two more elaborate defences—the principle that nothing brings about effects without itself changing can be defended as an empirical generalisation based on the widest sampling of experience. Constantly verified, and never falsified, the proposition that nothing brings about effects without itself changing may be taken as an empirical generalisation enjoying the strongest support experience affords.

Fourth—the second of two more elaborate defences—the principle that nothing brings about effects without itself changing is synthetic and yet knowable a priori. Since the categories are objective features of both thought and reality, and since causality is one of these categories, the causal relation must hold in the real world, and the principle that nothing brings about effects without itself changing must be a synthetic a priori proposition. It is a priori because it is universal and necessary, being a condition of thought itself. But it is synthetic because the concept of an event does not entail the concept of being caused.

3 The *First Way*

Aquinas’ *First Way* runs as follows:

The first and most obvious way is based on change. It is certain, as a matter of sense-observation, that some things in this world undergo change. Now, whatever undergoes change is changed by something else. For nothing undergoes change except in so far as it is in potentiality with respect to the terms according to which it changes. Something brings about change, on the other hand, in so far as it is in actuality with respect to the terms according to which it brings about change. This is because to bring about change is precisely to bring something from potentiality to actuality; but a thing cannot be brought from potentiality to actuality except by something which is itself in actuality. Thus, something which is actually hot, like fire, makes something which is potentially hot—say, wood—to be actually hot, and, in that way, it changes it. Now it is not possible for the same thing to be, at the same time and in the same respect, in actuality and in potentiality, for what is actually hot cannot simultaneously be potentially hot, though it may simultaneously be potentially cold. So it is impossible that in the same respect and in the same manner, anything should be both that which brings about change and that which undergoes change, or that it should change itself. So whatever undergoes change must be changed by something else. Moreover, that something else, if it too undergoes change, must itself be changed by something else; and that in

turn by yet another thing. But this cannot go on forever: because, if it did, there would be no first changer, and consequently, no changer at all, since second changers do not change except when caused to change by a first changer, just as a stick does not change the state of motion of anything, except when its state of motion is changed by a hand. And so we reach a first changer which is not changed by anything else—and this all men call God. (Adapted from Kenny (1969: 6–7).)

The conclusion of the *First Way* entails that there is causing without changing: there is something that causes other things to change while not itself changing. Thus, the conclusion of the *First Way* directly contradicts the claim that there is no causing without changing. If we suppose that there is no causing without changing, then we must suppose that there is something seriously wrong with the argument of the *First Way*.

The principle that whatever undergoes change is changed by something else seems obviously mistaken. Consider causal reality: the sum of all causal items. Global states of causal reality are ordered under the causal relation. Since transition between global states of causal reality is itself causal, it follows immediately that the global state of causal reality undergoes change without there being anything else that causes this change.

Perhaps it will be objected that there are no global states of causal reality because there is no global foliation of causal reality under the causal relation. However, even if there is no global foliation of causal reality under the causal relation, the conclusion remains the same: even if there is no global foliation of causal reality under the causal relation, there is—and can be—no causal entity outside of causal reality that causes the changes that occur within causal reality.

Aquinas argues for the claim that whatever undergoes change is changed by something else by appealing to the principle that *a thing cannot be brought from potentiality to actuality, in a certain respect and manner, by something that it is not itself in actuality, in that same respect and manner*. But this principle also seems obviously mistaken. Consider the following example. I am sitting on a chair holding a ball. The ball is potentially located on the bed across the other side of the room, even though it is actually located with me on the chair. But I do not need to make it the case that I am actually located on the bed—by moving across the room carrying the ball—in order to bring it about that the ball is actually located on the bed. Instead, I can simply throw the ball onto the bed. If I do this, then the ball changes from potentially lying on the bed to actually lying on the bed—but not as the result of anything that was already actually lying on the bed. (Kenny (1969: 21–3)

provides a more extensive catalogue of counterexamples to the principle that *a thing cannot be brought from potentiality to actuality, in a certain respect and manner, by something that it is not itself in actuality, in that same respect and manner*.)

While there is much more that might be said against the *First Way*, I think that I have already said enough to show that we should not look to the *First Way* for a defence of the claim that there is—or can be—causing without changing.

4 Transfer of Conserved Quantities

Here is a controversial claim about causes and changes in our universe: whenever an item A is a cause of a change in an item B, there is transfer of conserved quantities—mass-energy, linear momentum, angular momentum, electric charge, colour charge, weak isospin, etc.—from item A to item B. When a golf ball is projected down the fairway after being struck by a five iron, there is transfer of mass-energy and linear momentum from the five iron to the golf ball. When the sun causes growth in plants, there is transfer of mass-energy (and linear momentum) from the sun to the plants via light emitted from the sun and absorbed by the plants. When I deliberately raise my arm, events in my brain cause events in my arm, and there is transfer of mass-energy and electric charge along the nerves connecting my brain to my arm. And so on.

If it is true that, whenever an item A is a cause of a change in item B, there is transfer of conserved quantities from item A to item B, then it is true that there is no causing without changing: there can only be transfer of mass-energy—or linear momentum, or angular momentum, or electric charge, or colour charge, or weak isospin, etc.—from item A to item B if there is change in the mass-energy—or linear momentum, or angular momentum, or electric charge, or colour charge, or weak isospin, etc.—of item A.

Some may say that there are quantum causes in which there is no transfer of conserved quantities. However, even if we accept the controversial claim that quantum entanglement provides cases of causation in which there is no transfer of conserved quantities, this will not give us cases in which an item A causes a change in item B even though there is no change in item A. For, in the kind of case in question, measurements on—i.e. changes to—an item A are found to be correlated with subsequent measurements on an item B. At least on standard interpretations, measurements on item A collapse the state of—and hence change—both item A and item B.

Some may say that there are cases of mental causation in which there is no transfer of conserved quantities.

However, even if we accept the controversial claim that mental causes are cases of causation in which there is no transfer of conserved quantities, this will not give us cases in which an item A causes a change in item B even though there is no change in item A. Even on the dualistic assumption in which there is two-way interaction between mental events and neural events, there are no cases in which minds cause behaviour without there being any changes in minds. Whenever an action is performed, there are changes in mind—e.g. transitions in mental state that constitute the making of relevant decisions—among the causes of that action.

The overwhelming majority of causings of change in our universe involve transfers of conserved quantities or—if these do not involve transfers of conserved quantities—quantum entanglement or changes in states of minds. Thus, the overwhelming majority of causings of change in our universe are cases in which there is change in the items that do the causing. But this understates matters. As far as I have been able to determine, there is not even one plausible case of a causing of change in our universe in which there is no change in items that do the causing. One could hardly wish for a more “complete proof from experience”.

5 Nothing comes from Nothing

The principle that nothing comes from nothing—that there are no cases in which things “pop into existence” in our universe without any prior cause—has a “proof from experience” that is no less “complete” than the “proof from experience” that there are no cases of causes of change in our universe where there is no change in the items that do the causing. When we trace back the causal histories of things that exist now to the point at which those things began to exist, we inevitably find causes for the beginning of existence of those things. No atoms, molecules, plants, animals, artefacts, cities, planets, stars, or galaxies have begun to exist without some cause of their beginning to exist.

Some may say that there are quantum cases in which things “pop into existence” without any prior cause. However—at least as far as I can tell—the quantum cases are of two kinds. On the one hand, there are cases in which real particles come into existence as a result of indeterministic causal processes. In these kinds of cases, it is not true that the particles come into existence without any cause; rather, all that is true is that the particles come into existence as a result of merely probabilistic causes. Probabilistic causes are causes; things that “pop into existence” without any cause whatsoever do not have probabilistic causes. On the other hand, there are cases in which it is said that virtual particles come into existence without any cause

whatsoever. Here, there may be some division of opinion. Those who think that virtual particles are real assimilate this case to the first: virtual particles have probabilistic causes of their coming into existence, and so do not “pop into existence” without any cause. But others deny that virtual particles are real: on this view, virtual particles are mere mathematical artefacts that facilitate calculation of the properties of real particles. Either way, quantum cases provide no support for the claim that there are things that “pop into existence” without any prior cause.

Some may say that there are mental entities—ideas, decisions, feelings, etc.—that “pop into existence” without any prior cause. Of course, those who suppose that mental entities are physical entities—e.g. those who suppose that mental events are neural events—will immediately deny that it is ever the case that mental states have no cause whatsoever. But even dualists who suppose that there is two-way interaction between mental events and neural events should accept that ideas, decisions, feelings and the like at least have probabilistic causes. It is no more plausible to suppose that the idea of a large hadron collider might have “popped into existence” uncaused in Socrates’ mind than it is to suppose that a large hadron collider might have “popped into existence” uncaused in Socrates’ backyard.

The overwhelming majority of cases of coming into existence in our universe are cases in which there are prior causes of the coming into existence. But this understates matters. As far as I have been able to determine, there is not even one plausible case of something coming into existence in our universe without some cause of its coming into existence. The “proof from experience” is, indeed, “complete”.

6 Spatial Occupation

Even if it is true that there are no cases in which things “pop into existence” uncaused in our universe, it might—for all that has been argued to this point—be possible for things to “pop into existence” uncaused in our universe.

I think that there is a compelling argument for the conclusion that it is not possible for physical things to “pop into existence” uncaused in our universe. Suppose that it is claimed that it is possible for a certain kind of physical thing—an F-thing—to “pop into existence” uncaused in our universe. Given that F-things are physical objects, they have certain kinds of spatial properties including, most importantly for our purposes, *shape*. Whenever and wherever an F-thing exists, it occupies a volume of space that has exactly the same shape as the F-thing itself. Moreover, whenever and wherever an F-thing exists, it occupies a volume of space that is not occupied by anything that

would make it impossible for an F-thing to occupy that volume of space. Consider any F-thing-shaped space. In order for it to come to be the case that that F-thing-shaped space is occupied by an F-thing, it must come to be the case that the F-thing-shaped space is not occupied by anything that would make it impossible for an F-thing to occupy that volume of space. But any F-thing-shaped space that is not currently occupied by an F-thing *is* occupied by things that would make it impossible for an F-thing to occupy that F-thing-shaped space. So, in order to make it possible for an F-thing to “pop into existence” in the F-thing-shaped space under consideration, we must first remove from that F-thing-shaped space the things that currently make it impossible for an F-thing to occupy it. But, in the event that an F-shaped-thing “popped into existence” in the F-shaped-thing space, the removal from the F-thing-shaped space of things that currently make it impossible for an F-thing to occupy that space would be a cause of that “popping into existence”. Whence it follows that the “popping into existence” would not, after all, be an *uncaused* “popping into existence”. (For further discussion of this argument—including replies to possible objections—see Oppy 2010, 2015.)

The argument that I have just given reaches the conclusion that it is not possible for physical things to “pop into existence” *uncaused* in our universe. It is not an argument for the conclusion that it is not possible for physical things to “pop into existence” in our universe. I do not think that it is possible for physical things to “pop into existence” in our universe; but it is beyond the scope of the present article to try to argue for that further claim.

7 No Action without Reaction

Even if it is true that there are no causes of change in our universe in which there is no change in the items doing the causing, it might—for all that has been argued to this point—be possible for there to be causes of change in our universe in which there is no change in the items doing the causing. However, it seems to me that there is an argument for the conclusion, that it is not possible for there to be causes of change in our universe in which there is no change in the items doing the causing, that is about as compelling as the argument given in the previous section for the conclusion that that it is not possible for physical things to “pop into existence” *uncaused* in our universe.

Consider a case in which a physical item, A, causes a change in the properties of a physical item, B. In order for A to cause a change in the properties of B, it must be that A exerts a physical force on B. But, if A exerts a physical force on B, then B exerts a physical force on A. (There can be no action without reaction.) And, if B exerts a physical force on

A, then B brings about a physical change in A. Elementary considerations about the action of forces establish that there can be no causes of change in our universe in which there is no change in the items doing the causing.

The argument just given is a very close cousin of the argument given in Sect. 4 above: *no causing without exchange of conserved quantities* and *no action without reaction* are very closely aligned principles. So the same ‘hard’ cases—quantum mechanics and dualistic mental states—need to be considered again. However, the story goes the same way as it did before: it is not the case that there is causing without changing in the case of quantum entanglement; and it is not the case that there is causing without changing in the case of dualistic mental causation. We have the best of reasons for thinking that it is not possible for there to be causing of change in our universe in which there is no change in the items doing the causing.

8 Inconceivable!

Some may be tempted to object to the claim that it is not possible for physical things to “pop into existence” *uncaused* in our universe with something like the following argument: It is clearly possible to conceive of a rabbit coming into existence without a cause. But, given that it is possible to conceive of a rabbit coming into existence without a cause, it is possible for a rabbit to come into existence without a cause. So it is clearly possible for a rabbit to come into existence without a cause.

In response to this argument, Anscombe (1974: 150) says:

The trouble about it is that it is very unconvincing. For if I say I can imagine a rabbit coming into being without a parent rabbit, well and good: I imagine a rabbit coming into being, and our observing that there is no parent rabbit about. But what am I to imagine if I imagine a rabbit coming into being without a cause? Well, I just imagine a rabbit coming into being. That this is the imagination of a rabbit coming into being without a cause is nothing but, as it were, the *title* of the picture. Indeed, I can form an image and give my picture that title. But from my being able to do that, nothing whatever follows about what is possible to suppose ‘without contradiction or absurdity’ as holding in reality. (Italics in the original)

Taken straight up, this doesn’t seem very convincing. If it were true that imagining a rabbit coming into being without a parent rabbit were imagining a rabbit coming into being while observing that there is no parent rabbit about, then imagining a rabbit coming into being without a cause would be imagining a rabbit coming into being while

observing that there is no cause in the offing. And, if the first were fine, then surely the second would be so as well.

Suppose that imagining a rabbit coming into being without a parent rabbit is just imagining a rabbit coming into being while observing that there is no parent rabbit about. That is, suppose that, if—for example—you imagine a rabbit coming into existence as a result of cloning or genetic engineering, then you're doing much more than merely imagining a rabbit coming into being without a parent rabbit. Then, I take it, nothing at all follows about whether your imagining a rabbit coming into being without a parent rabbit gives you grounds for supposing that it is possible that a rabbit come into being without a parent rabbit. If you are at all persuaded by the idea that the imagination of a rabbit coming into being without a cause is nothing but, as it were, the *title* of a picture, then it seems to me that you should be persuaded by the idea that the imagination of a rabbit coming into being without a parent rabbit is also nothing but, as it were, the *title* of a picture.

The right thing to say here, I think, is that imaginability—or conceivability—is a very poor guide to possibility, particularly if the imagining or conceiving contains nothing by way of detail. That there is no contradiction or formal absurdity in the claim that there is a rabbit that came into being without a parent is not a good ground for maintaining that it is a real live possibility that a rabbit come into being without a parent; and, equally, that there is no contradiction or formal absurdity in the claim that there is a rabbit that came into being without a cause is not a good ground for maintaining that it is a real live possibility that a rabbit come into being without a cause.

Of course, you can tell a story about a rabbit that “materialises out of thin air”, i.e. that suddenly appears in a particular spatio-temporal location, not having occupied any earlier spatio-temporal location (either in objective time or in the rabbit's “personal” time); and it can be part of the story that there is no explanation of the appearance of the rabbit. But—as we have already seen—we have the best of reasons for thinking (a) that this kind of thing does not happen in our universe; and (b) that this kind of thing could not happen in our universe. Moreover, if we suppose that other universes are suitably similar to universe—say, because operating according to the same laws as our universe, sharing some initial history with our universe, and diverging from our universe only as a result of the outplaying of objective chance—then we shall also suppose (c) that this kind of thing could not happen in any possible universe.

9 Pictures and Titles

Some may be tempted to object to the claim that it is not possible for causes of change in our universe in which there is no change in the items doing the causing with something

like the following argument: It is clearly possible to conceive of God's causing change in our universe even though there is no change in God. But, given that it is possible to conceive of God's causing change in our universe even though there is no change in God, it is possible that for God to cause change in our universe even though there is no change in God. So it is clearly possible for God to cause change in our universe even though there is no change in God.

Given the way that Anscombe responded to the case of imagining a rabbit popping into existence without a cause, it seems that Anscombe ought to respond to this argument in the following way: Your imagining—or conceiving—of God's causing change in our universe even though there is no change in God is nothing but, as it were, the *title* of a picture. Moreover, however strongly you may be inclined to think that the imagination of a rabbit coming into being without a cause is nothing but, as it were, the *title* of a picture, you should be no less strongly inclined to think that imagination of God's causing change in our universe even though there is no change in God is nothing but, as it were, the *title* of a picture.

When you imagine a rabbit coming into being without a cause, perhaps your “picture” is like this: first, you imagine an empty “picture frame”; and then you imagine the same “picture frame”, but now containing a rabbit. If you like, there can be a background to your “picture”: say, a corner of your backyard. In your imagination, the rabbit just “pops” into the “picture frame”; and, since there is nothing else that happens, it seems appropriate to give the whole scenario the title “rabbit popping into existence without a cause”.

When you imagine God causing a rabbit to pop into existence without there being any change in God, the “picture” is perhaps like this: first, you imagine a “picture frame” that contains God. True enough, it's a bit tricky to say what God “looks like”—but it really doesn't matter for the purposes of the example. Then, you imagine the same “picture frame”, unchanged except for the fact that it contains a rabbit. In your imagination, the rabbit just “pops into” the “picture frame”; and, since there is nothing else that happens, it seems appropriate to give the whole scenario the title “God causes a rabbit to pop into existence without there being any change in God”.

It's an interesting exercise to compare two cases. First, imagine a case in which, in a world containing God, a rabbit “pops into existence” without a cause. Second, imagine a case in which, in a world containing God, God causes a rabbit to “pop into existence” without any intrinsic change in God. In terms of what is “pictured”, there seems to be no difference between the two cases: all that changes is, as it were, the title that is given to the picture.

10 “Popping into Existence”

In the discussion to this point, we have only considered how things stand within our universe. It is not very controversial to claim that, within our universe, there have been, are, and will be no cases in which things “pop into existence” without any prior cause; and nor is it very controversial to claim that, within our universe, there could be no cases in which things “pop into existence” without any prior cause. Equally, it is not very controversial to claim that, within our universe, there have been, are, and will be no cases in which items cause change in other items without undergoing change themselves; and nor is it very controversial to claim that, within our universe, there could be no cases in which items cause change in other items without undergoing change themselves. However, when we turn to consider the existence of the universe itself, matters become much more interesting. (Throughout this paper, the word “universe” is interchangeable with the expression “natural reality”. If, for example, natural reality is a multiverse, then, in this paper the word “universe” refers to that multiverse.)

According to (some) naturalists, the universe exhausts causal reality: there is no causing outside of the universe. *A fortiori*, according to (those) naturalists, there is no cause of the existence of the universe.

According to (some) theists, God is the unchanging cause of the existence of the universe. *A fortiori*, according to (those) theists, there is no cause of the existence of God. (For ease of exposition, I shall suppose that our theists maintain that there is nothing that God causes to exist other than our universe.)

Consider, first, the principle that nothing “pops into existence” without a cause. If the universe “pops into existence”, then—on pain of inconsistency—our naturalists must reject the principle. If God “pops into existence”, then—on pain of inconsistency—our theists must reject the principle.

What is it for something to “pop into existence”? One way to understand this expression is to treat “existence” as a domain: to “pop into existence” is to join the (already populated) domain of existing things. On this way of understanding the expression “pop into existence”, our naturalists deny that the universe “pops into existence”, and our theists deny that God “pops into existence”. Given this understanding of the expression “pop into existence”, our naturalists and our theists can both accept the principle that nothing “pops into existence” without a cause.

Another way to understand this expression is to treat “popping into” as a locative device in the causal order: a thing “pops into existence” just in case there is a prior part of the causal order at which it does not exist. Again, on this

way of understanding the expression “pop into existence”, our naturalists deny that the universe “pops into existence”, and our theists deny that God “pops into existence”. Given this understanding of the expression “pop into existence”, our naturalists and our theists can both accept the principle that nothing “pops into existence” without a cause.

A third way to understand the expression “pop into existence” is as a locative device in logical—or modal—space: a thing “pops into existence” just in case it exists and it is not necessary that it exists. So far, we have left it open whether our naturalists suppose that it is necessary that the universe exists; and we have left it open whether our theists suppose that it is necessary that God exists. If our naturalists suppose that it is necessary that the universe exists, then they will deny that the universe “pops into existence”, and they will be able to accept the principle that nothing “pops into existence” without a cause; however, if our naturalists suppose that it is not necessary that the universe exists, then they will accept that the universe “pops into existence”, and they will reject the principle that nothing “pops into existence” without a cause. If our theists suppose that it is necessary that God exists, then they will deny that God “pops into existence”, and they will be able to accept the principle that nothing “pops into existence” without a cause; however, if our theists suppose that it is not necessary that God exists, then they will accept that God “pops into existence”, and they will reject the principle that nothing “pops into existence” without a cause.

Perhaps there is some other way of understanding the expression “pop into existence”. However, even if there is, it seems pretty clear that there will be no distinction between our naturalists and our theists in terms of their entitlement to the principle that nothing “pops into existence” without a cause. On the one hand, when we fix our attention on how things stand within our universe, theists and naturalists have common reason to accept or reject the principle; and, on the other hand, when we fix our attention on how things stand with the universe as a whole, theists and naturalists again have common reason to accept or reject the principle. (I have argued elsewhere that these kinds of considerations show that there are no successful cosmological arguments for the existence of God. See Oppy 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015.)

Consider, second, the principle that there are no items that cause change in other items without themselves undergoing change. On the one hand, if—as we argued above—there is good reason to suppose that this principle holds, and must hold, within the universe, then there is good reason for naturalists to suppose that this principle is true. On the other hand, even if—as we argued above—

there is good reason to suppose that this principle holds, and must hold, within the universe, theists are obliged to reject this principle if they suppose that God is an unchanging cause of change. Whereas there is no reason to suppose that the principle that *ex nihilo nihil fit* has differential impact on naturalists and theists, it is obvious that the principle that there are no items that cause change in other items without themselves undergoing change can have differential impact on naturalists and those theists who think that God is an unchanging cause of change.

11 Upshot

Suppose that you are the kind of theist who supposes that God is an unchanging cause of change. Suppose—to fix ideas a little more—that you think that God is perfect, simple, eternal, impassible, absolutely independent, infinite, necessary, fundamental and incorporeal. How should you respond to the considerations advanced to this point in this paper?

One thing that you should certainly do is to repudiate the idea that the principle *ex nihilo nihil fit* is justified simply as a generalisation from experience. If it were a satisfactory strategy to infer fundamental metaphysical principles from our experience of things within the universe, then you would be saddled with contradiction—because, as we've seen, our experience supports the generalisation that no items cause change in other items without themselves undergoing change. Of course, if you buy my further claim that the principle *ex nihilo nihil fit* has no differential impact on theists and naturalists, then you have no reason to regard such repudiation as a loss: even if there is some other way of justifying acceptance of the principle, possession of the principle will not provide you with a reason to prefer theism to naturalism.

Another thing that you should certainly do is to repudiate the total package of arguments that Craig (1979) offers on behalf of the principle *ex nihilo nihil fit*. If it were a satisfactory strategy to accept that principle on the basis of the considerations that Craig advances, then you would be saddled with contradiction—because, as we've seen, it would plainly be a no less satisfactory strategy to accept the principle that no items cause change in other items without themselves undergoing change on the basis of a precisely analogous package of considerations. As before, if you buy my further claim that the principle *ex nihilo nihil fit* has no differential impact on theists and naturalists, then you have no reason to regard such repudiation as a loss: even if there is some other way of justifying acceptance of the principle, possession of the principle will not provide you with a reason to prefer theism to naturalism.

Given the considerations advanced to this point, should you be worried that the principle—that no items cause change in other items without themselves undergoing change—gives you reason to doubt that there is a perfect, simple, eternal, impassible, absolutely independent, infinite, necessary, fundamental and incorporeal being? I don't think so.

I do think that if we restrict our attention to evidence about causation and causal origins, then we do have reason to prefer naturalism to theism. Theism postulates more entities—and more kinds of entities—than naturalism, and it invokes more complicated causal principles. Both on point of ontology and ideology, naturalism has greater simplicity than theism. Yet there is no theoretical advantage that theism purchases—using its additional ontology and ideology—in connection with the data about causation and causal origins. (Again, see Oppy 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, for more elaborate development of these considerations.)

But, of course, the evidence that bears on 'choice' between naturalism and theism far outruns evidence about causation and causal origins. Weighing of naturalistic and theistic worldviews should also take account of considerations about: cosmic fine-tuning; physical law; biological evolution; consciousness; reason; abstract objects; mathematics; logic; moral requirements; moral values; aesthetic values; meaning; purpose; good and evil; reports of miracles; reports of religious experience; reports of anomalous experience; the texts of the religions of the world; and so forth. Even if it is true that evidence about causation and causal origins does not enable theism to claw back any of the ground that it loses to naturalism on account of its additional ontology and ideology, it hardly follows that total evidence does not enable theism to more than claw back all of the ground that it loses to naturalism on accounts of its additional ontology and ideology. In order to determine whether theism does more than claw back all of the ground that it loses to naturalism on accounts of its additional ontology and ideology, there is no alternative to careful examination of all of the relevant evidence.

12 Loose Ends

There are many loose ends in the preceding discussion. Let me wind up by tying a couple of them.

First, I expect that some will wish to dispute the claim that, if there is an initial natural state, it—or the entities that figure in it—can have the same ontological status that perfect theists wish to ascribe to God. Suppose—for the sake of simplicity—that, in the initial natural state is the initial state of a single entity: 'the initial singularity'. I

maintain that naturalists can perfectly well accept that the initial singularity exists of necessity: there is no possible world in which the initial state is not an—or perhaps even the—initial state of the initial singularity.

Some theists may object that God is not merely necessarily existent: God exists *a se*, in perfect independence from anything else. But, in fact, if the story that I have just told about the initial singularity is true, then the initial singularity also exists in absolute independence from anything else. After all, there is nothing that exists prior to the initial singularity; and there is nothing else that exists in the initial natural state.

Some theists may object that, since all of the natural objects with which we are familiar are plainly contingent, we ought to believe that the initial singularity is contingent. But the very considerations that are appealed to in traditional cosmological arguments, if cogent, would undermine this objection. If we are focussed only on the causal evidence, and we bear in mind considerations about ontological and ideological economy, then we clearly do better to suppose that the initial singularity is necessary than we do to suppose that there is a perfect, simple, eternal, impassible, absolutely independent, infinite, necessary, fundamental and incorporeal creator of the initial singularity. Whether the best theory is one according to which there is a necessarily existent initial singularity is a matter to be determined in the light of total evidence, taking account of the theoretical virtues of all of the theories that are in competition with it.

Second, I expect that some will wish to object to my analysis of Aquinas' First Way on the grounds that Aquinas's argument is not concerned with historical chains of causes, but rather with contemporaneous chains of causes. If something is now in a process of change, then, right now, it is being caused to change by something else. Either that thing is not currently in process of change, or it, too, is being caused to change by something else. Since there cannot be an infinite regress, there is something right now that is not itself undergoing change, but which is causing change in other things.

This version of the argument is worse than the argument that I discussed in Sect. 3 above. For it is obvious that there are things that are now in process of change even though there is no other thing that is, right now, causing that change. Recall the example of the ball being thrown from the chair to the bed. Consider the ball when it is in the air, midway between the chair and the bed. Right then, the ball is undergoing real change—it is travelling horizontally from the bed to the chair. But there is no agent that is causing the positive horizontal component of the motion of the ball—i.e. the horizontal motion of the ball from the chair to the bed—at that point: the only forces acting on the

ball are the vertical force of gravity, and the frictional forces of the air, neither of which makes any positive contribution to the horizontal component of the motion of the ball.

Third, Anscombe's views about conceivability and possibility are now rather old hat, and arguably deserve shorter shrift than I gave them. Suppose that we have some fairly extensive, logically consistent theory of the world: T. Even though there is no formal logical inconsistency in the claim that rabbits sometimes pop into existence uncaused, there may well be formal logical inconsistency in the set of claims {T, rabbits sometimes pop into existence uncaused}. When we say that it is not *really* possible for rabbits to pop into existence uncaused, one thing that we might mean is just this: that if we add the claim—that rabbits sometimes pop into existence uncaused—to the large body of knowledge—or well-founded belief—that we have about our universe, we end in formal logical inconsistency. That we can make models for the sentence 'rabbits sometimes pop into existence uncaused' does not entail that we can make models for the set of sentences {T, rabbits sometimes pop into existence uncaused}.

Fourth, I should mention that I am well aware that not all theists believe in a perfect, simple, eternal, impassible, absolutely independent, infinite, necessary, fundamental and incorporeal creator of our universe. Some theists—e.g. process theists—accept that God changes whenever God acts. Those theists can perfectly well accept both the principle *ex nihilo nihil fit* and the principle that no items cause change in other items without themselves undergoing change.

13 Final Wrap

There are many interesting questions about divine causation. I discussed a range of these questions in Oppy (2014); competing discussions may be found in Dawes (2009), Fales (2010), Johnston (2009), Koons (2000), O'Connor (2008), and Saunders (2002). In this paper, I have discussed a further question that was not examined in Oppy (2014). I do not think that anything that I have argued here makes difficulties for the claim that there is a perfect, simple, eternal, impassible, absolutely independent, infinite, necessary, fundamental and incorporeal creator of our universe. However, my aim here was not to try to provide defeaters for the claim that there is a perfect, simple, eternal, impassible, absolutely independent, infinite, necessary, fundamental and incorporeal creator of our universe. Rather my aim was to add a little more to my ongoing case for the claim that considerations about causation do nothing to make theism more attractive than naturalism.

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Divine Freedom

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Abstract In “Divine Freedom,” I argue that morally significant incompatibilist freedom is a great good. So God possesses morally incompatibilist freedom. So, God can do wrong or at least can do worse than the best action He can do. So, God is not essentially morally perfect. After careful consideration of numerous objections, I conclude that this argument is undefeated.

Keywords Freedom · Incompatibilism · Moral perfection · Frankfurt

1 The Argument

Christian philosophers, particularly those who address the problem of evil, make a great deal of the value of freedom. Freedom explains much of the evil we see in this world, even if there is an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good God. Freedom in some sense requires the permission of evil (if not the evil itself) and freedom is a very great good, good enough to justify the necessary permission of such evil. Although it’s not obvious that it can explain all of the evil we are aware of, it goes a long way to explaining a great deal of it. This raises the question of whether God Himself is free, and whether He is free in the same way that we are free. If He is, this seems to imply that He is not essentially good. If He is not, then why couldn’t we be like Him—unfree (or differently free) and hence unable to do

harm, and so, immune to the harm others do when they abuse their freedom (see Howard-Snyder and Howard-Snyder (1993); Smith (1997); Morrision (2000) for versions of this argument).

Here is an argument that expresses this tension:

1. Morally significant incompatibilist freewill is a great good.
2. Morally significant incompatibilist free will requires the ability to do wrong or at least the ability to do worse than one does.
3. If one is essentially morally perfect one cannot do wrong and one cannot do worse than the best one can do.
4. If a certain feature is a great good, then God possesses that feature.

So, God is not essentially good.

2 The First Premise

Morally significant incompatibilist free will is a great good. The literature on the problem of evil is full of claims of this sort. See Speak (2013) for some details of this. Freedom is a good thing. It is a good fortune to have it and the possession of it makes one a better being. It is thought to be good in itself and good because of what it makes possible. For example, without freedom, it seems, we cannot be morally responsible, and if we cannot be morally responsible, we cannot be virtuous or praiseworthy. You might also think that we cannot be capable of the best sort of love and perhaps even that we cannot be genuinely creative. If we are simply robots programmed to write a particular poem, then it is not we who create. It is not our poem. We are just God’s pen (or flute, as Salieri is supposed to have

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said of Mozart.). Perhaps we could be free to choose between options that are trivially different—as vanilla and chocolate ice-cream—without allowing for significant wrongdoing and suffering. But then, theodocists point out, that isn't a very interesting or valuable sort of freedom. We might explore the possibility of having somewhat significant freedom between options that are morally equivalent, for example, which of two children to save. Supposing there is no morally decisive reason to choose Jack over Jill or Jill over Jack, choosing either (where choosing both was ruled out) wouldn't make the world a worse place, but it would still be a significant choice. Choosing the subject matter or the form for a sonnet might also be significant without allowing any evil. However, these choices would not give the chooser moral responsibility. If I am forced to choose which of two equally worthy charities will receive the \$100 donation from my bank account, this doesn't redound either to my credit or my discredit, unlike say if I were choosing between charities of unequal worth and chose the better or the worse. So, it seems in order for free will to play the full role that theodocists assign it, it needs to be morally significant freedom (freedom to choose between right and wrong, or at the very least, between better and worse states of affairs.)

Compatibilists believe that we can have freedom to choose between right and wrong even if Determinism is true. However, there are serious difficulties with this view (see van Inwagen 1983; Ginet 1983; Warfield 2000). Moreover, compatibilism will not help the theodocist, since, if free will is to explain evil and suffering, it cannot be compatible with a causal framework which guarantees that the agent will never do wrong. It seems, if compatibilism is true, an agent can be free to do W (able to do W) even though some facts about the past and the laws of nature guarantee that she will not do W. Obviously compatibilists will insist that there are limits to what these facts about the past are—e.g., it cannot be that the agent's limbs have been wired and she is being manipulated like a puppet, it cannot be that a device has been inserted in her brain or she has been brainwashed. It has to be something more natural, more orderly etc. than that, but suppose it is simply the arrangement of fundamental particles in the universe one million years ago that determines that A will not do W. It seems that these particles could be systematically so arranged that no agent ever does harm or wrong and yet, according to the compatibilist, we are all able or free to do wrong. The upshot, it seems, is that the compatibilist cannot explain suffering and evil by way of the free will defence.

So, arguably, the sort of free will that must be attributed to human beings for a free will defence to work is morally significant, incompatibilist free will.

3 The Second Premise

As we have seen above, morally significant incompatibilist free will requires the ability to do wrong or at least the ability to do better or worse. It is not enough that the agent have trivial or morally indifferent options. The agent must in some sense, face morally weighty choices. If I go this way, the world will be much worse; if I go that way, the world will be better.

One familiar thought here is that, although it may be important for an agent to conceive of herself as faced with such options, and important that she, in some sense, cause herself to choose the option she does choose, it is not important that both options be genuinely open. Harry Frankfurt's famous case makes the point. See Frankfurt (1969). He imagines an agent who is faced with a choice between killing his enemy and not doing so. Meanwhile, there is an evil demon who will step and intervene to force him to do so if he hesitates. As things turn out, he doesn't hesitate, but goes ahead with the murder without any outside influence. It seems that he is responsible for the killing even though he could not have avoided killing.

As Frankfurt presented it, this is a point about moral responsibility. Some philosophers have reinterpreted it as a point about freedom.

There is a huge literature on this. My own take on it is that insofar as the Frankfurt cases always involve some sort of alternatives, such as: kill the victim *on your own* or be compelled to kill, the agent who kills on her own has some sort of responsibility for that aspect of the killing.

Also—and more importantly for our present purposes—if the sort of responsibility Frankfurt talks about is sufficient for responsibility (and also, some add, for freedom), then the theodocist is in trouble. Imagine if God were to set up a constant series of Frankfurt cases for us, in which we are faced with choices (or apparent choices) between good and evil. Sometimes we choose on our own to do good and sometimes our freedom is overridden. Although the overridings are unfortunate, there are still many, many instances where we do the right thing on our own and count as acting freely and being morally responsible. This is a world with a lot of freedom and moral responsibility. The genuinely virtuous amongst us are not robots or puppets. Those initially disposed to misbehave do have their freedom interfered with, but perhaps that is a price worth paying. But this all assumes that the virtuous are genuinely free and responsible when they act rightly on their own.

But if that is all the freedom worth wanting, then we lose freedom as a way of explaining evil. If you can have the freedom to do good without the freedom to do evil, then free will cannot explain evil.

4 The Third Premise

If one is essentially morally perfect, one cannot do wrong and one cannot do worse than the best one can do. Consider the best action or actions available to some being. Presumably, if she is morally perfect, she will perform that action (or one of them if there is more than one incompatible option.) If she failed to do the best of her options we might say that she was dutiful or good, but we would hesitate to call her perfect because there would be some respect in which she could have done better. If she has moral perfection *essentially*, then there will be no world where she exists and she is not morally perfect. So, this feature that makes her morally perfect in the actual world (failure to do anything less than the best action) will also be true of her in every world in which she exists. So, she cannot do wrong and cannot do worse than the best action. I'm relying on the principle that: if there is no possible world in which A does X, then A cannot do X. This seems a pretty obvious principle, but it may be denied. Below we will consider an objector who does deny it.

Note that this premise is not saying that an essentially morally perfect being cannot allow or even cause a world that is less than the best. There are scenarios where a being who is morally perfect can do these things. But these would be situations where the behavior of so permitting or causing is amongst the best actions available to the being. E.g., if the being allows human beings free will and they abuse it, then the world is less good than a world where they don't, but the action of allowing this behavior might be the best action available to the (divine) being, or if there is no best world, because the worlds keep getting better. See Howard-Snyder and Howard-Snyder (1996).

5 The Fourth Premise

If a feature is a great good, then God possesses that feature. God is supposed to be the greatest possible being. So, if God lacks a feature that makes a being better, then it seems that there is a greater possible being. So, God is not the greatest possible being.

An objector may point out that two great-making features could perhaps be incompatible. If so, then God wouldn't have both. But He would have the more important of the features. E.g., if you think that God cannot be omniscient and morally perfect simultaneously (because moral perfection requires the creation of free creatures and no one can know infallibly what free creatures will do) then you might suppose that God cannot both be omniscient and morally perfect. If you judge (correctly) that moral perfection is more important than omniscience, you might

think that God is not omniscient. So perhaps the truth is a little weaker than premise 4: Barring any contradictions, if a feature is a great good, then God possesses that feature. Now, of course, perhaps morally significant freedom does contradict some other great making property of God—the most obvious example being essential moral perfection. But if this is so, then it raises the question of which great making feature is more valuable, and again, if essential moral perfection wins out, why didn't God make us essentially morally perfect too?

Putting all these premises together: morally significant incompatibilist freedom is a great good. So, God possesses morally significant incompatibilist freedom. So, God can do wrong or at least worse than the best action He can do. So, God is not essentially morally perfect.

In the next few sections, I shall consider some objections.

6 The Conclusion is False¹

A critic might raise the following objection: "The conclusion is false. So, there must be a problem with the argument. We have good reason to think that God is essentially morally perfect. In fact, the reasons for thinking that God is essentially morally perfect are better than the above argument". Well, what are the reasons for thinking that God is essentially morally perfect? In what follows I shall discuss some of the strongest reasons for thinking this.

(A) Consider an analogy. Triangles, by definition, have three sides. So, it is a necessary truth that triangles have three sides. If something is a necessary truth, it cannot be otherwise. Similarly, since it is part of the definition of God that God be morally perfect, it seems to follow that it is a necessary truth that God be morally perfect. And if it is a necessary truth, then it cannot be otherwise.

But the fallacy in argument (A) is easy to see.

While this is a valid inference:

Necessarily, if x is God, then x is morally perfect.
God is God.
So, God is morally perfect.

This is not:

Necessarily if x is God, then x is morally perfect.
God is God.
So, God is necessarily morally perfect.

¹ I am indebted to Daniel Howard-Snyder for much of this section.

The point can be illustrated by reflecting on the claim that, “Necessarily, if someone is a bachelor, then he is unmarried”. It does not follow that some bachelor, say Peter, is necessarily unmarried. The definitional argument fails.

To make the point clearer, let’s distinguish “God” as used as a proper name from “God” as used as a definite description, synonymous with, “The greatest possible being” or “the being with all the divine properties”. To further clarify matters, let’s use the name “Yahweh” in place of the first instance of “God”. From the fact that necessarily, if Yahweh is God, then Yahweh is morally perfect, it does not follow that Yahweh is necessarily morally perfect.

Unlike Peter’s bachelorhood, you might protest, Yahweh’s divinity is essential to Him. He couldn’t exist without being God. But this seems close to question-begging in this context. Let’s consider some other reasons to think that God is essentially morally perfect.

- (B) 1. Yahweh is morally perfect.
 2. If Yahweh is morally perfect, then he cannot cease to be morally perfect.
 3. If Yahweh cannot cease to be morally perfect, then Yahweh is essentially morally perfect.
 4. So, Yahweh is essentially morally perfect.

The thought behind 2 is that a morally perfect being couldn’t now be intending to do wrong in the future and moreover, he couldn’t just randomly change direction.

If argument (B) is vulnerable, it is vulnerable in its third premise. The fact that something cannot cease to have a certain property, does not mean that that property is not contingent. E.g., suppose a boy was born in the last days of 1999 (according to some, the last days of the second millennium). This would be a feature of him that he could never lose. And yet it is certainly a contingent feature.

So, if premise 2 is solid, the opponent of essential moral perfection has to imagine a possible world in which Yahweh is always less than morally perfect.

This leads to Swinburne’s argument. See Swinburne (1993), chapter 8.

- (C) 1. Yahweh is essentially omniscient, essentially omnipotent and essentially perfectly free.
 2. Necessarily, for any x, if x is perfectly free, then x is unaffected by irrational impulses.
 3. Necessarily, for any x, if x is unaffected by irrational impulses, then x always acts only for reasons.
 4. Necessarily, for any x, if x is omniscient, then x always knows what the reasons are for doing the right thing.

5. Necessarily, for any x, if x always acts only for reasons and x always knows what the reasons are for doing the right thing, then x will always try to do the right thing.
 So, necessarily, Yahweh will always try to do the right thing.
 6. Necessarily, for any x, if x is omnipotent, then, if x will always try to do the right thing, x will always do the right thing.
 7. So, necessarily, Yahweh will always do the right thing.
 8. Necessarily, for any x, if x will always do the right thing, then x is morally perfect.
 9. So, necessarily, Yahweh is morally perfect.
 10. So, Yahweh is essentially morally perfect.

The assumption here is that pure reason will lead to moral (and morally perfect) action, a purely rational being will see the force of morality and will necessarily be drawn to follow it. This Kantian or moral internalist picture of morality is controversial. The debate over this cannot be settled here. But consider Zangwill (2003) for some good objections.

James Sennett (see Sennett 1994) considers another common idea.

- (D) 1. If Yahweh is contingently morally perfect, then it’s just an accident that he’s morally perfect.
 2. It is not an accident that he’s morally perfect.
 3. So, Yahweh is essentially morally perfect.

Sennett points out that the fact that something is contingently true of a person doesn’t mean that it is just an accident or that we should worry that it will suddenly change, for example, Mother Teresa’s virtue or Mike Tyson’s strength.

Brian Leftow discusses the idea (E) that we admire moral strength, the capacity to maintain to one’s virtuous qualities in a variety of circumstances. See Leftow (1989). An extension of this would suggest that the more situations in which one maintains one’s good character the better. The limiting case of this would be all possible worlds. So, the morally best sort of person is one who is essentially morally perfect.

Against this there is a tradition, according to which it is not to one’s credit to do the right thing if one cannot do wrong.

Leftow also mentions the fact that tradition has held that God is essentially perfect. He cites, Boethius, Anselm and Aquinas. It’s possible, of course, that these theologians believed that God was essentially good because of one or more of the arguments discussed above. If so, their testimony doesn’t add to the weight of evidence.

I would tentatively suggest that none of these arguments for thinking that God is essentially good is decisive—particularly in light of the strong argument for saying that He is not. In the remaining sections, let's consider some objections to the premises of that argument.

7 “Freedom” is Ambiguous

Theologians often invoke the notion of analogical predication, claiming that we use the same words to speak of humans and God in some respect—such as “person”, “love”, “good”, etc. but these words don't have exactly the same meaning when applied to us as when applied to God. Perhaps the same is true of “freedom.” Perhaps when we say that humans are free (morally significantly free) we mean (or should mean) something slightly different from what we mean when we say God is free. Perhaps, for example, our freedom involves the ability to do wrong (or the possibility of doing wrong) but this is not the case with God's freedom. This might be a way to have our cake and eat it too.

So, let us distinguish between Freedom 1 (human freedom) and Freedom 2 (divine freedom)—where ‘divine freedom’ means ‘the sort of freedom God has’ not just the particular instance of freedom that God has. Which is superior? If Freedom 2 is superior (and piety requires that we say it is) then shouldn't *we* expect to have freedom 2 ourselves? Wouldn't we have been better off with Freedom 2—in part because it is intrinsically better, but also because it would keep us safe from injuries due to the abuse of freedom by our fellow humans? On the other hand, if Freedom 1 is better, then wouldn't God possess Freedom 1? If both freedoms are equally good, then why wouldn't we have Freedom 2, the kind that doesn't come with so much suffering in its wake?

So, analogical predication doesn't help.

Unless, of course, humans are unable to have freedom 2.

8 What if We Cannot Have God's Sort of Freedom?

A related point would be to say that the freedom we have and the freedom God has are the same sort of freedom, but that the conditions for its realization are different in the two cases, because we are finite creatures and God is not. In this connection, an objector might dispute premise 2 from the original argument of this paper, which says that morally significant incompatibilist freedom requires the ability to do wrong or at least the ability to do less than the best action one can do.

Alexander Pruss (see Pruss 2008) discusses three kinds or aspects of freedom—freedom from external causes,

freedom from internal causes and logical freedom (the ability to do otherwise realized in part in the existence of at least one possible world where one does otherwise.)

Pruss argues that God lacks logical freedom as He is essentially morally perfect, but He possesses freedom from external causes and freedom from internal causes. Pruss argues, moreover, that the important sorts of freedom are external and internal freedom. In his view, God can have these freedoms without logical freedom, but creatures cannot.

For example, suppose some creature lacks logical freedom. That must be because she was created with an essential nature of a certain sort. But that act of creation is an external cause and hence, she lacks external freedom. So, it is impossible to create a creature without logical freedom who has internal and external freedom.

Kevin Timpe argues in a similar vein (see Timpe 2014). He asks us to consider the redeemed in Heaven who have lost the ability to do wrong. This is partly due to their own choices in developing morally—a phenomenon we see on earth—when we, through love or habit, become unable to do certain horrible things like torturing children. It may also be due in part to God's action in fixing their characters in accordance with their virtue. These people are no longer free, at least no longer free to do wrong, but they are still responsible for their virtuous acts because they are the product of earlier choices. Just as someone who puts herself on a plane at Europe and then calls at 8 am and says that she cannot be at your house at 9 to help with the move is being disingenuous if she expects you to let her off the hook, or regard her as not morally responsible for not helping. It is key here that she freely (perhaps we can insist *indeterministically* freely) put herself in a position where she couldn't help.

In Timpe's account this is supposed to warm us up to the idea that God can be responsible (and perhaps even free) even if he cannot do otherwise, but there is a salient difference. The reason that the redeemed are responsible for their virtuous acts is that *there was a time when they could have done otherwise. But that is not true of God*—if God is essentially morally perfect.

Think of it this way. On Timpe's view it is possible to be morally responsible without being able to do otherwise. So, an agent can be blameworthy for doing W even though she could not have avoided doing W (e.g., if she was eternally disposed to do W.) But this raises a problem. If one is blameworthy for doing x, then one has acted wrongly in doing x. (Wrongness seems to be a necessary condition for blameworthiness) But if an agent has acted wrongly, then she ought not to have so acted. But if she ought not to have done W, then she could have refrained from doing W. (Since 'ought' implies 'can'.)

So, if an agent is morally responsible for *w*, then she could have done otherwise than *w*.²

Now, this seems obviously true of wrong actions and blameworthiness. By analogy, it might be argued that something similar is true of good actions and praise- or thank-worthiness. (For example, by Howard-Snyder 2009). If an agent is worthy of praise or thanks—as God surely is—than he could have acted differently—in particular, could have acted worse than he did.

Now, Timpe or others may reject the symmetry here, and point out that while the Ought implies Can argument given above may work for wrongness and blameworthiness, it doesn't work for good/right actions and praiseworthiness.

To say that you did right in doing *R* implies that you ought to do or have done *R*, and to say that you ought to do *R* implies that you can or could do *R*, but it does not imply that you were able to do *not-R* (i.e., that you were able to refrain from doing *R*.) Someone might try to insist on a version of OIC that has that implication, but it isn't obvious that it would be motivated as well as the original OIC. Intuitively, it seems pointless to say that someone ought to do *x*, if she cannot do it; and it seems unfair to blame or hold her responsible for failing to do something she could never do. But neither of these motivations applies in cases where the agent can do what she ought but cannot fail to do so. Arguably then an agent such as God can be morally responsible for his good actions (praiseworthy).

It seems stranger to say that he or anyone is *morally significantly free* if he cannot do wrong. Are we to say that he is free to do wrong even though he cannot? Like Pruss, Timpe will say that although God lacks the logical freedom to do wrong, He is free of any external causes that cause Him to do wrong. And that, both philosophers claim, is all the freedom that matters.

But I wonder. Suppose I am instructed to lift a two ton rock. I try but fail. It seems that I can offer the excuse. "The rock was too heavy. I.e., although I tried my hardest I couldn't lift it. I wasn't free to lift it. Don't blame me." It seems that the weight of the rock made me unfree.

But now suppose my bosses tell me to draw a square circle. I try but fail miserably. It seems that I can offer a very similar excuse. "The task was logically impossible. Although I tried my hardest I couldn't draw the figure. I wasn't free to draw it. Don't blame me."

The logical facts that prevented me in this case seem as much of an obstacle to my fulfilling my charge as the physical facts in the first story. Now, there of course, is a disanalogy between my story and God's story. In my story,

I am *trying* to draw the circle and failing. In Pruss and Timpe's story about God, God is not trying to do wrong and failing. But the point of the analogy was simply to show that logical constraints are at least as much constraints as physical constraints.

Moreover, perhaps we can adapt my story to remove that disanalogy. Suppose I am instructed to both try and not try simultaneously to do *x* (make a square circle or just a regular circle.) I cannot pull that off because logic prevents me. It seems that this represents an obstacle just as much as physical limitations. If God is forbidden by logic from doing wrong, then He is not free to do wrong. If freedom is a great good, a good important enough to include amongst the divine attributes, then God would have it.

I conclude that God is not essentially morally perfect.

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² The connection between OIC and the principle of alternate possibilities has been arrived at independently by a number of philosophers, including Copp and Widerker. See Widerker (1991) and Copp (2008).

An Argument from Divine Beauty Against Divine Simplicity

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Abstract Some versions of the doctrine of divine simplicity imply that God lacks really differentiated parts. I present a new argument against these views based on divine beauty. The argument proceeds as follows: (1) God is beautiful. (2) If God is beautiful, then this beauty arises from some structure. (3) If God’s beauty arises from a structure, then God possesses really differentiated parts. If these premises are true, then divine simplicity (so characterized) is false. I argue for each of the argument’s premises and defend it against objections, including an objection based on analogical predication, and an objection that supposes that God is simple while appearing complex.

Keywords Divine simplicity · Divine beauty · Divine attributes · Divine perfections · Aesthetics · Beauty

1 Introduction: Divine Simplicity and the Argument from Divine Beauty

In this paper, I present a new objection to a popular understanding of divine simplicity, an objection based on a classical conception of beauty. In this section, I offer some clarificatory notes and present the argument. Then I will defend the argument’s premises and consider some objections.

The versions of the doctrine of divine simplicity to which I will object are those that imply the following:

(DS): God does not possess really differentiated parts.

A few notes are in order before we move on. First, in this paper, “parts” always means “proper parts” (a proper part is a part that is not identical to the whole it helps compose). Parts are really differentiated just in case they exist apart from any mind’s conceptualizations. Note that my definition of real differentiation differs from some medieval definitions. On my view, parts do not have to be separable by anyone, even God, to be really differentiated. For the remainder of this paper, I will drop the modifier “really differentiated” and just refer to “parts” for convenience.

Second, nearly all theists agree that God lacks a body, and so that God does not possess physical parts. (DS) goes further than this, in that it also denies that God possess any of what we can call “metaphysical parts.”¹ For instance, one might think that (at least some) property instances which an object possesses are parts of that object—the rose partially made out of a certain color, the agent out of various capacities for thought and action.² (DS) denies that anything like this is the case for God.

¹ Some philosophers may endorse (DS) because they believe that the only way in which something can have parts is by its having physical parts. I will not address this position; I take it that the interesting debates about divine simplicity occur between those who favor a “constituent ontology” and hence take it that at least some objects have metaphysical parts. See (Wolterstorff 1991) for a discussion of constituent vs. relational ontologies and their implications for the doctrine of divine simplicity.

² These examples are for illustration only, and I am not committed to their details—exactly what it takes for something to be a metaphysical part of something else, and what metaphysical parts exist, are difficult questions.

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Third, typically philosophers who defend divine simplicity are defending views that imply (DS) (this is certainly true now, and may also be true historically).³ It is worth noting, however, that within the Christian tradition at least, important figures have argued that God can be simple without (DS) being true.⁴ For convenience, I am going to set their views aside, and talk as though my argument is against divine simplicity *simpliciter*. I do not want to give the impression by doing so that I am making claims about whose views “really count” as versions of divine simplicity.

Finally, my argument depends crucially on claims about beauty. What is it for something to be beautiful? We can bypass some irrelevant debate on the subject by identifying beauty with *the most exalted kind of aesthetic state* (whatever exactly that is). To be beautiful is thus the best that an object can be, aesthetically speaking.⁵ It could be compared with the status of knowledge, which is the most exalted epistemic state. I am not denying that beauty, unlike knowledge, admits of degrees. But all beautiful objects are aesthetically superior to all non-beautiful objects, and all beautiful objects have a high level of aesthetic value.⁶

With all that out of the way, we are ready to look at the argument. Here it is:

- (1) God is beautiful.
- (2) If God is beautiful, then God’s beauty arises from some structure.
- (3) If God’s beauty arises from some structure, then God possesses parts.
- (4) Therefore, God possesses parts.

Since the argument is valid, a critic of the argument must object to one or more premises. I now turn to a defense of these premises.

³ Thomas Aquinas’ view of simplicity, I think, implies (DS), and his view seems predominant in contemporary discussion. See (Aquinas 1947 I, 3) for Aquinas’ view. (Stump and Kretzmann 1985) is an influential contemporary work in a similar vein.

⁴ Duns Scotus’ view is an example of a divine simplicity view that does not imply (DS); he uses his “formal distinction” to allow for distinctions between God’s attributes while endorsing a sort of divine simplicity. See (Cross 1999, p. 42–45). Gregory of Nyssa provides another example; see (RaddeGallwitz 2009, p. 212).

⁵ In this respect, I follow Zangwill (2001) in describing beauty as the highest type of aesthetic state, to be contrasted with other aesthetic states such as daintiness.

⁶ Perhaps some non-beautiful art objects are *artistically* superior to some beautiful objects, but this does not imply that those art objects are aesthetically superior to beautiful objects in the sense with which we are concerned.

2 Defense of the Premises

2.1 God is Beautiful

This premise is not likely to be especially controversial, but I should stress that the claim that God is beautiful should not be understood as equivalent to the claim that God is excellent, admirable, or worship-worthy. The argument makes a specific claim about a particular sort of excellence God has—*aesthetic excellence*. So it is not obvious from the fact that God is excellent overall that God is beautiful, since presumably there are excellent but non-beautiful things.

Still, it seems that a maximally excellent being must have all compossible maximal excellences, and that beauty is part of such a set of excellences.⁷ That line of thought suggests the following argument:

- (5) God is the greatest possible being.
- (6) The greatest possible being has all compossible maximal excellences.
- (7) Beauty is a member of the set of compossible maximal excellences.
- (8) Therefore, God is beautiful.

I believe this argument is sound, and I suspect most theists will agree.

There is certainly a good deal of support for the idea that God is beautiful within the Western tradition. Augustine says: “I have learnt to love you late, Beauty at once so ancient and so new!” (Augustine 1961, p. 231–2). And here’s Anselm: “The Supreme Nature is... Supreme Beauty” (Anselm 2000a, p. 28). Similarly, in his *Proslogion* Anselm laments “[My soul] looks in all directions but does not see Your beauty... For in Your ineffable manner, O Lord God, You have these [features] within You” (Anselm 2000b, p. 104).

I take it that these considerations give theists good reason to think that God is beautiful. In particular, they give us reason to believe that God is beautiful in the sense in which I mentioned earlier: that God is a being possessing the most exalted aesthetic state.

2.2 If God is Beautiful, then this Beauty Arises from Some Structure

This claim follows from a historically prominent general claim about beauty, a claim which I believe enjoys considerable support. We can call this view *Structuralism*, so

⁷ Or perhaps a maximally excellent being must possess all compossible maximal *universal* excellences, that is, things which are excellences for anything which possess them. This complication does not matter for our purposes. See (Martin Lembke 2012) for a defense of the notion of a universal excellence.

long as we do not confuse it with other sorts of structuralism (it has nothing to do, so far as I am aware, with the structuralist school of art, structuralism in philosophy of science, or French structuralism of the Lévi-Strauss sort). Here is a formulation of the structuralist view:

Structuralism: If an object is beautiful, it has a kind of unity, proportion, harmony, or some similar relation of various elements of a whole.

Structuralism is consistent with a number of different aesthetic theories; it claims only that beautiful objects necessarily exhibit a kind of unity, proportion, harmony, or some similar relation (these relation(s) need not be spatio-temporal). Exactly which words correctly mark out these relation(s) is irrelevant for our purposes; for convenience, I will refer to “harmony relations.” I’m claiming a necessary condition for beauty, not a sufficient one. There may be other necessary conditions; and in particular, it might be the case that beauty requires some kind of actual or ideal observer. Structuralism is thus, I think, neutral between standard debates about the extent to which beauty is observer-dependent. It merely claims that the beautiful objects themselves exhibit certain structural features. Structuralism is, though, inconsistent with a kind of relativism that claims that all that is required for an object to be beautiful is that it cause pleasure when experienced.⁸

I do not think that Structuralism is true by definition; that is, mere reflection on the meaning of the word “beauty” will not give us reason to believe that Structuralism is true. But as I mentioned, Structuralism, or something relevantly like it, has enjoyed some popularity historically.⁹ More importantly, Structuralism is also plausible when we consider particular instances of beauty. The aesthetic excellence of a sunset consists in the variety and relative position of the hues of the sky. A symphony is beautiful because of the unity and variety of the sounds produced. And a painting or sculpture is beautiful because

of the spatial arrangement of its parts (be they patches of color or the shape of bits of marble).

Note that nothing that I have said implies that beauty requires (let alone consists in) some sort of precise, mathematical ratio between the elements of a whole of the sort that Edmund Burke railed against [see the discussion in Sartwell (2014, p. 12–13)]. What is required is not (necessarily) punctilious arrangement, but simply good arrangement.

So careful reflection on paradigmatically beautiful objects and the source of their beauty makes Structuralism plausible. But one might think that reflection on apparently simple objects can provide counterexamples to the view. This was the basis for an objection pressed by Structuralism’s most notable ancient detractors: Plato and Plotinus. There are two sorts of relevant cases here: spatio-temporal ones, like color patches, and cases which are not (or not obviously) spatio-temporal, such as the beauty of thoughts. I’ll discuss both of these in that order.¹⁰

Plotinus (echoing Plato in the *Philebus*) argued that a simple patch of color was beautiful despite its lack of the kinds of structure that other Greek philosophers held was essential to beauty.¹¹ This confuses beauty with mere pleasingness. A patch of a single hue of some color, I argue, cannot possess the kind of aesthetic excellence which is required for beauty.

Careful imagination shows this. To avoid the fallacy of composition, it is important to imagine that a single hue of color is *all* one can see. Imagining, for instance, a patch of pink on a rose increases the possibility of assigning to the pinkness the beauty of the whole view (interestingly, Plotinus seems to have made this mistake; see (Plotinus 2001, p. 35–36). At best, the rose’s pinkness is beautiful by virtue of its place in the whole view; thus, if we want to test whether beauty is always dependent upon a structure, we must not imagine a color patch which is surrounded by other colors. Consider, then, a field of view which consisted entirely of a single patch of color. It hardly seems that this would be an instance of beauty. Even if a patch of color is pleasant to look at, it lacks the level of aesthetic value required to truly be beautiful. Similarly, a single tone is not in itself beautiful (again, it is important to imagine a single tone without any variation, which is *not* a part of

⁸ What about the idea that what is important for an object’s beauty is not the structure the object possesses in itself, but the apparent structure apprehended by observers? I am neutral about this issue for objects in general, and talk about features of beautiful objects rather than merely apparent, apprehended features for convenience. In Sect. 3, however, I discuss how someone might try to use the idea that beauty is about appearance to object to my argument, and why I believe such an objection fails.

⁹ I will not try to give a historical overview of the view, but perhaps it is worth noting some major supporters. Hutcheson’s advocacy is probably the most well known, but he was far from its only champion. Sartwell (2014, p. 10–12; page numbers are to the PDF version) suggests that the view was common in the ancient period; Aristotle, for example, claims that “order [and] symmetry” are among “the chief forms of beauty” (quoted in (ibid p. 11)). The view was also found among the Stoics (Beardsley 1966, p. 70), with Plato and Plotinus (see below) bucking the trend. David Hoekema has suggested to me in conversation that Kant endorsed Structuralism.

¹⁰ I am drawing on Plotinus’ arguments in the 6th Tractate; these arguments are actually targeted not at Structuralism, but at a more specific claim that beauty requires symmetry and being “patterned” (Plotinus 2001, p. 35). So is not clear to me that Plotinus intended for all of his cases to be taken as counterexamples to Structuralism. But they are the sort of cases it is helpful to think through, in any event.

¹¹ (Plato 2001, p. 46 (51(d))); (Plotinus 2001, p. 35–36). See (Beardsley 1966, p. 43 and 80) for discussion of the claims of Plato and Plotinus, respectively. This argument was important for Plotinus, since he claimed that the (simple) One was beautiful.

some melody). Even light (a frequent and appropriate metaphor for God) is only aesthetically excellent when there is a variety of the position and intensity of the luminescence. My claim is not that these things are not pleasing or attractive; only that they do not possess *beauty*—which was previously defined as the most exalted sort of aesthetic state. And although I cannot possibly consider all possible unstructured spatio-temporal objects here, I suspect that similar results will hold in those cases.¹²

Some readers may find it intuitive that things like color patches can be beautiful, despite what I have said above. If you are still not convinced, consider the following adjustment to the argument. Single color patches, if they are beautiful at all, do not possess a high degree of beauty, and neither do single tones or undifferentiated patches of light. God, however, does possess a high degree of beauty. I think that my entire argument is still cogent if cast in terms of a high degree of beauty rather than mere beauty: possessing a high degree of beauty is still a divine perfection, and Structuralism could be modified to be a requirement for a high degree of beauty. The result would be that God has a high degree of beauty, and must therefore have some structure. Either way, the point is that there is a quite significant aesthetic difference between symphonies and notes, portraits and color patches, complex unities and mere simples; and that God's beauty is much more like the former set than the latter in its aesthetic excellence.

So much for the first sort of putative counterexample to Structuralism, the spatio-temporal sort. But Plotinus has another sort of case.¹³ Here I think that Plotinus is wrong to assume that his putative counterexamples lack structure. Take thoughts.¹⁴ Thoughts are typically beautiful (when they are) because they are appropriately related to their objects, and perhaps to the circumstances of the thinker. For example, think of a mathematician's thought that some theorem is true—her thought is beautiful because it is a true judgment, and perhaps also because it is about something

important for her to get right. Similarly, beautiful mathematical theorems seem to be beautiful by virtue of the structure of mathematical objects they express.

Or consider the beauty of agents.¹⁵ This may be the most important for discussions of God's beauty, since it is plausible that God's beauty is of this sort. Excellent agents have a kind of beauty of personality: they are beautiful in the way they are disposed to reason and act. Some of this is moral beauty, the beauty of a morally admirable character. But the beauty of an excellent agent is not exclusively what we usually call moral—it also arises from the excellent way in which the agent is disposed to rationally connect means and ends, for example, as well as their well-ordered cognitive life. Each element of their character 'works well together' with each other element. So, for example, an excellent agent uses her excellent insight to see what should be done, and her excellent strength to accomplish it. The dispositions involved in such actions form an intricate, beautiful agential structure. But an object cannot 'work well together' with itself; agential excellence involves structure. Some sort of tight unity is to be expected between the elements of a maximally excellent agent's capacities, but this is consistent with the harmony of an intricate structure.

I want to stress that structuralism does not deny that unity or (relative) simplicity can play important roles in giving rise to an object's beauty. We do often appreciate an object's beauty more when we grasp the unity which underlies diverse phenomena. Symphonies provide an example of this: the development section of a symphonic movement is better appreciated when one can discern the reappearance of the unifying theme. But although greater appreciation for an object's beauty is often accompanied by greater awareness of its underlying unity, that fact does not suggest that the structure in which that unity finds expression is not necessary. It is just not the case that, say, a Bach fugue would be more beautiful if there were fewer differences or distinctions among its parts. The removal of distinctions would not bring the work closer to an ideal of beauty, but cause it to miss the golden mean. Nor would an agent be more beautiful if his activity and his insight were the same thing; there would then be no room for the beautiful reason-giving relation between insight and activity, where activity is guided by insight.

One objection here would be to claim that the intuitions that I have tried to pump give us no reason to endorse Structuralism over this alternative:

¹² Of course, a color patch is probably not completely unstructured (unless perhaps it is some sort of simple quale). They are experienced as simple, however, which may be what matters for aesthetic considerations (see the final objection in Sect. 3 for a consideration of whether the claim that the aesthetic qualities of things are dependent upon their appearance and not reality is of any help to the divine simplicity theorist.) And at any rate color patches (and similar examples I give) are probably closer to being unstructured and beautiful than anything else we can easily experience or imagine, so the evidence they can give regarding Structuralism is perhaps still part of the best evidence reflection on our experiences can get us.

¹³ I'd like to thank David Hunt and an anonymous reviewer for helping me realize I should discuss cases like thoughts, mathematical theorems, and agents.

¹⁴ Plotinus asks whether there can possibly be symmetry in "points of abstract thought" (2001, p. 36).

¹⁵ Plotinus does not seem to consider the beauty of a good character in the 6th Tractate, although he does consider "noble conduct" (2001, p. 36). An agent's conduct, though, is usually spatio-temporal, and obviously structured (in fact, it probably has a kind of structure similar to that attributed in the text to agents—as when the agent sees what ought to be done and does it).

Structuralism*: *For any object with parts*, if that object is beautiful, it has a kind of unity, proportion, harmony, or some similar relation of various elements of a whole.

If the evidence considered above consisted merely of noting beautiful objects with parts and observing that they possessed harmony relations among their parts, then this objection would be correct. But our evidence consists of more than this, for two reasons.

First, consideration of objects which seem to approach complete simplicity (like color patches) suggests that they are not beautiful, as well as the fact that they do not apparently (at least, to the untrained eye) possess harmony relations among their parts. So our evidence consists not only of examples of beautiful objects with parts, but also non-beautiful objects without apparent parts, which gives us some evidence that objects without parts are not beautiful. This evidence is, of course, reflected in Structuralism but not in Structuralism*. Second, this objection ignores the role that the harmonious structure appears to play in beauty. It isn't just the case that the objects that are beautiful have harmony relations; they are beautiful because of those relations. Harmony relations (understood broadly) seem to play a role in explaining the beauty of beautiful objects. Agents, for example, are beautiful partly by virtue of the way their diverse capacities and dispositions are related; symphonies by virtue of the relation of different movements. The fact that they play that role in observed cases gives us reason to think that they play that role in other cases of beauty as well, which gives us reason to think that harmony relations are found in all cases of beauty. Of course, other considerations might give us all things considered reason to prefer Structuralism* over Structuralism. But the evidence considered here supports Structuralism over Structuralism*.

I've presented some reasons to endorse structuralism. It is easy to see how the truth of structuralism would imply that a beautiful God must possess some structure. For proportion, harmony, unity, and similar candidate structuralist requirements for beauty involve relations among various elements of their objects, and the existence of relations implies the existence of some sort of structure. If this view of beauty is correct then to be able to truly say that God is beautiful requires that God possess (in some sense) the sort of unity, proportion, or harmony which gives rise to beauty.

2.3 If God's beauty has a Structure, then God Possesses Parts

It is hard to tell how a simple being could have structure. However, one might think that the structure which gives rise to God's beauty involves not only God, but things

other than God as well. If this is true, then a defender of divine simplicity could argue that the structure underlying God's beauty is compatible with divine simplicity.

This idea could be filled out in several ways. For example, propositions about God might be held to provide the structure necessary. Perhaps propositions describing God's attributes could be the basis for God's beauty. Alternatively, the concrete world, by being created by God, might be thought to display God's nature in a way that provides the necessary structure. Or perhaps divine thoughts about the created world might do so.¹⁶ One might also think that it is our thoughts about God that provide the necessary structure; this possibility will get further discussion in Sect. 3.

Attempts of this sort are prey to two problems. The first is that they run afoul of a plausible principle:

Intrinsicness: For any beautiful object *O*, the structure *S* which provides the basis for the beauty of *O* is intrinsic to *O*.¹⁷

This principle accounts for the fact that beautiful objects seem to be beautiful because of facts about *themselves* (perhaps when joined with facts about actual or ideal perceivers), not because of other objects. But perhaps this principle should be rejected; in any case, the second problem is worse. The inclusion of anything which is not divine into the structure which gives rise to God's beauty violates a core commitment of theists who endorse divine simplicity: the doctrine of divine aseity.¹⁸

The reason for this is that divine aseity requires that God not be dependent on anything non-divine for either God's existence or God's perfections (divine aseity may require more than this, but it certainly requires at least this). What does it mean in this context for something to be non-divine? I suggest that something is non-divine just in case it is neither identical to God nor an intrinsic property of God. Relations between God and the world (such as God's thoughts about the world) are not divine in this context, which is the right result since presumably these relations are dependent on the world. If God had not created, then there would be no world for God to relate to; yet (according

¹⁶ I include divine thoughts here because I believe divine simplicity theorists ought to say that God's thoughts about the created world are extrinsic to God. On this, see more below; and for a good recent defense of views on which God's knowledge of contingent matters is extrinsic to God, see (Grant 2012).

¹⁷ Intrinsicness is designed to be compatible with response-dependent theories of beauty, since it does not specify that *all* necessary conditions for beauty are intrinsic to the beautiful object.

¹⁸ Divine aseity is in fact a main motivation for divine simplicity; see (Vallicella 2010). Sometimes divine aseity plays a role in arguments for divine simplicity. I believe that divine aseity does not require divine simplicity; for some reasons to think this is so, see (Fowler 2015), and my (forthcoming).

to standard theism) God would still retain the divine perfections.

Beauty is a divine perfection. This is a consequence of the Anselmian argument sketched in Sect. 2.1 above. And even if this argument is not sound, it is surely plausible that beauty is a divine perfection. So inclusion of propositions, created substances, thoughts about the created world, or anything else that is not divine in the structure responsible for divine beauty would make God's beauty dependent on something outside God. Thus, it violates divine aseity. And, of course, if propositions or other structure-providing features are divine, perhaps by being divine thoughts, then divine simplicity is false anyway.¹⁹

This is a cost that I doubt divine simplicity advocates are willing to pay. Nor should they be willing to do so: it is intuitive that God is not dependent on anything "outside" God for the divine perfections.

These sorts of considerations can be expressed in the form of a dilemma for any attempt to acknowledge that God's beauty arises from some kind of structure while denying that God has parts. Either the structure required for beauty involves non-divine things or it does not. If it does, then the position runs afoul of divine aseity. If it does not, then the position appears to be incoherent; how could a perfectly simple thing have the sort of structure claimed?

One interesting potential objection to this premise appeals to the Christian idea that God is triune. Might a Trinitarian God possess the sort of structure that can undergird beauty in a way consistent with (DS)? Aquinas' attempt to give a rigorous theory of the Trinity which is consistent with (DS) is paradigmatic for western Trinitarianism, so let's consider his view. Aquinas held that each Person of the Trinity was identical to a relation, relations which take the divine essence as both relata (Aquinas *ST*, I.28). He also believed that each Person, although distinct from the other Persons, was "not other than" the metaphysically simple divine essence, and accordingly held that each Person is metaphysically simple as well [see (Aquinas *ST*, I.40.2), especially the first objection and reply]. This provides a kind of structure to divinity—albeit not a structure with proper parts, thus allowing Aquinas to deny premise (3).

¹⁹ I'm assuming that divine thoughts would be (non-identical) metaphysical parts of God. I believe some divine simplicity theorists hold that divine thoughts are not metaphysical parts of God, and hence are consistent with divine simplicity. They might claim that God is structured by virtue of divine thoughts about God (e.g. God's self-understanding as falling under various concepts). But according to the structuralist view defended in the previous section, it must be the beautiful thing *itself* that possesses structure; structure cannot be imposed on the object by someone's thoughts about the thing. This seems inconsistent with the idea that God is beautiful because of God's thoughts about God.

Let's grant, *arguendo*, that this approach to Trinitarian doctrine is consistent with (DS).²⁰ This approach would succeed in explaining the beauty of the Trinity as a whole without compromising (DS). However, like the previous proposal, it suffers from theological defects that its likely proponents should find unacceptable. For, on this view, parallel arguments can be made to the effect that individual Persons of the Trinity are not beautiful. Each Person is metaphysically simple, and none of the Persons themselves have a Trinitarian structure. But orthodox Trinitarianism holds that each Person (being God) possesses all the divine perfections, including beauty (Baber section 2.3). So Aquinas' account of the Trinity might help secure the beauty of the Trinity as a whole, but fails to help secure the beauty of the individual members of the Trinity. Insofar as other Trinitarian advocates of (DS) also hold that the individual members of the Trinity are metaphysically simple, they must also deal with parallel problems regarding the individual Persons.²¹

This leaves us where we began: there doesn't seem to be any contender for the beauty-undergirding divine structure that is compatible with divine simplicity and the theological commitments of divine simplicity theorists.

3 Further Objections

In this section I consider three further strategies that might be used to resist my argument. The first consists of an appeal to the analogical character of positive talk about God. Such an appeal would say more or less something like this: it may well be that created things must have structure to be beautiful, but (although we may truly call God 'beautiful') God's beauty is different. It is only like our beauty by analogy, so we cannot reason from the character of creaturely beauty to divine beauty.

²⁰ For discussion of medieval attempts to show that (DS) is consistent with broadly similar approaches to understanding the Trinity, see (Friedman 2010) and (Thom 2012).

²¹ At this point, someone might want to claim that the individual Persons are beautiful because of their relations with each other. I think this kind of move suffers from two problems. First, it is inconsistent with Intrinsicness, which I think we have some reason to accept (recall that Intrinsicness accounts for the idea that an object is beautiful because of the way it is, rather than because of the way other things are). Second, at least the 1st Person of the Trinity (and perhaps all of them) is typically supposed to have all divine perfections without relying on the other Persons for them. The only thing the Father is typically supposed to "get" from the Son is his Fatherhood. The Father has, in Himself, the whole divine nature, including all the divine perfections (or else he couldn't beget them in the Son). And beauty is a divine perfection, so I don't think that it is promising to suppose that the Father is beautiful because of his begetting relationship with the Son.

What should we think about this line of thought? To some extent, that depends on exactly what sort of doctrine of analogy is being appealed to.²² I won't try to canvass all versions of the doctrine; instead, I will briefly argue that the version which seems most promising as a response to my argument is actually irrelevant.

The version of the doctrine of analogy which seems most promising is one which claims that divine perfections are limit cases of creaturely perfections. It is promising because it suggests how God's beauty is unlike other beauty: while other beauty requires a unity formed out of diversity, God's beauty is pure unity without diversity (we could imagine a line, with maximal unity represented by one endpoint, and less and less diversity as one approaches the endpoint).²³ The problem with this way of responding is that, if my earlier argument is right, beauty requires more than mere unity (whether found in diversity or not); it also requires diversity.²⁴ Beauty involves a harmonious combination of elements, and the limiting case of unity is a mere sameness. When it comes to beauty, the limit case of unity is not 'what everything is striving after,' but rather a way of missing the golden mean.

So, as I said, *if* my earlier arguments in part 2 were correct, then this appeal to analogy will not help. The argument thus turns on specific, normative claims about beauty, and thus cannot be undercut merely by general accounts of analogical predication such as the limit case theory mentioned above. In other words, the problem is specific to beauty, and not dependent on any general skepticism about analogical predication about God. Thus, general theories of predication about God will not help unless they specifically engage with the aesthetic argument.

The second objection I will consider can be traced back to the Pseudo-Dionysius (Spicher section 3.b). On one

reading of his view, God is beautiful by virtue of the fact that God is the source of beauty. There are two different ways in which this claim could be understood. It could be that the claim is that God is beautiful by virtue of beautiful created things; then, however, it contradicts the doctrine of divine aseity (as I argued in Sect. 2.3). Or one might think that God is beautiful by virtue of his power to produce beautiful things. But it is hard to see why this would suffice to make God beautiful. After all, a beautiful vase could be produced by a plain potter (or, more likely today, a plain machine). So it doesn't seem generally true that the ability to make beautiful things is sufficient for being beautiful, which suggests that this objection is unacceptably *ad hoc*. We should therefore conclude that this second objection is not promising either.

The final objection holds more promise, but is, I think, not compelling.²⁵ It might be said that I have neglected the possibility that the beauty of an object is not determined by the way the object is, but by the way it appears. And appearance can differ from reality; so perhaps God is simple in a way that implies (DS), but does not appear to be simple. This would allow God to possess the sort of structure required by Structuralism in appearance, and so to be beautiful, without rendering (DS) false. I have two responses to make to this line of reasoning. The first starts from the fact that divine beauty is typically taken to be a divine perfection, and the fact that God is typically considered to possess aseity. If these views are correct, then it seems that God's beauty must depend on the way that God is, not on the way that God appears. After all, the way that God appears to creatures is dependent upon the nature of the creatures, and for a divine perfection to be dependent upon creatures would violate aseity. The objector might here say that divine beauty could be based on God's appearance not to creatures, but to God. But it is surely that case that God "sees" himself the way that God actually is; so a simple God must appear simple to himself—in which case the appeal to the difference between appearance and reality cannot help the objector.

At this point, perhaps the objector may want to insist that it is God's self-perception that matters for divine beauty, and claim that Structuralism is just false for divine perception. After all, all the examples I gave to motivate Structuralism were drawn from the experiences of creatures; perhaps God does not share our preference for structure. It is hard to tell just what God's aesthetic responses are like, and so hard to tell how to assess this reply. Suppose for the sake of argument that it is correct; my second response to the objection avoids this problem.

²² There are significant differences, between, e.g. the view Davies (2012, p. 394–7) attributes to Aquinas and the view Wippel (2000, p. 549) does.

²³ Thanks to Matt Frise for suggesting this particular application of the view that divine attributes are limit cases of creaturely perfections. For discussions of analogical predication that take this sort of line, see (Wippel 2000, p. 549) and (Miller 1996, p. 150). A reviewer has suggested that this version may not be so promising after all, on the grounds that a mere limiting case cannot capture the qualitative difference that, according to the doctrine of analogy, holds between the creaturely and divine perfections. I am not sure that this is correct. Even if it is, this problem has not kept a limit case understanding of analogy from being popular; and in any case, of all the versions of the doctrine I am familiar with, it is the only one which suggests how God's beauty might not involve structure.

²⁴ Actually, I suspect that it is impossible for their to be a limit case of *unity* without diversity; a complete lack of diversity is merely identity, which does not seem to be a kind of unity at all (it involves no *union*, since union always involves diversity of some kind). But I will grant my objector the use of the term "unity" to describe a simple being for the sake of argument.

²⁵ I would like to thank John Bennett for impressing upon me the need to think about this objection.

My second response starts from the idea that it isn't just God who is supposed to be able to see God as God is. It is a typical religious hope that we may someday see God "face to face," apprehending the divine nature.²⁶ Seeing God "face to face"—especially seeing God in a blessed future state—presumably must involve seeing God as God is. For an utterly simple God to appear structured would not be to see God as God is; and it would be a disappointing eschaton that featured such a permanent veil. So for those who think this sort of religious hope is on the right track—which I think includes most of those who are tempted to endorse (DS)—this last objection should not be convincing.

4 Conclusion

I have presented an argument against divine simplicity and defended its premises. I do not regard it as a knock-out punch against divine simplicity: disputes in philosophy of religion are typically won on points, not through a single devastating argument.²⁷ But since this argument is valid, I believe my defense of its premises gives us some reason to believe that its conclusion is true. Assessments of the doctrine of divine simplicity should no longer ignore the evidence aesthetics gives us against it.

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²⁶ For a philosophical discussion of the idea of seeing God, with commentary on the reports of people who have had religious experiences, see (Alston 1991).

²⁷ I owe this metaphor to Tom Flint, in his (2011, p. 46). Flint uses it in the context of disputes over Molinism.

Simplicity's Deficiency: Al-Ghazali's Defense of the Divine Attributes and Contemporary Trinitarian Metaphysics

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Abstract I reconstruct and analyze al-Ghazali's arguments defending a plurality of real divine attributes in *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*. I show that one of these arguments can be made to engage with and defend Jeffrey E. Brower and Michael C. Rea's "Numerical Sameness Without Identity" model of the Trinity. To that end, I provide some background on the metaphysical commitments at play in al-Ghazali's arguments.

Keywords Accidents · Al-Ghazali · Arabic philosophy · Aquinas · Aseity · Averroes · Avicenna · Divine attributes · Divine simplicity · Incoherence of the philosophers · Islamic philosophy · Philosophy of religion · Trinity

What beauty is there for an existence that is simple...what deficiency in God's world is greater than this? (Incoherence VI:48).

How are we to understand the classical theist principle that God is one? Does this principle imply that God is simple; lacking any composition or complexity? Do other classical theist principles, such as God's necessity or God's aseity, hold only if God is simple? On the other hand, what are we to make of the apparently-diverse attributes ascribed to God in classical theism?

These are perennial questions in philosophy of religion, and arguments concerning God's simplicity have been presented by contemporary philosophers like Eleonore Stump and Alvin Plantinga. Furthermore, we're still

interested in what medieval philosophers like Anselm and Aquinas have to say on the matter.¹ However, little attention has been paid in recent years to how this question was tackled among the medieval Islamic philosophers. This paper seeks to shed some analytical light on one snapshot of the medieval Islamic debate over divine simplicity: The defenses of the divine attributes presented by the philosopher Abu Hamid al-Ghazali in his work *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* (trans. Marmura 2000). To keep this paper's scope manageable, I've largely restricted my inquiry to the first, defensive half of the 6th chapter of *The Incoherence* (VI:1–21). Where prudent, similar arguments have been combined together.²

In this paper, I will [1] provide a brief account of the wider historical and metaphysical background taken up by al-Ghazali and his Interlocutor in *The Incoherence*. Second, I will [2] present the Interlocutor's Trilemma Argument against a form of divine complexity.³ Third, I will [3] present and evaluate the Interlocutor's sub-arguments toward each Horn of the Trilemma Argument, along with al-Ghazali's corresponding objections. With this analytical rendering in hand, I will finally [4] show how al-Ghazali foreshadows, and can be made to offer a defense of, a contemporary topic in philosophy of religion: Jeffrey Brower and Michael Rea's "Numerical Sameness Without Identity" model of the Trinity (Brower and Rea 2009).

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¹ For further examples and an anthology of contemporary sources, see (Vallicella 2015).

² For a comprehensive treatment of al-Ghazali's life and works, see (Griffel 2009).

³ Burns (1989) agrees that al-Ghazali's treatment of the divine attributes renders God complex.

1 Background

In the following sub-sections, I will present some of the terminology and metaphysical commitments at play in *The Incoherence*.

1.1 “Necessary of Existence” and “Need”

Al-Ghazali’s *Incoherence* puts the arguments of his philosophical opponents in the mouth of an Interlocutor⁴ he calls *al-Falasifa*. *Al-Falasifa* were medieval Islamic philosophers working within Aristotelian and Neoplatonic systems who endorsed the principle of divine simplicity (Adamson and Taylor 2012).⁵ Avicenna was among the chief representatives of this school (*Incoherence* I:11). For al-Ghazali’s Interlocutor, all of God’s supposed divine attributes are either other names for God’s essence, or non-natural properties, or external relations (e.g. for something to have the attribute “the First” is just for that thing to bear the *first* relation to other members of the set of all existents (*Incoherence* V:23–34)). The Interlocutor holds that such a treatment of God’s attributes is necessary to defend the doctrine that God is “necessary of existence.”

“Necessary of existence,” in turn, is a misleading name for an existence dependence condition. When we use terms involving the word “necessary,” we often think of logical necessity, on which a proposition’s negation entails a contradiction; or metaphysical necessity, on which, using possible worlds talk, something exists or some condition obtains in all possible worlds. Our Interlocutor, however, calls something *necessary of existence* just in case that thing doesn’t *need* anything else. And for one existent to *need* another existent is for them to stand in a certain existence dependence relation to one another. An existent upon which another existent depends for its existence is also called a cause. By my lights, the most charitable reading of *The Incoherence* yields the following definitions of the *x needs y* relation and *necessary of existence*:

The *x needs y* relation: If *y* does not exist, then *x* does not exist.^{6, 7}

⁴ In *The Incoherence*, al-Ghazali presents his Interlocutor opponent (“*al-Falasifa*” or “the Philosophers”) as an accurate portrayal of the views of his real-life opponents. Suspending judgment, in this paper I consider “*al-Falasifa*” only as an imagined interlocutor.

⁵ Al-Ghazali points out that the Mu’tazilite school of Islamic theology held a similar view to *al-Falasifa* concerning the Divine Attributes. Of the errors al-Ghazali identifies in *The Incoherence*, the error concerning God’s attributes is regarded as among the least severe (Griffel 2009 ch. 3).

⁶ “For whatever is in need of another, that other would be its cause, since, if that other is removed [from existence], the existence [of the former] would become impossible. Hence, its existence would not be of itself, but through another” (*Incoherence* VI:5).

⁷ I was aided by the formulations of existence dependence in Tahko and Lowe (2015).

x is necessary of existence: *x* exists, and there exists no *y* such that *x* needs *y*.⁸

On this definition, *necessary of existence* comes out as a restricted formulation of the aseity thesis. But what about our philosophical intuitions about necessity; clearly, if *x* is necessary of existence in our world, *x* needn’t exist in countless other possible worlds. So why does the Interlocutor use terms like these—terms which (among other peculiarities) only range over the actual world? After all, Aristotle understood metaphysical necessity to have modal force akin to what we typically understand it to have (*Metaphysics* V:1015b).⁹

My suspicion as to why this is the case is twofold: For one, in Avicenna’s logic, he distinguishes between two senses of “possible:” The first is our familiar sense of possible, which simply mirrors Aristotle. The second sense of possible Avicenna deems the “Real Possible” and refers to the existence dependence relation (Avicenna 1971, p. 24).¹⁰ This second sense of possible is what our Interlocutor seems to have in mind when employing the term “necessary.”¹¹ Second, popular philosophical concerns of the day weren’t seen to require metaphysical necessity talk. In fact, religious doctrine may have motivated a restricted necessity; for example, al-Ghazali’s cosmological argument for the existence of God only requires that God’s existence be deemed necessary for contingent existents in the actual world, which hints at some form of Necessitarianism.¹²

1.2 Hylomorphism and Accidental Unities

On one common account of Aristotelian hylomorphism, a hylomorphic compound is composed of a form or at least

⁸ Let us take for granted that things don’t need themselves. But if we wanted to say that things *do* need themselves, we could augment our definition to read: *x* exists, and there exists no *y* such that *x* needs *y* and *y* is not identical to *x*.

⁹ “...what cannot be otherwise we say is necessarily so. It is from this sense of ‘necessary’ that all others are somehow derived.”

¹⁰ “The term ‘possible’ has two meanings. ‘possible’ may apply only to those things which are not impossible. The class of contingent statements falls under this kind of possible. ‘Possible’ may also refer to things which may exist or may not exist. This is called the ‘Real Possible,’ and contingent propositions do not fall under this class. In ordinary language the term ‘possible’ is used in the second sense.”

¹¹ Averroes contrasts Avicenna’s cosmological argument, which relies on the ontological dependence relation, with what he considered the superior position of the Mu’tazilite theological sect. This sect endorsed possibility in Avicenna’s first sense. See (Averroes 1954, p. 152).

¹² Al-Ghazali and *al-Falasifa* held that brute contingency is impossible. See (Abu Zayd 1970, p. 5).

one formal property, on the one hand, and a substrate which “receives” the form or formal property on the other hand. According to Aristotelian physics,¹³ matter and form can compose hylomorphic compounds, as in the classic example of the bronze statue composed of bronze (matter) and the shape of the statue (form). Hylomorphic compounds are often produced when some efficient cause, called an *agent*, causes some matter to be ordered according to some form.¹⁴ In other words, the agent *effects* the form upon the matter, as when a seal is impressed upon inert clay.¹⁵

x is an agent: x causes some substrate z to have some attribute y .

Interestingly, accidents and essences can also form hylomorphic compounds. In such a case, an essence plays the role of substrate. Some accidental property (or properties) plays the role of formal property (or properties). To take an example directly from Aristotle, consider a primary essence: The particular man Coriscus. Coriscus can be in different states at different times, e.g. Just Coriscus and Unjust Coriscus,¹⁶ yet Just Coriscus and Unjust Coriscus are the same object. For Aristotle, this is possible only because the properties “Just” and “Unjust” are accidental properties variously united to the essence of Coriscus. Coriscus is the common primary essence grounding the identity of Just and Unjust Coriscus.¹⁷ These accident-essence compounds, or accidental unities, will play an important part in the arguments to come.

1.3 Receptive Cause

Now, in Aristotelian physics, existents can have four sorts of causes: The Formal, Material, Efficient and Final causes. However, as we've seen above, the “material cause” often accounts for what is not strictly matter: For example, an essence serving an analogous role to matter in composition.

¹³ For example in (*Metaphysics* V:1013b).

¹⁴ By form, I just mean the property of being organized according to some pattern or principle, taking this handy definition from (Brower and Rea 2009, p. 131).

¹⁵ Avicenna held that absolutely un-formed or “prime” matter does not exist in reality: This is because prime matter is pure potentiality, and pure potentiality cannot exist; there is always some form or other ordering existent matter and rendering it active. As a result, Avicenna held that all material objects are hylomorphic. See (McGinnis 2006, p. 60).

¹⁶ Al-Ghazali was intimately familiar with the works of Avicenna, who was himself familiar with Aristotle's accidental unities and spoke about them in his primary logical treatise: So, it's fair to assume that al-Ghazali was also familiar with Aristotle's accidental unities. Avicenna uses the accidental unity examples of “Young Zid” and “Old Zid” in (Avicenna, p. 17).

¹⁷ See especially (*Metaphysics* V:1014a, 1015b–1025a).

By the time of Avicenna, the material cause had become known as the “receptive cause,” and included any substrate that could serve as a “receptacle” for forms or formal properties (*Incoherence* VI:9–10).

Now that we've established our preliminary definitions and teased out some metaphysical commitments, we are finally ready to present the Interlocutor's Trilemma Argument against the divine attributes.

2 The Trilemma Argument Against God's Attributes

Al-Ghazali's Interlocutor argues that if we affirm a plurality of divine attributes, this entails one of three undesirable alternatives. While the Interlocutor and al-Ghazali use the general term “divine attributes” with respect to the Trilemma, it's clear from the context that a subset of possible attributes is being implied. For the Interlocutor's first premise names, specifically, attributes that are distinct from, but united to, God's essence (*Incoherence* VI:1, 5): These are none other than accidental properties united to a primary essence in an accidental unity of the sort discussed in Sect. 1.2 above.¹⁸ We might think that al-Ghazali's opponents were keen on denying these accidental properties for the following reason: If capacities are real properties, then if an essence is united to some accidental property, then that essence must have a corresponding essential capacity. For example, S can only have the accidental property “running” if S has the essential property “capacity to be running.” In other words, accidental properties are *activities*, and every activity entails a corresponding essential capacity.¹⁹ We can generalize this thesis in the following way:

Accidental unity entails essential capacity: If an essence x is united to accidental property F , then x includes the corresponding property G , where G is the capacity to have F .

On such a principle, diverse activities imply a complex essence, which was anathema to the medieval Islamic proponents of divine simplicity. However, if they held that capacities are not real properties, then this threat of essential complexity would be abated. A note from Averroes suggests that al-Ghazali, in any case, has good reason

¹⁸ In his work *The Golden Mean in Belief*, al-Ghazali is reluctant to use the term “accidental” to describe these attributes. He fears this will imply there are times at which these attributes do not exist. Despite his protestations, there doesn't seem to be any substantial difference between his “non-accidental” attributes and accidental attributes. See (Abu Zayd 1970, pp. 81–89).

¹⁹ Not all activities are accidental, of course. Fire, for example, is essentially characterized by the active state of burning.

to deny that God's attributes entailed that God's essence is complex.²⁰

Even if the threat of a complex essence would not be enough to compel our Interlocutor to attack the notion of God having a plurality of attributes, God being an accidental unity would have presumably been dangerous enough to divine simplicity, on its own, to warrant the Trilemma.

The three Horns of the Trilemma are as follows: If we suppose that God's attributes are distinct from each other and from God's essence, this either entails that: (i) Both God's attributes and God's essence are necessary of existence. (ii) Both God's attributes and God's essence need one another (that is, each is dependent upon the other for its existence). (iii) God's attributes need God's essence, but God's essence does not need God's attributes. Each Horn, the Interlocutor argues, entails that God is not necessary of existence, an unacceptable conclusion for both the Interlocutor and al-Ghazali. From this, we can only conclude that God does not have attributes distinct from one another and from God's essence (*Incoherence* VI:5).

The Trilemma Argument, stated:

- 2.1 If God has attributes distinct from one another and from God's essence, then God's attributes and God's essence are either (i) both necessary of existence, (ii) both need one another, or (iii) God's attributes need God's essence while God's essence is necessary of existence.
- 2.2 (i)–(iii) each entail that God is not necessary of existence.
- 2.3 But God is necessary of existence.
- 2.4 Hence, God's attributes are *not* distinct from one another and from God's essence.

In the next section, I'll present the Interlocutor's sub-arguments for premise 2.2 of the Trilemma, along with al-Ghazali's corresponding objections.

3 Sub-arguments for the Trilemma Argument, al-Ghazali's objections

Al-Ghazali's objections all target premise 2 of the Trilemma Argument presented above: That each Horn of the Trilemma [(i)–(iii)] entails that God is not necessary of existence. Al-Ghazali grants that (ii) would entail that God is not necessary of existence, but resists the sub-conclusion that (i) and (iii) each entail that God is not necessary of

existence (*Incoherence* VI:7). Sections 3.1–3.2 will cover the Interlocutor's arguments that Horn (ii) entails that God is not necessary of existence, along with al-Ghazali's corresponding objections. Sections 3.3–3.5 will cover the Interlocutor's arguments that Horn (iii) entails that God is not necessary of existence, along with al-Ghazali's corresponding objections. Al-Ghazali's defense in Sect. 3.5 forms the bulk of his contribution to the divine attributes debate.

3.1 The first argument against Horn (i)

Horn (i) supposes that God's attributes and God's essence are both necessary of existence: Our Interlocutor argues that God is not necessary of existence if this is the case. The argument concerning Horn (i) is the primary argument of the 5th Chapter of *The Incoherence*. As such, it will only be lightly touched on here.

The first argument begins by supposing (i) to be the case. The Interlocutor claims that God's attributes and God's essence, being distinct concrete existents, would both belong to the same species, such as "divinity" "being God's" or some other. The Interlocutor then asserts that if two existents belong to the same species, they must have been acted upon by some efficient cause or other. What are we to make of this odd premise? It in fact relies on a peculiarity of Avicenna's model of attribution, on which universals perceived by the mind (for example, divinity) are either *sui generis* on the one hand, or individuated only if two or more substrates form compounds with them on the other hand. For Avicenna, all compounds are effects of some efficient cause;²¹ hence, if there are two existents belonging to a species, they must both be caused. The Interlocutor concludes that, as both God's attributes and God's essence are caused, neither are necessary of existence (*Incoherence* V:2–3).

The first argument against Horn (i), stated

- 3.1.1 Suppose that God's attributes and God's essence are both necessary of existence.
- 3.1.2. If God's attributes and essence are both necessary of existence, then they are both concrete existents belonging to the same species.
- 3.1.3. If God's attributes and essence are both concrete existents belonging to the same species, then they are effects.
- 3.1.4. All effects need some agent or other.
- 3.1.5. So, if God's attributes and God's essence are both effects, then they both need some agent or other.
- 3.1.6. If God's attributes and essence both need some agent or other, then they are both not necessary of existence.

²⁰ Responding to al-Ghazali, Averroes notes that "the Ash'arites," al-Ghazali's sect of Islamic theology, considered God's attributes to be additional to God's essence; Averroes contrasts the Ash'arites with "the Christians," who hold that God has a plurality of essential attributes. In (Averroes 1954, p. 193).

²¹ See Marmura's footnote 3 to (*Incoherence* VII:2) in Marmura (2000, p. 235).

3.1.7. Hence, it is not the case that God's attributes and God's essence are both necessary of existence.

Al-Ghazali offers two objections: First, he points out that when "necessary of existence" is considered as a property, it is a negative property—that is, a description picking out the *lack* of some property. In other words, when "necessary of existence" is regarded as a property of some existent *x*, it is the property "there exists no *y* such that *x* needs *y*." Al-Ghazali assumes that negative properties cannot constitute a species which can be individuated (*Incoherence* V:6). If we're willing to accept that negative properties cannot constitute a species, then we can quickly discard this first argument from our Interlocutor. Second, al-Ghazali asserts that compounds do not have to be effects of some efficient cause or other. While this seems obvious enough to us, I'll provide his reasoning for this dismissal later on in Sect. 3.3.

3.2 The Second Argument Against Horn (i)

The Interlocutor's second argument begins similarly to the first. Suppose (i) to be the case. The Interlocutor claims that God's attributes and God's essence, being distinct concrete existents, would both belong to the same species, e.g. "divinity" "being God's" or some other. If this is the case, then they are formed according to the formal property specified by the species "divinity" or some other; if God's essence and God's attributes are both formed according to the formal property "divinity," then they are both composed. The Interlocutor asserts that what is subject to composition is subject to division,²² and a necessary existent cannot be subject to division in contemplation (that is, analytical division). Hence, neither God's attributes nor God's essence is subject to division (*Incoherence* V: 11–12).

The second argument against Horn (i), stated

- 3.2.1. Suppose that God's attributes and God's essence are both necessary of existence.
- 3.2.2. If God's attributes and essence are both necessary of existence, then they are both concrete existents belonging to the same species (divinity, being God's, or some other).
- 3.2.3. If God's attributes and essence are both concrete existents belonging to the same species, then they are both ordered by some formal property or other.
- 3.2.4. If God's attributes and essence are both ordered by some formal property or other, then they are both composed.

²² "According to Avicenna... God's essence is a total unity, and it is not possible for there to be division or change within something that is totally unified in nature" (Griffel 2009 ch. 5).

3.2.5. If God's attributes and essence are composed, then they are not necessary of existence.

3.2.6. Thus, it is not the case that God's attributes and God's essence are both necessary of existence.

Al-Ghazali accepts premises 3.2.1–3.2.4 of the above argument without contest, but objects to premise 3.2.5. According to al-Ghazali, the Interlocutor's motivation for stipulating that the necessary existent cannot be subject to division in contemplation has a twofold justification: On the one hand, the Interlocutor argues that the possibility of division in contemplation compromises the one-ness of the necessary existent, which is necessary to be necessary of existence. Al-Ghazali dismisses this as question-begging (*Incoherence* V:6). On the other hand, the Interlocutor argues that the possibility of division implies that the necessary existent needs some cause: Arguing against this claim forms the bulk of al-Ghazali's objections in Sub-Sect. 3.3 below.

3.3 The first argument against Horn (iii)

As with the Interlocutor's arguments concerning the first Horn of the Trilemma, the arguments toward Horn (iii) focus on questions of composition and causation. The first argument toward the third Horn supposes what it hopes to disprove: That God's attributes need God's essence, while God's essence is necessary of existence. If this is the case, then God's attributes are effects. The Interlocutor justifies this premise by appealing to the essence's analogy with matter in accident-essence compounds that we talked about in Sect. 1.2. On Aristotle, hylomorphic compounds can be effected upon some substrate by an agent. If the analogy between form-matter and accidental property-essence is taken far enough, then there could be some agent that effects forms on receptive essences to make compound objects. Thus, since effects need their agents, God would need some agent to affect God's attribute-essence unity. So, neither God's attributes nor God's essence would be necessary of existence.

The first argument against Horn (iii), stated

- 3.3.1 Suppose that God's attributes need God's essence, while God's essence is necessary of existence.
- 3.3.2 If God's attributes need God's essence, while God's essence is necessary of existence, then God's attributes are effects.
- 3.3.3 If God's attributes are effects, then there exists some agent or other that effects God's attributes upon God's essence.
- 3.3.4 If there exists some agent or other that effects God's attributes upon God's essence, then God is not necessary of existence.
- 3.3.5 Hence, God is not necessary of existence.

Al-Ghazali again challenges the notion that compounds *must* be effected by some agent or other. If God is eternal, al-Ghazali argues, there is no reason why God's attributes cannot be co-eternal with God. Why should we believe that all compounds entail agents outside of themselves (*Incoherence* VI:8)?

The Interlocutor does not explicitly answer this question, but al-Ghazali's responses to the Interlocutor give us a clue as to what may be motivating this premise: Al-Ghazali claims that "terminating the regress of causes" (i.e., what motivates a First Cause argument) is important to keep in mind when defining God's being (*Incoherence* VI:10). If the Interlocutor shares this concern, it may be that the Interlocutor supposes that if God is a compound, then God is subject to analysis. And if God is subject to analysis, then God is explained by something. And if God is explained by something, then God needs something and does not terminate the regress of causes (*Incoherence* VII:13). The "something" that explains God, by contrast, would be an agent causally prior to God.²³ This reading is supported by the following second argument that Horn (iii) entails that God is not necessary of existence.

3.4 The Second Argument Against Horn (iii)

The second argument argues that God's essence and God's attributes are both causes of God. The Interlocutor has us suppose that God's attributes need God's essence, while God's essence is necessary of existence. If this is the case, then God is a composite of God's attributes and God's essence. If God's essence did not exist, then God's attributes did not exist, and vice versa: Per Aristotle, if God is a hylomorphic compound of accident and essence, then God's accidental properties and God's essence are formal and receptive causes of God, respectively. Hence, God needs both, and so God is not necessary of existence.²⁴

The second argument against Horn (iii), stated

- 3.4.1 Suppose that God's attributes need God's essence, while God's essence is necessary of existence.
- 3.4.2 If (3.4.1), then God is a composite of God's attributes and God's essence.
- 3.4.3 If God is a composite of God's attributes and God's essence, then if God's essence did not exist, then God's attributes would not exist.
- 3.4.4 If God is a composite of God's attributes and God's essence, then if God's attributes did not exist, then God would not exist.

²³ Averroes adds that al-Falasifa took an object's being composed as entailing that an object has a material substrate, which they further took to imply an external composer. In (Averroes 1954, p. 195).

²⁴ Synthesized from (*Incoherence* VI:9, 14, 18).

- 3.4.5 If (God's essence did not exist, then God would not exist), or if (God's attributes did not exist, then God would not exist), then God is not necessary of existence.

- 3.4.6 So, God is not necessary of existence.

Al-Ghazali's response involves moving the goal-posts of the needs relation: According to al-Ghazali, the *x* needs *y* relation (i.e. if *y* does not exist, then *x* does not exist) requires restriction. Not every sort of explanans can be substituted for *y*; rather, *y* may only be substituted with some existent or other that plays the role of efficient cause (*Incoherence* VI:12). In *The Incoherence*, al-Ghazali offers an argument for this restriction, which we will call the Counter-Argument. Al-Ghazali also alludes to an example he presents in a different work, *The Golden Mean in Belief*, to explain his Counter-Argument. For the sake of completeness, I will present and analyze both below.

3.5 Al-Ghazali's Counter-Argument

The Counter-Argument al-Ghazali puts forward for restricting the needs relation to efficient causes is as follows: Suppose things need their properties and their substrates. God exists, and is necessary of existence. This means that God has, or exemplifies, whatever properties it takes to meet the criteria for being necessary of existence.²⁵ And these criteria include having or being a substrate and having or exemplifying a property. If this is the case, it follows that God needs a substrate and a formal property, or a substrate or a formal property, even if God happens to be identical to them (as our Interlocutor would have it). As a result, God is not necessary of existence. But, God is necessary of existence, as the Interlocutor must confess. So formal properties and substrates cannot be substituted for *y* in the *x* needs *y* relation: It is faulty from the get-go.²⁶

Al-Ghazali's Counter-Argument, stated

- 3.5.1 Suppose that things need their properties and their substrates.
- 3.5.2 Suppose that there exists some *x* such that *x* is necessary of existence.
- 3.5.3 *x* doesn't need anything only if *x* has, or exemplifies, a property or properties sufficient to meet the criteria for "necessary of existence."
- 3.5.4 If *x* lacked a substrate to receive or exemplify the property or properties sufficient to meet the

²⁵ Earlier, al-Ghazali argued that "necessary of existence" is a negative property. He is not contradicting himself here, however, as he is distinctly referring to those properties *in virtue of which* something is necessary of existence.

²⁶ Synthesized from (*Incoherence* VI:10, 12, 17, 18).

criteria for "necessary of existence," then x would not be necessary of existence.

- 3.5.5 If (3.5.3) and (3.5.4), then there does not exist some x such that x is necessary of existence.
- 3.5.6 So either things do not need their properties and their substrates, or there does not exist some x such that x is necessary of existence.
- 3.5.7 But there does exist such an x (God)!
- 3.5.8 So, things do not need their properties and their substrates.

In *The Golden Mean of Belief*, al-Ghazali diagnoses this problem with the x needs y relation as a confusion of reference. He asks us to consider a parts-whole relation as an example: If we point to the human Zayd's hand and say: "that is the hand of Zayd," we might think we've thereby regarded Zayd's hand as separate existent from Zayd himself. However, we've only distinguished *within* the accidental unity "Zayd" between Zayd's essence and one of Zayd's accidental properties (or Zayd's whole from one of his accidental parts).²⁷ In other words, at first we thought we were referring to an object distinct from, and in some sense external to, Zayd: His hand. This would be true if "Zayd" referred to Zayd's essence. However, "Zayd" picks out the accidental unity, not Zayd's essence. We can only speak about "Zayd's hand" and "Zayd's essence" after abstracting them from the more fundamental "Zayd."²⁸ The following general principle begins to emerge: Accidental unities are particulars prior to their accidents and the essence to which those accidents are united.²⁹ Therefore, if we were to say that Zayd needs his hand or his essence, this amounts to saying that Zayd needs some aspect of himself to be himself. This can only be "need" in a trivial sense. Applying the same reasoning to God, because God is an accidental unity (or relevantly similar to an accidental unity), God is likewise prior to

²⁷ Griffel (2009 ch. 6) suggests that al-Ghazali comfortably resorts to an established accident-essence distinction in *The Incoherence*.

²⁸ Al-Ghazali's distinction between how an object is in the world versus possible division via conceptual analysis bears some resemblance to Duns Scotus's formal distinction. Both consider the distinction between form and matter in existing compounds to be one of real difference without division in reality. See (Dumont 2005), especially (pp. 40–41).

²⁹ Cohen (2013) seems to endorse this as a plausible reading of Aristotle's own understanding of accidental unities. He writes: "A pale horse is no more capable of existing in a world in which pallor does not exist than a cube is capable of existing in a world in which there are no squares, but that does not deprive the compounds [i.e. accidental unities] of their ontological priority. Just as cubes are not constructed out of squares, neither is a pale horse constructed out of pallor. A pale horse may be analyzed, à la Lewis, as this horse + pallor, but it is not constructed out of those ingredients. The accident is only a definitional, but not an ontological, constituent of the compound. The accidental compound is ontologically prior to the accident that is one of its (definitional) constituents."

God's components and cannot be said to "need" them in all but the most trivial sense.

From this, al-Ghazali concludes that the Interlocutor's x needs y relation is best restricted to efficient causes, if it is to avoid being trivial; also, so that it will avoid implying the erroneous conclusion that something can be self-caused. Given this, since there can be a composite being that is the first efficient cause in the regress of causes and is uncaused itself, there is no reason why the necessary existent cannot be a composite of attributes and essence.

4 Al-Ghazali's Counter-Argument and "Numerical Sameness Without Identity"

In this final section, I will present Brower and Rea's "Numerical Sameness Without Identity" model of the Trinity, and show how it is relevantly similar to al-Ghazali's composite God. This will take up Sect. 4.1. Section 4.2 will show how al-Ghazali's Counter-Argument from Sect. 3.5 above can be made to defend this model against charges that it compromises God's being necessary of existence.

4.1 The "Numerical Sameness Without Identity" model of the Trinity

In "Material Constitution and the Trinity," Brower and Rea put forward a model of the Christian Trinity according to which God is something like three accidental unities of the sort described in Sect. 1.2 above. In each of these three accidental unities, which correspond to the respective persons of the Trinity, God's essence plays the role of a substrate that receives accidental properties (Just as the essence, the man Coriscus, plays the role of substrate in Aristotle's example of Just Coriscus). Some formal property, or property relevantly similar to a formal property, informs the substrate. Thus each of the three Trinitarian Persons is a compound of some distinct property (or properties) united to an essential substrate (Brower and Rea 2009, p. 141),³⁰ as the formal property "Just" is united to the substrate "Coriscus" in the example of Just Coriscus. This has the result that each of the three members of the Trinity is an accidental unity of some formal-like properties and the divine essence.

Brower and Rea go on to assert that, despite this multiplicity of accidental unities, God is exactly one object. They argue this by pointing out that, in cases like Coriscus,

³⁰ "...we can regard the divine essence not as an individual thing in its own right but rather as that which, together with the requisite "Form", constitutes a Person. Each Person will then be a compound structure whose matter is the divine essence and whose form is one of the three distinctive Trinitarian properties."

Just Coriscus and Unjust Coriscus pick out the same object in virtue of their common substrate: The primary essence, Coriscus. Similarly, in the case of the bronze statue, the statue and the bronze of which the statue is composed pick out the same object in virtue of their each having the same material substrate, namely the bronze. If we're willing to hazard that God's essence can be regarded as relevantly similar to a material substrate, then (1) each accidental unity bears the *same object as* relation to God's essence, (2) without being identical to one another or to the essence. Furthermore, we (3) only count one material object, God's essence. Brower and Rea formulate this model of the Trinity as follows:

(G1) x is a God iff x is a hylomorphic compound whose 'matter' is some divine essence; x is the same God as y iff x and y are each hylomorphic compounds whose 'matter' is some divine essence and x 's 'matter' is the same 'matter' as y 's; and there is exactly one God iff there is an x such that x is a God and every God is the same God as x .

And the corollary:

(G2) x is God iff x is a God and there is exactly one God (p. 142).

Brower and Rea's formulation of the Trinity as three "accidental" unities sharing one common substrate has a lot going for it. After all, it meets the following Trinitarian desiderata:

(T1) Each person of the Trinity is distinct from each of the others.

(T2) Each Person of the Trinity is God.

(T3) There is exactly one God (p. 129).

The Numerical Sameness Without Identity model meets T1: Each accidental unity is not identical to each other accidental unity, or to the essence of which each unity is composed. It meets T2: Each accidental unity is composed of the common essence, and is thus God; and it meets T3: The accidental unities are all the same object in virtue of their common substrate, the essence.

As should be apparent from Sect. 3, al-Ghazali anticipates something like this sort of accidental unity with his understanding of God as an attribute-essence compound.³¹ For al-Ghazali, the person of God is an accidental unity of the divine essence, which functions like a substrate, and some formal property, namely an activity of God like knowledge, power or will. Al-Ghazali argues that God's one-ness of essence is not compromised by unity with

extra-essential formal properties like God's attributes, and Brower and Rea argue the same. The obvious dissimilarity between al-Ghazali's formulation and the Numerical Sameness Without Identity model of the Trinity is that, for al-Ghazali, the formal properties of the attributes, together with the essence, are sufficient to jointly-compose one person, not three. Al-Ghazali also anticipates Brower and Rea's concern that referring to the unities as "accidental" could compromise important doctrinal commitments (for Brower and Rea, it threatens to collapse their model into Trinitarian modalism; for al-Ghazali, it threatens to introduce contingency into God, in Abu Zayd (1970)). In order to avoid this, al-Ghazali denies that there are times when God is not in some unity or other with God's attributes: Brower and Rea make a similar move in denying that the Trinitarian persons are accidental in the sense that they are contingent (Brower and Rea 2009, p. 142).

4.2 Al-Ghazali's Defense Against a Challenge to the Numerical Sameness Without Identity Model of the Trinity

Brower and Rea anticipate several objections to their model, primarily objections challenging the coherency of Numerical Sameness Without Identity (pp. 133–141). However, these objections all concern how the model supposedly compromises God's one-ness or God's unity. They do not consider the possible objection that their model is incompatible with the doctrine of God's aseity: That God exists independent of any cause. Recall that the conditions for aseity are essentially the same as our Interlocutor's necessary of existence condition (see Sect. 1.1). Our Interlocutor might object to Brower and Rea that the three property-substrate unities (e.g. the three Trinitarian Persons), being composites, introduce need into God: Because God would be composites in need of both their substrates and their formal properties: They constitute formal and receptive causes.

If we endorse the reasoning behind al-Ghazali's Counter-Argument from Sect. 3.5, we can bring his defense to bear on behalf of Brower and Rea. If we restrict the conditions for necessary of existence to " x exists, and there is no agent (i.e., no efficient cause) y such that x needs y ," then neither God's formal properties nor God's essence, nor God's three accidental unities can be thought to make God dependent upon any cause outside of God. Given this, since there can be a composite being that is the first efficient cause in the regress of causes and is uncaused itself, there is no reason why the necessary existent cannot be a composite of attributes and essence. For if either God's essence or God's properties are thought of as causes which render God dependent upon needs, then God cannot be necessary of existence even if God is simple; this gives

³¹ This was also anticipated in Christian circles by Palamas (1988), especially (p. 233).

classical theists a good reason to restrict the needs relation to consider efficient causes alone.

The Hand of Zayd example is supposed to show that if we refer to the abstracted components of an accidental unity as if they are separate existents, then we have made a mistake; for accidental unities are concrete particulars existing prior to their abstraction into the distinct "essence" and "attributes." Each one of the Trinitarian persons may be thought of as, in an extended sense, analogous to Zayd, and their formal-like properties Zayd's hands: They are first thought through unity, and are only separable in abstraction and not in actuality. Therefore, they cannot constitute causes for one another, because this would reduce to a sort of self-causation or triviality. If we're persuaded by al-Ghazali's Counter-Argument, and his subsequent explanation drawing on the Hand of Zayd example, then we might be willing to give Brower and Rea a pass when it comes to charges of violating aseity.

5 Conclusion

In this paper, I've hopefully shed some analytical light on a small slice of the larger medieval Islamic exchange about divine attributes, essence, and divine simplicity. I began by making explicit some of the metaphysical presuppositions at play in *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*. Then I reconstructed the Trilemma Argument against the divine attributes, and its sub-arguments, along with al-Ghazali's objections and counter-arguments, while coming down on possible interpretations of some squirrely premises in said arguments. Finally, I brought al-Ghazali's Counter-Argument to bear on a potential objection to Brower and Rea's "Numerical Sameness Without Identity" model of the Trinity.

While we might not share a great deal of the metaphysical concerns that captivated medieval Islamic philosophers (e.g. problems following from some of the more contentious Aristotelian commitments), contemporary philosophers of religion still face some of the same questions the medieval Islamic philosophers did: If God has attributes distinguishable from God's essence, then what does it mean for a complex God's status as an object? Can a composite God be reconciled with doctrines like God's aseity? Abu Hamid al-Ghazali provides us with his answers, one of which can potentially assist current models of God like Brower and Rea's "Numerical Sameness Without Identity" model of the Trinity. This paper will

also hopefully serve as a starting point for those trying to understand the large and often unappreciated role that medieval Islamic philosophy plays in the history of ideas.

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Causation, Time, and God's Omniscience

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Abstract The cause of an event must continue over a period at which the effect is not occurring and the whole period at which it is occurring. It follows that simultaneous causation and backward causation are metaphysically impossible. I distinguish among events said to occur at a time, 'hard' events which really occur solely at that time and 'soft' events which occur partly at another time. God's beliefs at a time are hard events at that time. It follows that if God is a temporal being, he cannot know infallibly what either we or he will do freely at a future time; and if God is timeless, he cannot know what happens in time. Hence we must define God's 'omniscience' in such a way as to exclude any knowledge of future free actions. I discuss in an Appendix how far this view is compatible with Scripture and Church tradition.

Keywords God · Omniscient · Timeless · Backward causation · Simultaneous causation · Hard event

1 Introduction

It is metaphysically impossible, I am going to argue, for anyone to know infallibly what anyone (they or anyone else) does freely at a time t except at a time later than that time. Hence it is metaphysically impossible for God to be essentially omniscient in what I will call the 'strong sense' of knowing all true propositions—given that God or some other agent sometimes acts freely. (I understand by 'metaphysical necessity' the strongest kind of necessity

there can be; an example of a metaphysically necessary proposition is one whose negation entails a contradiction. I understand by 'metaphysical impossibility' the strongest kind of impossibility there can be; an example of a metaphysically impossible proposition is one which entails a contradiction. I understand by 'metaphysical possibility' the weakest kind of possibility there can be. I understand an agent acting 'freely' in the 'libertarian' sense that there is no sufficient cause of her doing what she does.) If we suppose that God is in time, that is that his eternal existence is everlasting existence—he has always existed, exists now, and will always exist—there is a powerful argument articulated clearly by Nelson Pike, (Pike 1965)¹ from which it follows that it is not logically possible for God to have such infallible knowledge, to which I will come in due course. That argument assumes the generally accepted principle that backward causation—an effect occurring earlier than its cause—is metaphysically impossible. But that principle needs justification, and I shall attempt to provide that justification. Nevertheless, if we suppose, as of course the considerable majority of Christian theologians have supposed, that God is outside time—he exists in one timeless moment and at that moment knows every event in the history of the universe and causes (directly or indirectly) all such events (apart from human free actions)—then, as Pike acknowledges, his argument does not apply; it does not show that God could not be essentially omniscient in a world in which there exists a free agent. For while the impossibility of backward causation rules out God's foreknowledge of free actions, it does not rule out God's timeless knowledge of free actions. We can rule that out, I shall argue, by means of a second principle: that every

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¹ For a clear summary of the argument and reaction to subsequent writing on the topic, see Pike (1993).

direct (that is, most immediate) cause must consist both of a part which is not simultaneous with the whole of its effect, and also a part which is simultaneous with the whole of its effect. I shall defend this principle, and argue that it follows from it that there could not be a timeless God who knows infallibly what anyone does freely. I shall also point out It follows from these two principles that (direct or indirect) simultaneous causation (a cause being exactly simultaneous with its effect) is impossible.

2 Causation and Temporal Succession

Whether either backward or simultaneous causation are metaphysically possible depends on how we understand 'cause' and 'earlier than'. On one view of these concepts, which I call the 'derivative' view, they are analysable in terms of more fundamental concepts, and in particular the concept of 'law of nature'. On the derivative view of 'cause', causes and effects are events, and an event E being the cause of an effect F consists in it being a law of nature or a consequence of a law that all (or most) events of some type ϵ (of which E is a token) are correlated with events of some type ϕ (of which F is a token). One may make it a further matter of definition—as Hume did²—that to be a law the correlation must be of an earlier E with a later F, in which case the impossibility of backward causation follows by definition. But reasonably most writers have felt that what looks like a deep metaphysical claim needs to be supported by more than what looks like an arbitrary definition. Hence the move by for example David Lewis, to define a 'law of nature' in such a way as not to beg that question. For Lewis laws of nature are the regularities of the 'best system' of laws, that being the one which 'strikes as good a balance as truth will allow between simplicity and strength' (see Lewis 1994, 478), that is one which explains (as far as can be done) all events, past, present or future. We can infer with probability to what these laws are from our knowledge of what is the simplest system which explains all known events. Given (as Lewis assumes) that which events are earlier than other events is fixed independently of what are the laws of nature, it then becomes a contingent matter whether the simplest system has laws, all of the form 'all (or most) ϵ 's are followed by ϕ 's', or whether it has some laws of the form 'all (or most) ϵ 's are preceded by ϕ 's' and so whether there is backward causation. Some philosophers however assume that all that is fixed is not the temporal order of events, but only which

events are temporally contiguous to other events; and these philosophers define 'the direction of time' (that is, the earlier to later direction) in a particular spatio-temporal region, as the direction of most causal processes in that region; and this constitutes a derivative view of temporal precedence. These philosophers define not merely 'cause' but 'earlier than' in terms of laws of nature. That too leaves it as a contingent matter whether there is backward causation. On all such accounts, as Hume famously claimed, a cause does not make an event occur, does not necessitate it; something is a 'cause' merely in virtue of its place in the web of actual events in the history of the world.

However, I support a rival view, which I call the 'underivative' view, which seems to me clearly to elucidate those concepts, that neither 'cause' nor 'earlier than' are concepts derivable from 'laws of nature', but that they are concepts too fundamental in our conceptual system to be defined fully in terms of other concepts. We understand these concepts in large part by knowing paradigm instances of their correct application. On this account of causation,³ which seems to me to elucidate what we ordinarily mean by 'cause', the paradigm instances include ones where we intentionally make bodily movements, that is we 'have the intention' (or 'have the volition'—to use the old-fashioned philosophical word) immediately to make a bodily movement such as the motion of a hand, and the movement then occurs. For me to have an intention immediately to move my hand is not to have occur in my mind some passive event like a desire; it is just to do what (if it were difficult to move my hand, or I did not succeed in moving it) would be called 'to try' to move my hand. And similarly for every intention to do any other instrumentally basic action (that is, any action which we do straight off without needing a belief about how to do it).⁴ And to try to do such an action is just to do whatever it seems to the agent is most likely to cause the intended effect. There is no other way to describe my trying except as apparently exerting causal influence, which—if I exert enough of it, and there are no stronger counter-influences—will produce the intended effect. If I did not think of what I do when I try as exerting causal influence, there would be no point in trying and I would cease to act. And when we have to try hard to produce some effect—for example, to lift a heavy weight—we are acutely conscious of what causal influence is, and so—if other necessary conditions are present (e.g. the weight is not very heavy, or tied down)—what causation is. Exerting causal influence just is the kind of thing of which we are aware when we try to perform a basic action; and actually causing just is the kind

² In his first definition of a cause as 'an object, followed by another, and where all the objects similar to the first are followed by objects similar to the second'—David Hume. *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, section 7. Part II.

³ For a fuller exposition of this account, see Swinburne (2013, ch. 5).

⁴ For argument in support of the thesis that every intentional action involves trying, see for example Hornsby (1980, ch. 3).

of thing of which we are aware when we succeed in performing the basic action. And this concept is the concept of 'physically necessitating', the effect, forcing it into existence when it was not in existence when we began to cause it. The ability of humans to do this on any occasion depends of course on other factors (the state of our body and especially our brain).

The kind of causation, 'intentional' or 'agent' causation, in which agents intentionally cause effects cannot be analysed as the occurrence of an instance of a regular succession along the lines described above. For the causation is a directly experienced causing by a substance. But it is possible to analyse inanimate, that is non-intentional, causation also as the causation of an effect by a substance—for example, when a brick breaks a window, not as the event of the motion of the brick breaking the window, but as the brick itself causing the window to break; and then we can analyse 'laws of nature' in terms of causation, and not causation in terms of laws of nature. Laws of nature are then mere regularities, not of the actual successions of events as with Hume and Lewis, but of the causal powers possessed by substances and their liabilities to exercise them under certain conditions (e.g. when acted on by other substances, or when having some particular property or relation). When the brick breaks the window, it is exercising its power to break a substance, which it has the liability to exercise when it has a certain momentum and the substance has a certain fragility. 'All photons travel in empty space with a velocity of 299,792 km/s' is the regularity that all photons have the power to cause themselves to move at 299,792 km/s, and the liability to exercise that power when in empty space. Then inanimate causation is the same kind of causation as intentional causation. The difference between them lies only in how the causation is initiated. Humans (and animals) often exercise causation intentionally; while inanimate substances have a liability to exercise it under certain conditions, and belong to kinds, all members of which have the same powers and liabilities. It is simpler to suppose, and so more probably true, that all causation is of the same kind, than to suppose that two different kinds of causation are at work in the world, interacting with each other; and we assume in our pre-philosophical moments that there is only one kind of causation. Hence we come to understand that concept of causation as transitive. If I move my hand, that is cause my hand to move, and thereby my hand causes a stick to move, and the stick causes a ball to move, then I have caused the ball to move. And so generally. It then follows that, contrary to the derivative view, a cause of any kind is not an event which occupies a certain kind of place in the overall pattern of events; rather a cause is—to repeat—a substance which physically necessitates the effect, makes it occur.

The underivative account of causation fits naturally with an underivative account of temporal succession. The primitive source of our grasp of the concept of temporal succession is our experience in a specious present of one event being succeeded by another event—for example, an experience of a flash being succeeded by an experience of a bang; and such successions form paradigm instances of the concept. Temporal succession—one event occurring later than another one—just is the relation of which we are aware when it holds between our experiences in the specious present. In talking about events in the public world succeeding one another, we are attributing to them the same relation as we experience when we experience one experience being followed by another one. And we also are aware in the specious present of instances of one experience being succeeded by a second experience, and this by a third experience, and since they are also instances of the first experience being succeeded by the third experience, we come to understand the concept of temporal succession, like the concept of causation, as transitive.

Before proceeding further I need to defend a theory which I call the P-theory that all talk about events happening at instants of time can be analysed more fundamentally in terms of what happens over a period or periods of time. The normal sense of 'instant', made precise in mathematics, is as designating a zero-dimensional boundary to a one-dimensional period of time. Most ordinary talk about an event beginning or ending at an instant is analysable as the event lasting for a period of which that instant is the initial or terminal boundary. Talk about an event happening at an instant is analysable as the event happening for a period divisible into two periods, each bounded (terminally or initially) by that instant, and which in a loose sense may therefore be said to 'include' that instant. Talk about objects having some rate of change such as velocity at an instant at some point is analysable in terms of that velocity (or whatever) being the limit of the distance (or whatever) covered over time as we take smaller and smaller distances (or whatever) from that point (on one side or the other of the point—and of course the 'instantaneous velocity' may differ in the two cases—which couldn't happen if it was what it was independently how it was measured.) No mundane phenomenon requires us to postulate that there is a sense of 'instant' in which an event can happen at an instant, which is not analysable more fundamentally in terms of what happens over periods. And it seems difficult to understand what it would mean to say that an event happened at an instant without that entailing anything about the period which includes or begins or ends with that period. It seems an ungrounded assumption to postulate that there is a sense of 'instant' in which this does have a meaning; and I cannot see why talk about God needs to postulate this. Hence I shall in future assume the

P-theory, and so assume that all temporal events happen at periods of time.

3 The Impossibility of Backward or Simultaneous Causation

With these understandings of causation and temporal succession, and of the times at which events occur, I come back to the issue of whether backward or simultaneous causation are metaphysically possible. Given the P-theory, simultaneous causation is to be understood as a substance exercising its causal influence over exactly the same period of time as the effect which it causes, and backward causation is to be understood as a substance beginning to exercise its causal influence after the beginning of the effect which it causes. However in order to make my exposition simpler to follow, I shall sometimes describe these alleged possibilities in terms of an event (a substance exercising causal power) causing another simultaneous or earlier event. I now introduce three connected concepts. By an event occurring at a (period of) time T being '*fixed*' at a time T^* . I mean that it is such that of metaphysical necessity no agent however powerful and however hard he tried at T^* could cause any part of that event not to occur at T . As I noted earlier, one may cause an event E by causing another event which in turn causes E . A cause which is the most immediate (or direct) cause of an event, and actually brings it (the whole event) into existence (when but for the act of causing, it would not occur) may be said to '*fix*' it. By an event being '*fixable*' at a time T I shall mean that the event is such that it is metaphysically possible that a strong enough agent could at T have fixed either it or its non-occurrence, whichever he chose, whatever else metaphysically possible might be the case at any other time or timeless moment.

One could only bring any event E into existence at a time by beginning to act at a time at which E does not exist. The most immediate act of exerting causal influence—what I call '*direct*' causation—moves E from non-existence to existence, and so must begin to be exerted when E does not exist. So E cannot be fixed by a direct cause acting at exactly the same time as E . Hence some part of E is fixed at any period during E 's occurrence. For this simple reason, I suggest, simultaneous direct causation is impossible. That is compatible with some direct cause acting during the first part of the occurrence of some event so as to bring about the second part of that event (or indeed, barring my arguments below, a direct cause acting during the second part of the occurrence of some event so as to bring about the first part of that event.) But what, I argue, is impossible is that a direct cause cause an effect by acting over exactly the same period of time as the effect. Hence every effect is fixed at the time at which it occurs.

And not merely must the direct cause C of some effect E exert causal influence at some time other than when E occurs, but it must continue to do so over the whole time while E occurs, if C is to fix E . For if C exerted causal influence so as to cause E for only a part of the time when E occurred, the substance involved in E itself or some other substance could fix the other part of E . So, I claim, a substance which fixes an event must exert its influence for a period of time which includes both a time when the event does not occur and the whole time when the event does occur. We can see this principle at work in mundane examples. When a moving billiard ball A hits a stationary billiard ball B and causes B to move, A must be moving as it touches B , and so—given P-theory—for some period ending with the instant at which it touches B in order to transmit its motion, and it will be the direct cause of B 's subsequent motion for the period while it is still in contact with B . After contact is broken, the direct cause of B 's subsequent motion is B itself.

I turn next to the issue of whether (direct or indirect) backward causation—a cause causing an earlier effect—is possible. Among the paradigm examples of a substance being the direct cause of an event are a person having an intention to cause some bodily movement being followed immediately by a brain event which causes the movement ('followed immediately' in the sense that the effect begins after the beginning of the cause and ends at the same instant as it). In these cases it follows from the argument of the previous paragraph that some part of the first event (e.g. a person having a certain intention) is fixed at a time at which no part of the second event (the brain event) is fixed. And while most of the successions of temporally overlapping events ending at the same instant of which we are aware are not ones in which, we believe, the first event causes the second event, we derive from the paradigm examples the understanding that a time at which persons can cause an event directly is any time beginning with their exercise of causal influence and ending at the same instant as the event. It follows that if at the time of the occurrence of the first event we had formed an intention to stop the second event occurring and/or to cause a different event instead and were strong enough, we would have succeeded—for this would be a succession just like the actual ones in which our intentions cause events. It follows that all successions of temporally overlapping events which end at the same instant, not merely the ones of which we are aware, are ones where some part of the event which begins earlier is fixed at a time when no part of the later event is fixed but the whole later event is fixable.

Yet no (whole) event E at a time T_2 is fixable at any time T_0 ending earlier than the end of T_2 . This is because, however strong an agent was at T_0 , it remains possible that he changes his mind at a later time T_1 , beginning at the end

of T_0 and ending at the end of T_2 , and so stops (some part of) E occurring. But since an agent at any earlier time T_0 could (unless he changed his mind, or was prevented by the act of a stronger agent before the end of T_1) cause (though not fix) what happens at T_1 , and thereby what happens at T_2 , what happens at T_2 cannot be fixed at T_0 . Hence every event is unfixed at every time ending before it ends.

Further, no event E at T_2 can be caused directly and so fixed by any agent D acting at any subsequent time. For as we have seen, the direct cause C of an event E must last for the whole time while E occurs, as well as for some further time when E does not occur. In the case of a supposed subsequent cause D , that further time T_3 would be immediately subsequent to E . But only what is fixed can fix some other event; unless D 's action is fixed, that action cannot fix E . For if an event is not fixed, an agent of sufficient strength could always prevent that event from happening, and then its effect would not happen. Yet, we have seen, every event is unfixed at every time ending before it ends. Hence no event at one time can have a direct cause acting at a later time. Yet if an event cannot have a later direct cause, it cannot have any later cause. For such a later cause would be connected to the direct cause by a chain of causes, each of which was the direct cause of the next one; and some of these direct causings would be of an earlier event by a later one, and so ruled out by the previous pattern of argument. So every event is fixed at all times after it has occurred. In summary and very loosely, since forward causation is always metaphysically possible, backward causation is never metaphysically possible. I have now completed my justification of the two principles which I stated at the beginning of the paper.

It follows, that not merely direct simultaneous causation, but indirect simultaneous causation is impossible. For if C caused a simultaneous event E by directly causing F which directly caused E , F would have to occur either (1) simultaneously with C , or (2) after C or (3) before E . (1) is impossible because of the impossibility of direct simultaneous causation; (2) involves backward causation in the respect that F causes E ; and (3) involves backward causation in the respect that C causes F . And the same problems arise for any postulated longer chain of causes by which C causes E . Hence the metaphysical impossibility, not merely of backward causation, but of all simultaneous causation.⁵

⁵ Most philosophers seem to allow the possibility of simultaneous causation. Immanuel Kant (*The Critique of Pure Reason*, B248) claimed that 'the great majority of efficient causes are simultaneous with their effects'. He purported to justify this claim by giving what he claimed were examples of simultaneous causation, without giving any argument to show that they were not merely examples of very fast forward causation; his least plausible example is 'the stove, as cause, is simultaneous with its effect, the heat of the room.'

4 Hard and Soft Events

Before we can apply the above principles, we need an account what it is for an event to occur at a certain time. For despite these principles, there are certainly propositions reporting some event purportedly occurring at some time which can be made true or false (wholly or partially) by some later event, where it seems fairly evident that the proposition reporting the purportedly earlier event does not report merely what happened at that earlier time. And it is for this reason that the event reported by the former proposition is not caused by the later event. For example suppose that John met Mary in 1988 and they got married 2 years later; then by marrying Mary in 1990 John made it true that 'John met his future wife in 1988'. But it is evident that 'John met his future wife in 1988' is only partly about a meeting in 1988; it is also about what happened at some unspecified later time. While it may seem in general obvious whether or not some proposition purportedly about some time is really totally about that time and so made true or false solely by events at that time, it is desirable to have a definition which makes a clear distinction between such propositions and other propositions which are purportedly about one time but are really (at least partly) about another time and so made true or false solely or partly by events at that other time. Various philosophers have sought to make such a distinction in terms of 'hard' and 'soft' facts. In my view the definitions which they have offered⁶ have not been satisfactory, and I shall now provide what I believe to be a more satisfactory one; and because our concern is a concern with relations between events, I shall phrase it as a distinction between 'hard' and 'soft' events; the occurrence of a hard/soft event constitutes a hard/soft fact.

I define an event E as a hard event at T iff the occurrence or non-occurrence of times before or after T is neither metaphysically necessary nor metaphysically sufficient for the occurrence of E —given the occurrence of the other events that occurred at T , for the occurrence of which the

⁶ The definition which I proceed to give is based on the account of a 'hard fact' about a time t given by William Hasker (Hasker 1989, 81–90), as (in effect) one which has truth conditions independent of whether there is any future time subsequent to t . This definition and all the other earlier definitions are unsatisfactory for the purpose of discussing the possibility of backward causation, because they constitute an event as 'hard' in terms of its relation to events in only one direction of time, and so beg the question about whether hard events can be caused by what happens later. For detailed discussion of all other definitions see Swinburne (2014). My definition in that paper defines an event as 'hard' in terms of its relation both to its past and to its future. I realized subsequently that my own definition in that paper needed further refinement, and I have tried to provide that here. My definition will of course, for any T , capture far fewer events as 'hard' at a given time than all the earlier definitions, since it rules out events reported by propositions which depend for their truth-value on the existence (or non-existence) of any times before T .

occurrence or non-occurrence of times before or after T is neither metaphysically necessary nor metaphysically sufficient. (To avoid too clumsy a definition, I am counting the non-occurrence of an event of some kind at T as an event at T .) An event at T that is not a hard event at T is a soft event at T .

I now illustrate how this definition works. Me-having-a-pain-at-midday is a hard event at midday, because whether it occurred is metaphysically independent of the occurrence or non-occurrence of any time before or after midday, given everything else that happened at midday for the occurrence of which the occurrence or non-occurrence of times before or after T is neither metaphysically necessary nor metaphysically sufficient. Whether or not there were such times, I could still have had or not have had a pain at midday. Likewise a-world-war-beginning-in-1914 is a hard event at 1914. Its occurrence is independent of there being any time before or after 1914,⁷ given everything else that happened in 1914, for the occurrence or non-occurrence of which the occurrence of an earlier or later year is neither metaphysically necessary or sufficient. But John-being-30-years-old-in-1988' is a soft event in 1988, since it is metaphysically necessary for its occurrence that there were 30 years before 1988. Necessarily, if there were no times before 1988, that event could not have occurred. Intuitively John-meeting-his-future-wife-in-1988 is a soft event in 1988. But the occurrence of times before or after 1988 is neither metaphysically necessary nor metaphysically sufficient for its occurrence, for John could have married Mary later in 1988. To get the result that this is a soft event in 1988 we need the clause 'given the occurrence of the other events that occurred at T , for the occurrence of which the occurrence or non-occurrence of times before or after T is metaphysically necessary or metaphysically sufficient'. For, given what else happened in 1988, including the event of John-not-marrying-Mary-in-1988, the occurrence of times later than 1988 is necessary for the occurrence of John-meeting-his-future-wife-in-1988; and the occurrence or non-occurrence of other times apart from 1988 is not metaphysically necessary or sufficient for the event of John-not-marrying-Mary-in-1988. The-beginning-of-the-First-World-War in 1914 is a soft event in 1914, because the non-occurrence of any years before 1914 would be metaphysically sufficient for its occurrence, given the

occurrence of a-world-war-beginning-in-1914 (for the occurrence of which, as noted above, neither the occurrence nor the non-occurrence of times before or after 1914 is metaphysically necessary or sufficient).

An event that is not a hard event at a time T may be a hard event at a different time, and in particular at a time that includes T . Thus, while John-meeting-his-future-wife-in-1988 is a soft event in 1988, it is a hard event at the period 1988–1990 inclusive; the existence or non-existence of years outside that period makes no difference to whether or not it occurred. With this definition of 'hard event' the impossibility of simultaneous or backward causation is the impossibility that any hard event at T_2 cause any event that is a hard event at T_1 or is a part of any event that is a hard event at any period that includes T_1 , where T_1 or any such period is earlier than or simultaneous with T_2 . In future, unless otherwise stated, I ask the reader to understand by an 'event at T ' a 'hard event at T '.

All the claims made in previous sections and to be made in subsequent sections about the possible relations of events to each other are to be read as concerned only with hard events.

5 A Temporal God cannot infallibly know future free actions

With these crucial preliminary results about the nature of causation and of temporal succession, I come at last to Pike's argument which, I repeat, assumes that God exists in time. As presented by Pike, this is an argument to show that no agent, and so not even God, could have essential foreknowledge of the free actions of any human being; and although Pike does not apply it to God's foreknowledge of his own free actions or those of any other free agent, on the assumption that God is in time, it seems obviously to apply to that as much as to his foreknowledge of human free actions. Knowing at a time T_1 that S will do A at a later time T_2 , entails both believing at T_1 that S will do A at T_2 , and that S will do A at T_2 . So if S has a choice at T_2 independently of the causes influencing him, whether to do A or not-A, and if backward causation is impossible and so S's action at T_2 cannot affect what God believes at T_1 , if God believes at T_1 , that S will do A, S has it in his power at T_2 to make God's prior belief false—by doing not-A. And if God believes at T_1 that S will do not-A, S has it in his power at T_2 also to make that belief false. But if God has total foreknowledge, either he must believe that S will do A, or he must believe that S will do not-A. So it could only be a lucky accident if God has at T_1 whatever is the true belief. And, to generalize, it could only be an enormously lucky accident if all God's beliefs about the future free choices of any agents prove true; and so there could not be a being who is essentially omniscient (in

⁷ I am assuming that an expression denoting a period (or instant) of time, such as a particular year, picks out the time it does on our current usage, independently of what happens before or after that time. This aspect of our usage is shown by the fact that the names of years (e.g. as '1988' or '1990'), originally given to them on the basis of their supposed distance in years from the year of the birth of Jesus ('1' CE) have been retained, despite the current general belief of scholars that Jesus was born a few years earlier than previously believed.

what I have called the 'strong' sense of 'omniscient'). This quick argument brings out what seems obvious to many people that God cannot foreknow infallibly what an agent will do tomorrow, if what she will do tomorrow depends on her (libertarian) free choice tomorrow. Hence—given that some agent sometimes acts freely, God cannot be essentially omniscient in what I have called the 'strong sense' of knowing all true propositions.

The above argument assumes that, while God's knowledge at a time T_1 may be a soft fact about T_1 , God's beliefs at T_1 are hard facts about T_1 . Alvin Plantinga's (Plantinga 1986) suggestion for why there is no incompatibility between God's omniscience (in the strong sense) and human free will is that God's beliefs at a time T_1 about future human actions at T_2 are soft facts at T_1 . So, he claims, the event of God having in 1974 a belief the Jones will freely mow the lawn in 1976 is a soft fact about 1974; the truth value of 'God believes in 1974 that Jones will freely mow the lawn in 1976' depends on what happens in 1976; by mowing the lawn in 1976 Jones would bring it about that God believed in 1974 that Jones would mow the lawn (and so also at the same time bring it about that that belief was true). However it seems obvious that in the normal sense of 'belief', that someone has a belief at a time T_1 is a hard fact about that time.⁸ Given that to know some proposition entails to believe that proposition, it follows that the proposition that God knows all true propositions would mean something very different from what it is normally supposed to mean. Plantinga is arguing that

⁸ A belief is the belief it is in virtue of who has it and what is its content, that is what is believed by the believer, but that content may be described in different ways. Thus my belief that 'there was a Greek called 'Alexander' who was a great general' may be described by those who believe that there was such a person as Alexander, as my belief that 'the Greek called "Alexander" was a great general'. But while I could have the belief described in the former way, even if there was not such a Greek, I couldn't have the belief described in the latter way if there was no such person—that description of the content of the belief presupposes that there was such a person. This difference is sometimes described as a difference between beliefs of two kinds which we may have—'narrow content' beliefs (e.g. the belief that 'there was a Greek called "Alexander" who was a great general') and 'wide content' beliefs (e.g. the belief that 'the Greek called "Alexander" was a great general'). But there are not two such kinds of belief; there are merely two different ways of describing a particular belief. A narrow content belief is one in which the content is described in a way which does not presuppose anything outside the mental state of the believer. A wide-content belief is always a re-description of a narrow content belief in a way which does presuppose something outside the mental state of the believer. In this context we are concerned with whether the contents of God's beliefs to which he has immediate mental access are all true; and so my claim in the text is that a belief at a time, individuated by its narrow content, is a hard event at that time. Although to avoid too complicated an exposition, I have often in the text given wide content descriptions of beliefs. I ask the reader to assume that when it is relevant to the hardness of a belief, the belief is the belief it is in virtue of its narrow content.

human free will is compatible with God's 'omniscience' by redefining 'omniscience', so that the apparent incompatibility disappears. So we cannot regard this suggestion as proving that the propositions normally expressed by 'God knows all true propositions' and 'humans sometimes act freely' are compatible. And since Plantinga does not give any positive account of what 'God is omniscient' does mean, he is simply claiming that we must affirm the sentence without any understanding of what it means. It follows from that that we cannot regard God's omniscience as—to use Plantinga's own phrase—a 'great-making property' which provides some ground for worshipping him.

A similar but somewhat more appealing solution to the apparent incompatibility between God's omniscience and human free will is to claim that propositions about the future actions of free agents are neither true nor false until the agents do or do not do the actions. For in that case in order to be omniscient at some time a person could know all propositions true at that time without knowing those propositions. A person is omniscient in 1974 if he knows all propositions which are true in 1974. All propositions which correctly report what happened in earlier years—e.g. that I moved house in 1972 or that my grandfather died in 1963—were true in 1974, and a being omniscient in 1974 must know them. But if you maintain that propositions which correctly predict the future actions of free agents) are not true or false until that which they predict does or does not occur, then you allow that a being may be omniscient without knowing them. One could use the words 'true' and 'false' in this way. But it seems to me obvious that those who have wanted to claim that God is omniscient in the wide sense of knowing all true propositions have wanted to claim that God knows everything that is going to happen; and if you use the words 'true' and 'false' in the way being discussed, the claim that God is omniscient (in the strong sense) has to be expressed slightly differently from the way I expressed it earlier, as the claim that God knows at every time all the propositions which will be true at any time; those about the future may not yet be true, but a God omniscient (in the strong sense) would know now which ones will be true. Pike's arguments can then be re-expressed in such a way as to show that God having such knowledge would also rule out the possibility of agents acting freely.

6 A Timeless God cannot infallibly know free actions

However on the view of most Christian theologians God is supposed to be timeless. In the classical exposition of this doctrine by Boethius (Boethius, *De Consolatione philosophiae* 5.6), God being eternal consists in his having the

complete possession all at once of an unlimitable life. Everything God knows or does is done all-at-once in a moment of divine time, his 'eternal present', which has no beginning or end. At that moment, according to Boethius, God knows everything that happens on earth at every period of time (both what is past and what is future relative to us), and causes effects which happen at each period of time. His knowledge includes knowledge of all human free actions. But since his eternal present is not 'before' the time of any human actions, he *foreknows* no human action. And since he does not exist at any time on our time scale, he does not know any human action at what is (literally) the same time as the action. Hence his knowledge of that action is no more incompatible with the action being free than is our observation of someone else's present action incompatible with it being free. So, Aquinas wrote, 'future contingents cannot be certain to us, because we know them *as* future contingents; they can be certain only to God, whose act of knowledge is in eternity, above time.' (*Summa Theologiae* Ia.14.13 ad3.) God is omniscient in the strong sense because all things are present to him (at his one divine moment) as they happen. If this is what God's knowledge really amounts to, the earlier objections which relied on the impossibility of backward causation do not succeed. For it would never happen that God first believed something and then later there occurred that which makes his belief true or false.

However, the doctrine of God's timeless knowledge of free human actions is normally expounded, as by Boethius and Aquinas, as involving the claim that God sees temporal events 'as present', that is as they happen; to use the expression coined by Stump and Kretzmann (1981)⁹ his knowledge of all events is 'co-occurrent' with the occurrence of those events. And theists generally claim that God knows what humans are doing and suffering, as they act and suffer. But what could 'co-occurrent' mean except 'simultaneous with'? And, how could God 'simultaneously' be aware of a temporal event 'as it happens', unless his awareness of it is simultaneous with it happening, and so how could he be aware at his one timeless moment of two events happening at different times, unless the two awareness are simultaneous with each other, and so the two events happening at different times would have to happen at the same time—which is logically impossible. How could God be aware of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 587 BCE as it happens, and of its destruction by the Romans in 70 CE as it happens, when these two times are not simultaneous with each other? Any

⁹ They claim that the 'timeless' tradition is most naturally read as holding that the divine 'moment' has duration and thus is a period and not an instant' (pp. 432–433). Paul Fitzgerald (Fitzgerald 1985) denies that their view can be held consistently with the rest of what Stump and Kretzmann wish to claim.

sense of 'simultaneous' in which this is logically possible would seem to have little connection with the ordinary sense of 'simultaneous'.¹⁰

It is not possible to save the doctrine of God's timelessness by abandoning the explicit claim that God's knowledge of all events is 'co-occurrent' with the occurrence of those events, and claim instead that God knows all events at a timeless moment which has no temporal relation to the times of the occurrence of the events. This is because if God's knowledge of a human free action is not to be an enormous lucky accident, those actions must cause God coming to know about them. Now either this causal relation is direct (that is, the action is the direct cause of God coming to know about it), or the action causes some other mundane event which directly causes God coming to know about it. Either way, this process involves the direct causation of God's knowledge by a mundane substance. I argued earlier that directly causing or 'fixing' must continue over a period which includes both the non-existence and the existence of the event. So the mere existence of a causal relation between a human action and God coming to know about it entails that some part of the event of God's knowledge occurs at the same time as some mundane event, and so must be an event in time.

A similar result follows from the doctrine of God as creator and sustainer of the universe. This, given my earlier construal of laws of nature, entails that God causes mundane substances to retain their causal powers and liabilities. Now for any given mundane substance either this causal relation between God and the mundane substance is direct, or God causes some other mundane substance to retain its causal powers and liabilities which include the power and liability to cause the former substance to retain its causal powers and liabilities. Either way—given the previous argument—it follows that at any time T , God directly causes a mundane substance to continue to have the same powers as previously by acting on it both when it does not have those powers at T and when it does. But in acting when the substance does have the powers which it has T ,

¹⁰ Stump and Kretzmann (1981) have tried to make sense of a special kind of simultaneity, which could hold between God's beliefs and actions on the one hand, and mundane events on the other hand, without incurring the problems which I have been describing. They point out that, according to the normal interpretation of the equations of the Special Theory of Relativity, simultaneity is relative to a frame of reference; and so strictly we can speak only of 'simultaneity in frame F_1 ' or 'simultaneity in frame F_2 ' and not of 'simultaneity' *simpliciter*. With this analogy in mind, Stump and Kretzmann define a notion which they call 'ET-simultaneity', which has the consequence that all events in time are ET-simultaneous with the one timeless event, without being simultaneous (in the normal sense) with each other. I do not believe that the analogy from Special Relativity will serve Stump and Kretzmann's purpose of beginning to make 'ET-simultaneity' intelligible. For my reasons for this, see Swinburne (2016, chapter 12).

God is acting at T . So part of God's direct action in conserving the powers of mundane substances involves God acting simultaneously with the existence of those powers in the substances. So analogously to the case of God's knowledge, the mere existence of a causal relation between a part of God's action and its mundane effect entails that some of the action must occur at the same time as the event caused, and so must be an event in time. God could only know that Jones will freely mow the lawn if part of his coming to know this is simultaneous with Jones's intention to mow the lawn or with another mundane event caused by Jones's intention; and God can only cause an event on earth if part of his causal action is simultaneous with the occurrence of that event or with another mundane event which causes that event. And since God acts and knows throughout the history of the universe, much of God's life must be a temporal life.

But it seems impossible to give any sense to the view that each of God's actions of causing mundane events and each of the events of God acquiring knowledge has a part which is temporal and a part which is timeless, since the continuity of the parts in each case seems necessary for the occurrence of the action or other event. I conclude that it seems almost impossible to give any sense to the view that there could be a timeless God who knows what is happening in the physical universe and causes events in that universe. For this reason God's omniscience must be construed in a weaker sense; and I suggest that the obvious weaker sense compatible with his other divine properties is that God is essentially omniscient at all times T iff necessarily he knows all metaphysically necessary true propositions, and all metaphysically contingent true propositions about every period ending at or earlier than the beginning of T and all the propositions which these entail. I do not see any reason why a theism which emphasizes God's omnipotence and perfect freedom should regard such a God as less worthy of worship if by his own free choice he exercises his omnipotence in such a way as to limit his omniscience for as long he chooses.

7 Appendix on God's Omniscience in the Bible and Church Tradition

There are several passages in the Bible which imply that God does not foreknow human free actions, and so that his omniscience should be understood in a weaker sense than the strong sense. Genesis 6 records that humans became very wicked in the period before the Flood, and so 'the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth'. (Genesis 6:6). The obvious interpretation of this passage is that humans had behaved in a way in which God did not expect them to behave when he created them. Typically in

the Old Testament God has certain plans for humans and at their intercession changes them. Consider Abraham's intercession for Sodom (Genesis 18), or the intercession of Moses for the children of Israel (Exodus 32). Or God may change his plans because humans change their behaviour. The Book of Jonah tells how God told Jonah to preach to Nineveh 'Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown', but Nineveh repented and so 'God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them, and he did not do it' (Jonah 3:10.) Nineveh was not overthrown. But if God changes his mind, he cannot have foreknown his own future action, and so his knowledge cannot be unlimited. Again in the Old Testament God often makes, as well as absolute promises (that he will do so-and-so), conditional promises (that he will do so-and-so if humans do such-and-such). Yet there would be no need for a conditional promise if God already knew how humans would act. Jeremiah is told by the Lord to make a certain proclamation in the Lord's house to the people of Judah. The Lord comments that '*it may* be they will hearken and turn every man from his evil way' (Jeremiah 26:3; my italics). Jeremiah is told to tell the people that *if* they continue in their evil way then the Lord will destroy Jerusalem and the Temple. The natural interpretation of the passage is that the Lord does not know whether the people will continue in their evil way. By contrast, the New Testament talks a great deal of God's 'foreknowledge', but, at any rate sometimes, it does not seem to regard this as absolute. Man can upset God's plans. God indeed has a book of life in which the names of those who will be saved are written. But the names in the book can be changed if humans behave in unexpected ways. According to the Book of Revelation Christ—through an angel—told the church of Sardis that, if they 'repent' and 'conquer' (that is, live the Christian life) 'I will not blot your name out of the book of life' (Revelation 3:5), and the implication seems to be that if they do not repent and conquer, Christ will blot out their names.

However, most Christian theologians, and some doctrinal definitions, have held that God is omniscient in the strong sense—because they thought that otherwise God would not be as great as they believed him to be. Yet the first council recognized as 'Ecumenical' (that is, as having universal authority) by either Catholics or Orthodox, to pronounce on God's omniscience was the first Vatican Council which declared in CE 1870 that 'all things are open and laid bare to [God's] eyes, even those which will be brought about by the free activity of creatures'. (My translation. For the Latin text see Denzinger (1963), no. 3003). Nevertheless the Council authorized no anathema against those who held a rival view, which Councils normally did when they regarded some doctrine as heretical; and (as far as I can see) this view is not mentioned in the

1992 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* which ‘aims at presenting an organic synthesis of the essential fundamental elements of Christian doctrine’. It seems to me therefore unclear whether a doctrine of God’s essential omniscience (in the strong sense) is an essential part of Catholic doctrine; and of course the first Vatican Council is not recognised as Ecumenical by the Orthodox Church or by any other Christian group.

One theologian, much revered as one of the great Fathers of the Church, who seems to have had considerable doubts about God’s essential omniscience (in the strong sense) is Jerome, who allows that God might not fulfil his promises to humans if humans change their behaviour. In what he regarded as expounding teaching of Ezekiel (presumably Ezekiel 18:21–24) and Jeremiah, Jerome wrote: ‘The Lord would not fulfil the good things which he had promised for them, if good people turn to sin; nor the bad things which he had promised for the worst people, if they turn again to salvation ... Because [God] prefers the repentance of a sinner to his death, he gladly changed his judgement because he saw [the sinner’s] reformed deeds.’ (*Commentary on Jonah* 3:10. PL25.1144.) A later influential Anglican theologian who did not understand omniscience in the strong sense was William Paley. He writes that God’s omniscience would seem to involve ‘a foreknowledge of the action [of created things] upon one

another, and of their changes’, but he then qualifies this by adding ‘at least, so far as the same result from trains of physical and necessary causes’ (see W. Paley, *Natural Theology* Ch. 24).

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A Note on Eternity

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Abstract The timeless solution to the problem of divine foreknowledge and human freedom has many advantages. Still, the relationship between a timeless God and temporal beings is problematic in a number of ways. In this paper, we focus on the specific problems the timeless view has to deal with when certain assumptions on the metaphysics of time are taken on board. It is shown that on static conception of time God’s omniscience is easily accounted for, but human freedom is threatened, while a dynamic conception has no problems with human freedom, but, on this view, some truths seem not to be knowable by a timeless God. We propose Fragmentalism as a metaphysics of time in which the divine timeless knowledge of temporal events and human freedom can be reconciled.

Keywords Divine omniscience · Eternalism · Fragmentalism · Temporal logic

1 Introduction

Eternity is definitely a very difficult topic. With reference to (Sellars 1962, p. 527), William Craig writes:

An eminent philosopher has remarked that “the problem of time” is virtually unrivaled in “the extent to which it inexorably brings into play all the major concerns of philosophy”. Combine the problem of

time with “the problem of God,” as the study of divine eternity requires, and you have a subject matter which would exhaust a lifetime of study. (Craig 2001, p. iii)

Even confining ourselves only to recent contributes within the very conspicuous literature on this matter, we can identify at least three large families of problems. First of all, there is the problem of distinguishing the ways in which God and other timeless entities, such as abstract objects, eternally exist. In which sense is God out of time? Is He out of time in the same manner in which the number 4 is considered out of time? Note that the questions discussed in philosophy of mathematics since Benacerraf (see Benacerraf 1973) share interesting analogies with the topic of the interaction of a timeless God with temporal and spatial entities. One of the classical problems Benacerraf dealt with is how it is possible to characterize mathematical knowledge—i.e. knowledge of abstract properties and relations—in a naturalistic framework. Mathematical objects are abstract, timeless, non-spatial entities and, therefore, they are causally ineffective. Then, it is not clear how human beings, that are part of the temporal and spatial net, can acquire knowledge on the domain in question. Similarly, on the timeless account of God’s existence, it is not clear how He can causally interact with spatial and temporal entities. In fact, the problem of the cross-relations between God and temporal entities is even more pressing: while it is possible to paraphrase mathematical language in order to show that its ontological commitment is actually less demanding for a naturalist account of knowledge, the same argumentative move is not available to an advocate of the timeless view of God.

Another question, which has been discussed for a long time, concerns the nature of eternity itself. In particular,

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one can inquire how a timeless entity can have a life, that is, how it can be in states that have a duration. A possible strategy is to claim that God's life has a simple extension, devoid of parts. Another way to answer is by calling into question the assumption that a personal being cannot have a punctual life, without any duration.

A third family of problems specifically regards the relationship between a timeless God and the entities that exist in time. This paper will look into some of these problems. In particular, God's timeless conception will be compared with some metaphysical accounts of time. The paper is divided into five sections: in the next section, the timeless solution to the problem of divine omniscience and human freedom is reviewed. In Sect. 3 the relationship between God's timeless conception and a static metaphysics of time is analyzed. In Sect. 4 we provide some attempts to reconcile a genuinely dynamic conception of time with an atemporal view of God. Finally, Sect. 5 contains our proposal.

2 Timeless Solution to the Dilemma of God's Foreknowledge and Human Freedom

The problem of divine foreknowledge and human freedom can be summed up as follows: God is omniscient and, therefore, He knows today what John will do on 3rd March 2026. In particular, assume that God knows that on 3rd March 2026 John decides to mow his lawn. Is John free to decide to mow his lawn or not? If John decided not to mow his lawn, then God's present belief would be false and, thus, He would not be omniscient. But, if John cannot do but to mow his lawn, he cannot be considered free. God's omniscience seems to be a limit to human beings' freedom.

A possible solution to this problem is to state that God's knowledge is not in time. It is inappropriate to say that God knows something today because God is a timeless entity. He atemporally "sees" John's free act exactly as John's birth, his death, and every event that makes the world history. On this view, John can choose to mow his lawn or not because his choice has no influence on God's past beliefs, which do not properly exist.

Some critics of this solution (cf., for instance, Zagzebski 1991) have objected that a fatalist argument can be mounted also in this case. The idea, in a nutshell, is that if God timelessly knows that John decides to mow his lawn—let us call p the proposition describing this state of affairs—the truth of p is fixed *ab aeterno*. It is, therefore, not in John's power to choose not to mow his lawn, making $\neg p$ true. A possible response to this objection (cf. for example Rogers 2007) is to underline that God knows that John mows his lawn *because* John freely chooses to mow his lawn. Therefore, necessity of p does not undermine the

agent's freedom. It is the agent herself who, by choosing p , makes p necessary. Now, since God is eternal, He is co-present with every time and knows every time as if it were present; therefore, God knows every action performed by the agent at every time. Nevertheless, this knowledge does not clash with the agent's freedom because it depends on the agent's choice. If we see an agent a performing an action p , then we know that a performs p and that p has a consequent necessity. Yet, this is not in contrast with a 's freedom. The same is true for God: He eternally sees every point in time and thus He sees a performing p at t . So p has a consequent necessity at t , but neither God's knowledge nor the consequent necessity of p are in contrast with John's freedom.

The timeless solution appears to be an interesting proposal to solve the dilemma of divine omniscience and human freedom. In fact, one of the main reasons to adopt a timeless conception of God is because it reconciles omniscience with freedom. However, we will see that this solution has to face the problem of the metaphysical relationship between an eternal entity and temporal entities and, in particular, the relationship between God's timeless knowledge and the temporal entities that are known. Under assumptions, these relationships seem to undermine human freedom.

3 God's Knowledge and the Static View of Time

The metaphysics of time one is assuming is crucial when inquiring the relationship between an eternal entity—like God—and the temporal states of affairs.¹ We will distinguish below, rather roughly, two very general options regarding the metaphysics of time: the *static* (or eternalist) conception and the *dynamic* conception.²

The eternalist conception seems to be particularly consonant with the idea of an omniscient and timeless God. However, the advocates of this conception have to deal

¹ Obviously, the assumed metaphysics of time is not relevant when the *intrinsic* nature of a timeless God has to be characterized. By definition, an entity that is outside time is compatible with presentism, eternalism and the conceptions that are intermediate between these two (growing block theory, moving spotlight, etc.). It is, of course, necessary to formulate the different metaphysics of time in such a way that they do not exclude that something outside time can exist. For instance, if the main thesis of presentism is: only present entities exist (cf., for example, Crisp 2003), this axiom should be reformulated as: all that exists in time exists in the present.

² We prefer not to use the A-theory–B-theory terminology here because it could be difficult to ascribe some positions to these classes. Consider, for instance, the moving spotlight theory. According to this view, all temporal things exist eternally. However, the present has a privileged ontological status and determines the objective time flow. This position has some features of both the A-theory (the present is ontologically privileged and time flows objectively) and the B-theory (future and past facts exist eternally).

with one main issue: the *fatalist threat*. Let us see this point in detail.

In our discussion we will presuppose a rather shared principle, the Truthmaker Principle:

- (TM) Every truth requires a truthmaker, an existing state of affairs (or ‘fact’) that necessitates and thereby grounds its truth.³

God is conceived as out of time and, thus, His knowledge cannot change and evolve in any way. Now, since God is omniscient, He knows every truth. For (TM), if God knows p , then there exists a truthmaker that makes p true. The matter becomes particularly intriguing when we assume that God (atemporally) knows the future course of history.⁴

Let us assume that God eternally knows that John mows his lawn on 3rd March 2026. Since knowledge is factive, it is true that John mows his lawn on 3rd March 2026. This proposition is true, therefore a truthmaker that makes the proposition true must exist. Under some assumptions, the truthmaker cannot be a present state of affairs, because at the present nothing determines John’s future free choice. John’s future free choice must, in a certain sense, already exist. The thesis that all facts—past, present, future ones—exist is usually called “block universe theory”. The whole history of the world is already given and the only temporal relations are the relations “earlier than”, “simultaneous with”, etc. that characterize the B-series. God’s omniscience and eternity seem to imply a static view of time.

However, it is not clear whether such a view allows for a libertarian conception of freedom.⁵ If every choice is already given, it is not indeterminate today whether John will perform p or not in the future. If nothing is indeterminate, no room seems to be left for libertarian freedom.

³ For this formulation, (Rhoda 2009, p. 41). On this topic, we refer, among others, to Armstrong (2004), Beebe and Dodd (2005), Lowe and Rami (2009).

⁴ Admittedly, on the ground of the definition of knowledge and from that of truthmaking, one could consistently claim that, since today it is neither true nor false that John will make p tomorrow, there is no actual truthmaking that makes the proposition true (or its contradictory true). Accordingly, one should affirm that even God does not know the outcome of John’s decision today, because this is indeterminate at the present. God will learn tomorrow what John will decide tomorrow because He will see his decision. However, this conception requires a temporal God, who changes His beliefs on the basis of what happens in time.

⁵ On this point, W.L. Craig notices an interpretative problem in Thomas Aquinas’ position. Although it is reasonable to believe that Thomas considered becoming an objective feature of reality and embraced a dynamic view of time, his doctrine on future contingents is intelligible only if a tenseless theory of time is assumed: “[...] The entire temporal series would seem to exist timelessly, on the analogy of a spatial extension, and as such is known by God” (Craig 1988, p. 117).

A first solution is to accept a compatibilist view of freedom. On this view, the problem of divine prescience and human freedom rapidly dissolves. However, here we would like to investigate the solutions that hold a stronger conception of freedom, that is the libertarian conception.

4 God’s Knowledge and the Dynamic View of Time

Only few advocates of the eternalist conception of God are ready to pay the price of a block universe because such a view of time seems to undermine a strong conception of freedom. Consider the two following thesis:

1. God exists in a timeless manner and He has a particular relationship with the temporal entities.
2. Time flows and the becoming of temporal entities is a real dimension of being.

In this section we will discuss two significant proposals that hold these two points: Stump and Kretzmann’s and Leftow’s positions. We will see, however, that, their merits notwithstanding, they suffer some problems.

4.1 Simultaneity and Eternity

Stump and Kretzmann believe that time and eternity are separate ontological dimensions. The eternal events cannot be temporal and, conversely, the temporal events cannot be eternal. Since there are two categories of events (temporal and eternal), there must be two simultaneity relations, one for the temporal events and the other for the eternal events:

- (T) T-simultaneity = existence or occurrence at one and the same time
 (E) E-simultaneity = existence or occurrence at one and the same eternal present (Stump and Kretzmann 1981, p. 435)

In order to characterize the relationship between the eternal God and the temporal world, Stump e Kretzmann postulate a third type of simultaneity, called ET-simultaneity:

- (ET) For every x and for every y , x and y are ET-simultaneous iff
- (1) either x is eternal and y is temporal, or vice versa; and
 - (2) for some observer, A , in the unique eternal reference frame, x and y are both present—i.e. either x is eternally present and y is observed as temporally present, or vice versa; and

- (3) for some observer, B, in one of the infinitely many temporal reference frames, x and y are both present—i.e. either x is observed as eternally present and y is temporally present, or vice versa. (Stump and Kretzmann 1981, p. 439)

The relation of ET-simultaneity is symmetric (if x is ET-simultaneous with y , then y is ET-simultaneous with x), but also irreflexive and intransitive. If it were transitive, absurd conclusions would follow: since time t is ET-simultaneous with God and God is ET-simultaneous with another time t' , it would follow that t and t' are ET-simultaneous.

A possible problem concerns the temporal/eternal existence of events. Stump and Kretzmann mention the following example. Suppose that in His eternal present God is simultaneous—ET-simultaneous—with Richard Nixon when he was alive on 9th August 1974. However, God is also simultaneous with Richard Nixon at the moment of his death on 22th April 1994.⁶ From the point of view of God's eternal present, Nixon is both alive and dead, which is absurd. Stump and Kretzmann respond that:

One and the same eternal present is ET-simultaneous with Nixon's being alive and is also ET-simultaneous with Nixon's dying; so Nixon's life is ET-simultaneous with and hence present to an eternal entity, and Nixon's death is ET-simultaneous with and hence present to an eternal entity, although Nixon's life and Nixon's death are themselves neither eternal nor simultaneous (Stump and Kretzmann 1981, p. 443)

Stump and Kretzmann's view has received numerous criticisms. It has been claimed that their position is obscure (Fitzgerald 1985; Helm 2011) or that it introduces a concept (that of ET-simultaneity) that is entirely *ad hoc* and that does not offer any explanation of the metaphysical relationship between eternity and time (Yates 1990; Helm 2011). However, we do not believe these criticisms to be appropriate: the ET-simultaneity relation is neither obscure nor unjustified. The basic idea is that there are two dimensions—the temporal and eternal dimensions—and three different kinds of relationships that characterize the relations among temporal things, those among eternal things and those between temporal and eternal things. In fact, no account claiming that God is outside time can dispense with these three kinds of relationships.⁷

⁶ Richard Nixon died in 1994, after the publication of Stump and Kretzmann's paper. We have changed the example in light of this.

⁷ Stump and Kretzmann's theory is a more formal version of a classical way of representing the relationships between temporality and eternity, which goes back at least to Boethius: that of a circle with a point in the center. The circle represents the temporal series while the central point is God's eternal perspective, which has the same

What seems a more serious difficulty for Stump and Kretzmann's position is that the relation of ET-simultaneous is completely unanalyzed. In fact, such relation is substantiated in a different way according to the accepted metaphysics of time. For example, consider the static block-universe. Then, ET-simultaneous is a relation between static and non-dynamical things and can be conceived as stable and a-temporal. Instead, let us assume a non-dynamic metaphysics of time according to which the present time is privileged compared to the other times. Since there is a variable privileged time (the present), how can God have the same ET-simultaneous relation with every time? The present is distinct from the other times and this fact represents an important feature of temporal reality. How can God have the same identical relationship with the present time and with the other times? Only two alternatives seem to be open: either we affirm that God does not know an ontological trait of the world—for instance, the fact that it is 4 o'clock now—or we affirm that the dynamicity of time is an illusion. However, both these alternatives are unpalatable. So, the question is whether it is possible to reconcile the temporal dynamic with the fact that God has the same relationship with every time. Since Stump and Kretzmann do not analyze the ET-simultaneous relation in any way, these problems remain unsolved.

4.2 Leftow's Position

Brian Leftow puts forward an alternative solution. His basic intuition is that the events are, in a way, both temporal and eternal. Consequently, God, who lives in the eternity, sees events under the eternal respect while they are temporally present to us. Leftow characterizes the eternal dimension by means of an analogy according to which space is to time as time is to eternity. The analogy is rather articulated (Leftow 2009, pp. 212–213) but we will just focus on a few points: as all the spatial points co-exist in a unique instant of time, so all the temporal points co-exist (and, in a sense, are contained) in the eternity. Particularly, just as entities with spatial features remain so when they exist in time, so entities with temporal features remain so when they exist in eternity. Reality is, according to Leftow, structured in an eternal dimension which includes God and the temporal things that exist *at once*. Therefore, God and the world are

Footnote 7 continued

relation with every point of the circle. In this representation there are two kinds of points: those on the circle and that in the center. They represent the two dimensions: temporality and eternity. The relations TS and ES are represented by the relations between the things that are on circle and those that are in the center respectively. The existence of the radii of the circle justifies the third kind of relationship—the ETS relation.

simultaneous in the eternity but nevertheless the world does not lose its genuine temporal properties.

In order to explain how an event can be both temporally located and eternally present, Leftow assumes a particular interpretation of Special Relativity according to which the concept of simultaneity is relative to a framework. It is both scientific and philosophical folklore that one of the consequences of the Special Relativity Theory is the relativization of the concept of simultaneity between events to different inertial systems. Leftow's philosophical intuition proposes to extend the relativity of simultaneity to the concept of *actuality* of the events:

If simultaneity and presentness are relative to reference frames, then if present events are actual in some way in which future events are not, this sort of actuality is itself relative to reference frames. Thus, there is a (strictly limited) sense in which the relativity of simultaneity entails a relativity of actuality. (Leftow 2009, p. 232)

We shall not discuss here the plausibility of this particular interpretation of the Theory of Special Relativity even if—obviously—a good deal of philosophical work should be done in order to show the very possibility of extending to *actuality* what it holds for the *simultaneity*. Robinson sums up:

[A]lthough all events of all times are present at once in eternity, it does not follow that all events of all times are present at once *in time* or in any temporal reference frame. Although in eternity time is tenseless, it does not follow that *in time* time is tenseless. (Robinson 1995, p. 133)

Unlike Stump and Kretzmann's account, which state just one ontological dimension for the mundane events—that is, the temporal one—Leftow provides a sort of ontological reduplication: things exist in time *and* in eternity.

A first problem of such a view concerns human freedom. If it is eternally true that Obama drinks a beer on 24th May 2032, is Obama really free of doing otherwise on that day? We shall not seriously take into account this problem, but we believe that Rogers gave an adequate answer to it, by carefully distinguish between eternity and necessity (Rogers 2007). The fact that it is eternally true that Obama drinks a beer on 24th May 2032 does not mean that this fact is necessary. Obama could act differently, and in that case, it would be not eternally true that Obama has his beer at that time, but instead the negation of that proposition would be true. Moreover, it is necessary to distinguish between “eternal” and “since always”. From the notion of eternity does not follow that the events are fixed “from the beginning”, with the consequence that it would be already true from the beginning of time that Obama drinks a beer

on 24th May 2032. In the a-temporal dimension, that event is so and so just because Obama chooses in that way in the temporal dimension.⁸

Another problem of Leftow's proposal seems to be more complicated. Leftow advocates a dynamic conception of time. This means that there is a privileged instant (the present), that this privileged instant changes and that this fact is a genuine ontological feature of reality. This is true for those who accept presentism and for those who accept a version of the moving spotlight theory: in both cases the temporal reality is characterized by a privileged instant with respect to the others. However, in God's eternal framework all the times are on a par and there is no privileged instant. By definition, there is no dynamicity. There seems to be a feature of reality that is not grasped by God. Notice that it is not possible to say that the dynamic status of temporal reality is just an illusion and that only the eternal dimension obtains. This would be in contrast with Leftow's proposal: it would lead us to a static conception of temporality. The privileged instant, on the contrary, is not an illusion and, therefore, the dynamicity is something that essentially characterizes the temporal reality.

Often this problem is emphatically set by stating that a timeless God cannot know what time it is. If one accepts the idea that the dynamicity of time is an illusion, in other terms, if one accepts a block universe, this is not a problem. But if one is ready to say that the universe is dynamic, then the fact that it is 4 o' clock and not 5 o' clock, or that *now* Obama is drinking his beer, is an actual feature of the reality which a timeless God cannot access since for Him all times are on a par. And if there is something real which God does not know that could represent a problem for His omniscience. At first glance, in Leftow's framework, there is no way to escape this problem.

Let us briefly sum up what has been stated so far. Two problems emerge within the tenseless conception of divine knowledge. Firstly, if it is eternally true that an agent does *p* at time *t*, it seems that the agent cannot do otherwise and, then, this position would imply the theological fatalism. Secondly, assuming a dynamic conception of time, there is an instant, the present, which is privileged. But from the eternal point of view of God, no time is privileged, therefore it seems that God does not grasp an aspect of reality. Stump and Kretzmann's solution from one hand and Leftow's, from the other, do not provide an adequate solution to the second problem. We believe, however, that by assuming a fragmentalist conception of time a solution can be found. The next section will discuss this topic.

⁸ This solution has a price: it admits a grounding relation between the free choices of a temporal entity (Obama) and an eternal state of affairs (divine knowledge). This relation has to be a-temporal even if it seems to be alike to a causal relation which can hardly be considered out of time.

5 Divine Knowledge and Fragmentalism

In the previous paragraphs we have seen that it is not easy to characterize a timeless account of divine knowledge; here, we will provide a tentative answer by referring—at least partially—to Kit Fine’s account in philosophy of time known as *Fragmentalism* (Fine 2005; see also Lipman 2015).⁹ We will proceed as follows: we will state four general theses concerning our version of Fragmentalism and then we will offer a timeless account of divine knowledge.

(T1) Temporal reality is fragmented

It is important not to equivocate, here: (T1) does not mean that there is something, i.e. the temporal reality, whose parts are fragments of it. On the contrary, this is exactly the thesis Fragmentalism denies: reality is originally fragmented. What exists in a proper sense, in any instant, is a fragment. And—as we will see below—it is not possible to coherently refer to something as “all fragments”.

(T2) Every fragment is constituted by tensed facts:
past, present and future facts

So, time is “real” since there exist genuine A-properties. In every fragment, there exists a set of present facts, the “now” of the fragment. In the next fragment, part of the future facts of the previous fragment are present facts, present facts are past and so on.

(T3) Fragments are incompatible

This would be not surprising. Let us assume that now Obama is standing. In another fragment, Obama is sitting; so, the two fragments are not compatible. (Lipman 2015) developed a logical framework in which one can handle two types of consistency which he calls, respectively, coherence and coherence*. The idea, in a nutshell, is the following: he provides a semantic to a dyadic connective ‘•’ whose intended meaning is “is compatible with”. This allows us to say that whilst it is not logically contradictory that Obama is sitting and Obama is standing, since there can be two fragments in which these states of affairs obtain, the two facts are incompatible since there is no fragment in which both states of affairs obtain.¹⁰

⁹ We are not interested in a faithful construal of Fine’s position; rather, we will exploit some intuitions of fragmentalism which we think illuminating to solve the problem of divine timeless knowledge.

¹⁰ Lipman’s system has weird consequences: for instance, from $A \bullet B$ does not follow A.

(T4) Fragments are not internally complete

This is the most relevant difference with respect to Fine’s system. To guarantee freedom in the libertarian sense, we assume that the facts of a fragment are not a maximal set; there are undetermined regions, i.e. those dependent on the agent’s free decisions.

Our metaphysical framework is then—very roughly—described by (T1–T4). How does God eternally know? The idea is that God simultaneously sees each fragment. Let $K(g,p)$ be the eternal fact that God knows the proposition p . And this holds for all true propositions, given God’s omniscience. p is true in virtue of a truthmaker, that is, a fact which makes it true. So, God eternally knows that Obama drinks a beer in 2032 because Obama freely chooses to have a beer. Today Obama has not chosen yet and the proposition relative to this fragment is neither true nor false: it is about a region of the future which is ontologically undetermined. But if Obama decides to have such beer, then this fact is actual—in a certain fragment—and the proposition is true relative to that fragment.

There exists no ontologically dimension *beyond* the temporal one, as it happens in Leftow’s proposal. Obama does not have a modality of eternal existence, in addition to the temporal existence. Obama just exists in time and the existence in time is fragmented. We said that a fundamental problem for the eternalist accounts is to preserve the timelessness of divine knowledge together with free acts. These two facts seem to contradict each other: if God eternally knows a free act F , F has to be, in a way, determinate and then F cannot be really free. Fragmentalism answers to this dilemma by stating that F —as any mundane reality—is never determinate or indeterminate *simpliciter* but always with respect to a fragment. Therefore, F is not determinate in a given fragment but it is in another. And the reason of its determinateness is the agent’s free action. That decision exists as a present fact *and* as a past fact. But it is not necessary, since its nature is decided by the agent.

On the proposed view, even if God is conceived as eternal and even if the reality is dynamic, God has a full access to the temporal reality and there is no feature of reality He cannot know. For *every* fragment has a privileged instant, the “now”, and God knows which instant is privileged in any fragment. Obviously, from an eternal point of view, there are many “nows”, all incompatible; but this is not a problem for the fragmentalist since this is her basic intuition: temporal reality is fragmented. Contrary to the more traditional dynamic conceptions of reality, in this framework any fragment has its now; therefore, there is no aspect of reality that God cannot know.

There are (at least) three possible objections to our account:

1. A first objection is that Fragmentalism is not a real dynamic conception of time. There is no real passage from one fragment to another but there is just a fragmented temporal reality which is intrinsically static. So, the success of Fragmentalism is illusory; it solves the problems the dynamic conceptions deal with just because it is not a dynamic conception but an eternalism in disguise.

One can answer to that by noting that the Fragmentalism's conception of time is quite far from the block universe view of eternalism. The tensed properties of facts are different within the various fragments and through these properties it is possible to reconstruct a sort of passage of time. For instance, in fragment f_1 a fact s can hold the tensed property of being future, in fragment f_2 the property of being present and in fragment f_3 that of being past. It is therefore possible to reconstruct the passage of time according to which s is future, then present, then past by means of the tensed properties of the fragments f_1 , f_2 and f_3 .

2. There is no—since there cannot be—a coherent description of God's contents of knowledge. Let us elaborate. The indeterminist conception we assumed entails the following: let f_1 and f_2 be two fragments; let us describe the fact that Obama drinks a beer A , and the fact that Obama does not drink a beer $\neg A$. Let us employ **P**, **N**, **F** as tensed attributes meaning respectively past, present and future. Given the indeterminism we have that in f_1 , $\mathbf{N}(\neg\mathbf{F}(A))$ and $\mathbf{N}(\neg\mathbf{F}(\neg A))$, namely, today it is not a fact that in the future Obama will drink a beer and it is not a fact that in the future Obama will not drink a beer. Things obviously change in f_2 . Obama (freely) chooses to drink a beer and then we have $\mathbf{N}(A)$. But if it is currently true that $\mathbf{N}(A)$, then it must be a past fact in f_2 that Obama would drink a beer, that is $\mathbf{P}(\mathbf{F}(A))$. Therefore God knows that $\neg\mathbf{F}(A)$, that $\neg\mathbf{F}(\neg A)$ and that A . The ground of His knowledge in the first two cases is the fact that Obama has not chosen yet, while in the third case, that Obama has chosen. Since God's knowledge is always actual (eternity as extended present) God sees things as present, which are, in turn, present, past, and future. On this account, God sees both the indeterminateness of A and its actuality. He sees them in two different fragments.

However, according to Fragmentalism, the various fragments are incompatible; so, the fact that A is indeterminate in the fragment f_1 and actual in the fragment f_2 is not troublesome. In a certain sense, even our knowledge is structured in this way: we know that yesterday it was indeterminate that Obama would drink a beer today, but we know that it is not indeterminate today that Obama is drinking now a beer and then that

today is determinate that it was true yesterday that Obama would drink a beer today.

3. One could maintain that throughout the fragments there exists a true future: there is a set of facts which, at the end of the day, will be actual despite the indeterminateness within a single fragment. Sure, it is indeterminate whether today Obama will drink his beer but Obama is going to choose something and his choice is actual in a certain fragment. So, as in the Ockhamist accounts, there exists "today" the sequence of true future propositions: the Thin Red Line (*TRL*), quoting Belnap's expression (Belnap et al. 2001).

Here, there is an objective tension: on one hand, Fragmentalism is not committed to the existence of *TRL* since all that exists there exists in the fragments and, by definition, the *TRL* is a section of the fragments; but on the other hand, we should concede that God knows the *TRL* and then it exists—in a sense. Our aim is not to characterize the reality *sub specie aeternitatis*; rather, we would like to provide an account of timeless divine knowledge which is compatible with free agents and a genuine dynamism of time. Moreover, we think, that the existence—in a sense—of a real future and God's knowledge of this future is a minimal condition not to misinterpret the intuitive concept of omniscience which grounds the classical theism. According to this definition, a non-omniscient God could not be provident, with all the consequences.

6 Conclusions

In this work, we have discussed the timeless account of divine knowledge. Traditionally, there are good reasons to believe that God does not exist in time and that, consequently, His modality of knowledge is timeless. That is, God does not foreknow the future but He sees any instant as if it were present. Among the reasons to advocate this view, it is particularly relevant the fact that it gives a coherent account of the divine omniscience and human freedom. However, some questions can be triggered by the eternalist solution. First of all, it is reasonable to presuppose a God who does not exist in time only if the time is real. If we adopt a static metaphysics of time, like, for instance, the block-universe view, then it is not complicated to characterize the relationship between the eternal God and temporal reality. But it is, indeed, a cheap victory: since the passage of time is not real, the modality of existence of God and of the world are not so different. Much more demanding is trying to reconcile a dynamic metaphysics of time—where the flow of time is a genuine feature of reality—with a timeless conception of God.

Ironically, the most puzzling problems are the free actions and the divine knowledge of the tensed aspects of the world. We have seen how two important and influential contributors (by Stump and Kretzmann, and Leftow) show, in our opinion, some intrinsic flaws. Our proposal is to advocate a different conception of time, that is a version of Kit Fine's Fragmentalism. Even if this theoretical option has relevant theoretical costs, we believe it to be more suitable as far as God's eternal knowledge is concerned. This account preserves two hardly compatible aspects: on the one hand reality is intrinsically temporal (and for that reason, Fine himself defined his theory as a form of non-standard A-theory); on the other, God holds the same relationship with all the temporal facts, that is, He sees reality as (eternally) present. Fragmentalism does not lack internal problems; however, we are not interested in a defence of this particular metaphysics of time. What we would like to argue for is that, *if* accepted, the Fragmentalism provides the best metaphysical framework to account for a timeless view of divine knowledge.

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Omnisubjectivity and Incarnation

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Abstract In her 2013 Aquinas lecture and a previous article (Zagzebski in *Oxford studies in philosophy of religion*. Oxford University Press, New York, 231–247, 2008), Linda Zagzebski argues for a new divine trait, that of omnisubjectivity. In brief, omnisubjectivity is God’s ability to know what it is like for each of God’s creatures to be themselves. This knowledge is not merely propositional but ascribes to God knowledge of the sort that one typically associates with a first-person perspective on the self. Zagzebski’s considered opinion about what grounds omnisubjectivity appears to be that it is grounded in simulations of creaturely experiences that God imagines. My answer is that God experiences your experiences in experiencing you. Getting clearer on the basis of omnisubjectivity provides some novel results for thinking about what it would mean on the Christian story for Christ to become incarnate and in particular, for how it could be that an incarnate deity could learn something new even if that deity is omnisubjective.

Keywords Omnisubjectivity · Incarnation · Kenosis · Temptation · Simulation · Interpersonal perception

In her 2013 Aquinas lecture and a previous article (Zagzebski 2008), Linda Zagzebski argues for a new divine trait, that of omnisubjectivity. In brief, omnisubjectivity is God’s ability to know what it is like for each of God’s creatures to be themselves. God knows what it is like to be a bat and what it is like to be a bartender. The most

compelling reason Zagzebski offers, in my opinion, for why God would have to be omnisubjective is that God would not be omniscient otherwise.¹ Simply knowing all the facts, for instance, seems not to be sufficient for omniscience if there is more to know than just facts. Just as a color scientist might know all manner of facts about color and yet learn something new upon experiencing a color for the first time, so it is with subjective experience in general (Zagzebski 2013, 11). God cannot know all there is to know just by knowing the facts about our conscious experiences. God in some way or another needs to “have” them as well.

As we’ll see, Zagzebski varies the way she talks about omnisubjectivity, but her considered opinion about what grounds omnisubjectivity appears to be that it is grounded in simulations of creaturely experiences that God imagines.² My answer is that God experiences your experiences in experiencing you.

We will begin by unpacking the concept of omnisubjectivity and these two rival accounts of it. I will then show that a discussion of omnisubjectivity produces some novel

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¹ She also argues that God would not be omnipresent if God were not in all the psychic places and that the practice of prayer presumes that God has access to our subjective experience. Regarding omnipresence, I think this line would only have force if she was willing to endorse a pantheist or panentheistic position. One that we’ll see she rejects. It’s not clear that on her preferred ways of talking about the phenomenon, omnisubjectivity has much of anything to do with omnipresence. As regards prayer, it is not clear to me that there is an independent argument here. It seems to me to collapse either into the argument from omnipresence or the argument from omniscience depending on how one wants to interpret it.

² If this is not a view that Zagzebski would want to be committed to, I think it is at least the most natural way of explicating her most common way of speaking about omnisubjectivity as we’ll see.

results when applied to the doctrine of Christ's incarnation in the Christian faith.

1 Zagzebski on Omnisubjectivity

Zagzebski lays out her project as follows.

I will argue that the existence of subjectivity requires an addition to the traditional attributes of God. I call the attribute omnisubjectivity. It is the property of consciously grasping with perfect accuracy and completeness every conscious state of every creature from that creature's first person perspective. I will use the analogy of empathy to defend the possibility of omnisubjectivity. (10)

A point to note in this first statement of what omnisubjectivity is and which is reflective of how she will go about defending it is that she links what is cognitively distinctive here to two things—the first-person perspective and empathy. After all, one might endorse a traditional and unmodified notion of omniscience and yet think that God understands with perfect accuracy everything about everyone. The idea that there's more to God's omniscience than we thought is instead going to be tied to the first person perspective and to empathy.

This emphasis on first-personal states comes out clearly here.

What you feel when you feel anxious or cheerful or indignant or serene might be similar to feelings I have had, but if there are any differences, I cannot know exactly what it is like to have your feelings.... (13)
I am sure you can see how this problem applies to God. How can a divine being know what it is like to be one of his creatures? (13)

Notice, however, that you might well doubt that what empathy gives you is someone else's first person perspective. Empathy is certainly responsive to the first person perspective of another but it isn't immediately obvious that it does so by replicating it. Consider a parent with a narcoleptic child. It could be that never having had the distinctive feeling of exhaustion that accompanies narcolepsy puts a limit on the depth of certain aspects of empathy, but anyone who thinks that a parent cannot, nonetheless, have empathy for her suffering narcoleptic child is crazy. Indeed, even if one's child has the stomach flu and thus one can remember similar experiences to that of the child, the pain of watching one's child in pain is quite different from the unpleasant sensations of the flu, and we are perfectly familiar with what it is like to prefer one over the other as when a parent wishes that he or she was the one suffering instead of the child.

On the other hand, one can imagine two people having the same type of feeling for the same object and yet having no empathy for one another. For example, suppose that, upon the death of one's spouse, one discovers and meets one's spouse's secret lover. Though perhaps not an exemplary reaction, it is not hard to imagine detecting the same feelings of loss and pain in the secret lover that one experiences oneself while having no experience of empathy for this person. In addition to feeling wronged or angry at one's deceased spouse, one might also feel possessive of one's grief as if it is offensive for this other person to have the feelings of loss that should be distinctively one's own. Having the same feeling, even toward the same object, might lead to the opposite of empathy.

A question that the emphasis on one's private, first personal experiences suggests is how it is that God or anyone else could have whatever is unique to that experience. Perhaps, one might think, getting clearer on this point can help bring a perfect empathizer and the first-person perspective closer together. One possibility that Zagzebski rejects is that your psychic space is occupied by more than one person (21).³ Zagzebski also rejects pantheism and panentheism as explanations of how God gains access to our first person states (23).⁴

Zagzebski appeals to the idea of imaginative projection using the example of how we read novels to illustrate the way one could appreciate the experience of another person without having to possess the psychic space of another person.

As we imaginatively project ourselves into the character's point of view, we imagine having his or her thoughts, beliefs, feelings, desires, sensations, and emotions, making choices, and acting and experiencing various responses from others, as these states are described by the novelist. (27; cf. 42)

The idea of imaginative projection is the one that seems to do the heavy lifting in Zagzebski's work on the topic. There are times, though, when she uses perceptual language, namely when invoking sources from the Christian intellectual tradition.

Aquinas says that to God all things are 'bare and open to his eyes'. Presumably, what he has in mind is presence in the sense of intimate acquaintance. (19)
Since I also accept the traditional view that God

³ It is worth noting, though, that Zagzebski says that God knows what it is like to smell roses because "he permeates the consciousness" of beings who smell roses (41), which certainly sounds like God can co-occupy your psychic space.

⁴ If Zagzebski is right that God must be omnisubjective and that omnisubjectivity necessarily concerns the first-person perspective, one could actually mount a novel argument for pan(en)theism on these grounds.

knows everything directly, I propose that omnisubjectivity is direct acquaintance with the conscious states of creatures—like direct seeing.... (29–30)

Notice, however, that imaginative projection and perception differ. Perception is outward directed. Imaginative projection is inward directed, even if in response to something external. To perceive a cup and to imagine the same cup based on some facts one knows about the cup are two very different things. One can think of either projection or perception as being involved in empathy. I can have empathy for my sick child because I see her in pain, and I can have empathy due to imaginatively projecting myself into her shoes (e.g. if I get a text message saying she has the flu). Perception of another person does not allow for having a first-personal relationship to the states perceived. The relation is second personal. In contrast, there is a way of thinking about imaginative projection that connects with the first-personal insofar as imaginative projection recreates the first-personal state of the other person within oneself.

What Zagzebski says that imaginative projection is supposed to get us (or God) is a copy of the state of the other person. She says, “I assume that empathy is a way of acquiring an emotion like that of another person” (25), and when it comes to the “total empathy” of God, we are to imagine “the transference of all psychic states from a human to God” (26). Hence, one of the major objections that Zagzebski wrestles with is the possibility that there is something morally contaminating about having this relationship to certain of God’s creatures. If Zagzebski were using a perceptual model, it would be less clear how the objection would get off the ground. To see someone’s blindness does not put one at risk for cataracts. In contrast, the idea that God imaginatively facilitates “the transference of all psychic states” between himself and Hitler is unnerving. Why should God recreate such states within himself as opposed to taking up an attitude towards these states in considering Hitler directly? The worry is not one of having empathy for Hitler per se but of becoming like Hitler in some respect because some of one’s first personal states have become like Hitler’s in imaginative projection.

What this problem points us to is the need to distinguish empathy and imaginative projection from what is called emotional contagion (or psychic contagion if one wants to put the focus more broadly) (cf. Hatfield et al. 1994). When a baby cries and another baby responds to the distress of the first baby by becoming distressed herself, one has emotional contagion. The second baby does not care about the subjective perspective of the first baby. It just experiences distress as distressing. Emotional contagion does not presume any cognitive insight. Consider, for instance, when panic spreads through a crowd but only a very few

people may know what caused the initial disturbance. Likewise, emotional contagion is consistent with one’s relational attitude toward the other person being negative. If emotional contagion is all that relates me to your experience, I might hate you for making me feel sad with your sadness. Far from empathy, emotional contagion is consistent with my wishing you harm because of the way your affect spreads across the psychic barrier between us.⁵

God’s being subject to contagion vis-à-vis the states of creatures would be problematic. It would, for example, mean that part of God would be changed into the likeness of the imperfections and evils of the world, which does not seem acceptable for a perfect being. Even contagion that involved the positive states of human beings would be problematic as our best still falls far short of divine perfection. We get some hints in Zagzebski’s text as to how we could avoid thinking of the copy produced by imaginative projection as akin to contagion. In discussing a human example where one person, Michael, experiences empathy for a grieving person, Elizabeth, Zagzebski says of it that there is a difference in the experience of the two.

Michael’s emotion is consciously representational, whereas Elizabeth’s emotion is not. Elizabeth’s emotion comes first and has nothing to do with Michael. Michael’s emotion comes in response to hers, and loses its point if she discover she does not have the emotion he thought she had. (26)

Notice that Michael’s emotion is not simply grief at what grieves Elizabeth. If Michael discovered that what he thought Elizabeth was grieving was not in fact what her attitude was about, he would lose the reason he has for being grieved by that state of affairs that leads us to predicate empathy of him. Rather, the object of Michael’s grief is first and foremost the grief of Elizabeth. Whereas Elizabeth’s state can be modeled in terms of ATTITUDE <object> as GRIEF <the loss of a loved one>, Michael’s state is more nearly GRIEF <[Elizabeth has GRIEF <the loss of a loved one>]>. This move could help the worry about contagion and God because one could imagine Michael being appropriately grieved in relation to the object of his grief even if it were the case that Elizabeth’s grief was somehow inappropriate. By making the focus of the state Elizabeth, there need be no emotional contagion involved, and thus no contamination if it were the case that Elizabeth’s grief were somehow inappropriate.

⁵ Although differentiable, I am not claiming that emotional contagion cannot play a role in producing empathy as well, which seems plausible. I might, for instance, be moved on a first order level by emotional contagion and then choose to identify with that emotional response on a meta-level. It seems plausible that the result might be empathy.

One might wonder, though, how the Michael and Elizabeth case is supposed to be consistent with Zagzebski's metaphor of reading a novel. After all, Michael can have this meta-cognitive stance towards Elizabeth simply on the basis of the fact that Elizabeth is grieved without that stance being grounded in a like experience. In the example of the novel, one imagines oneself in the shoes of a character having the character's experiences. In the case of Michael and Elizabeth, Michael takes up an attitude that takes the other person as part of its object. Here's a stab at how to tie them together. Perhaps God is not omniscient in virtue of being an empathizer on the view in play so much as God's empathy is made possible by being the perfect simulator. Michael could, as it were, take certain of his cognitive and affective systems off-line to run a simulation of what it would be like to be Elizabeth. The representation in brackets, <[Elizabeth has GRIEF <the loss of a loved one>]>, isn't represented in a standard third-personal propositional form. Rather, it is represented in a first-personal format as Michael imaginatively projects himself into Elizabeth's shoes. Michael then takes an empathic meta-cognitive stance towards the output of that simulation.

Similarly, on this view, God performs simulations via imagination of God's creatures.⁶ These imagined states are always bracketed within the mind of God, however. They exist within the hard boundaries of a fiction that God has a meta-cognitive stance towards. Thus, one might think that, whereas God acquiring greed is a problem, creating a greedy perspective within a fiction that one has a negative moral attitude towards at the meta-cognitive level is perhaps acceptable. Granted, one might still object to God having thoughts like this, "If I were Hitler and saw a Jew, I would feel like so" despite God also having a disapproving meta-cognitive attitude towards what is being simulated. Perhaps one should not think it possible for God to imagine himself as Hitler. One might well doubt whether a God who fits in Hitler's shoes is God. A God who performs simulations is better than one that is subject to contagion, however.

Even if we set aside worries about whether it would be unworthy of God for him to simulate our experiences, this view would live within a problematically confined dialectical space. On the one hand, Zagzebski asserts that if there is any difference between your experience and mine, I cannot know what your experience is like in the way that

omnisubjectivity concerns. On the other hand, God's experience has to be different in order to avoid the contagion problem. There's a reason that you don't act like you are Hercule Poirot after reading one of Agatha Christie's detective novels, even if one has been engaging in imaginative projection while reading. "As if" experiences are experienced differently from real experiences, and one of the main reasons for this is that one experiences them as bracketed. We are amused or embarrassed when our offline simulation has a quarantine breach, as when a scary movie causes one to jump, precisely because we normally experience the content of a simulation while also experiencing it as a simulation. Losing one's cognitive grasp on the boundaries of a simulation is one way of simulating poorly. Once again, if God had such quarantine problems in his simulations, then we would have a contagion problem in predicating these simulations of God. Zagzebski needs there to be a difference between what evil people have in their soul and what a simulating God has in his mind, and yet that difference means that God actually doesn't experience what it's like to be that evil person. He experiences what it is like to imagine that he's the evil person, and that's different. After all, I have a much easier time understanding what it was like for little boys in 1969 to imagine being Neil Armstrong than I do what it would be like to take humanity's first steps on the moon.

It is worth noting that there is no necessary tie between empathy and simulation through imaginative projection. Even if a simulation needs to include a meta-cognitive perspective lest it get confused with one's online perspective on the world, that meta-cognitive perspective doesn't have to have anything to do with empathy. Consider the following case. Suppose I am a scientific researcher, and late one night I find myself wondering what the lives of my lab rats are like. I imagine what it would be like to be one of these rats, and I am horrified. I take a decidedly negative stance towards my simulated life as a rat while recognizing that what I have simulated is a good copy of the lives of my actual rats. Nonetheless, due to speciesism or what have you, I do not take the further step of caring that my lab rats' lives are awful, and I acquire no dispositions to treat them at all differently than I have treated them hitherto. It's not the case that I have a failure of nerve, that I fail to act on empathic feelings. Rather, I have no empathy for the rats. Perhaps I should, but I do not. A fortiori, someone who took up a similar attitude towards a human being would have no empathy for that human being. If, for example, I am biased against poor people, then I could simulate what it is like to be poor, find myself aghast at how difficult it is, and, ironically, end up even more disapproving towards the poor because, due to my bias, I am convinced that they have put themselves in an awful position.

⁶ It is worth noting here that it is not immediately clear what it would mean to predicate an imagination of God. There are conceptions of God, such as the classical one, that would seem an awkward fit for such language. Likewise, it is an interesting question on such a view whether one can square a divine mind that performs simulations with a robust form of divine simplicity. I thank Rico Vitz for pointing out these issues to me.

In the next section, I will present an alternative way of grounding omnisubjectivity. I will show how it would allow God to understand what our experiences are like without running into a contagion problem and while preserving a strong link to empathy.

2 An Alternative View

Return to the perceptual model that Zagzebski mentions twice but ultimately does not incorporate. Let us start with the human case and build outwards from there. When I encounter you with a slight, repressed smile with moderately arched brows, etc., I experience you as bemused. A different configuration leads me to experience you as surprised or angry or sad or happy. The experience comes immediately and automatically in response to the presence of your surprised, angry, sad face. So long as I am being minimally attentive, I experience the pattern of your movements as conveying the contours of your inner experience. These surface patterns, perhaps with the help of my mirror neuron system and certainly with the help of background information, provide me with a sense, even if not fully defined, of a whole inner state in you (Green 2012).

Whatever one wants to claim about the underlying physiological basis, the phenomenology of the experience is perceptual. I experience a presence manifested in my environment through the medium of flesh, bone, and sound. I experience you, a person and not just a body, as being present and as having an inner world that, for all its privacy, can be glimpsed from a distance if not shared through further patterned interactions. Moreover, there is this further similarity between the experience in question and cases we normally think of as perceptual. The experience is dependent on the presence of the object of experience, and the presence of the object is sufficient under typical conditions for the experience. The richness of the experience is dependent on viewing conditions, as it were, but that also is typical of perception. Whereas reasoning, memory, and imagination are tied much more loosely to the environment and to the presence of what one is thinking about, when it comes to ordinary cases of perception and to experiencing another person, it is the opposite.

God has no mirror neurons to be sure, but God also doesn't have physical limitations. If there is some reason to think that we have something very much like a partial perception of what other people are doing, feeling, and thinking, then we should think that God would have to be the ultimate perceiver of other persons and their states. The key here is to appreciate that being related to another person in a second personal manner allows one to have a

sense of what that person's experience is like without having to occupy her first personal perspective. If one thinks the options are only those of a first-personal or a third personal perspective on others, the options would be analogous to viewing minds as closed rooms. One is either inside the room or one is outside the room. If those are the only options, then the only real way to tell what's inside a room is to be one of its occupants. If that's not possible, imagining that one is inside the room may be the best one can do. Putting the second personal option on the table is like noting that rooms have windows.

Consider, for instance, the notable absence of the second personal in this passage.

Mary's perspective on the fact that she is reading a book is first personal, whereas Sam's perspective and the perspective of everybody but Mary is third personal. (16)

Ignore for a second that, on this taxonomy, there is no relevant difference between Sam knowing that Mary is reading upon seeing a text message from her to that effect and his knowing she is reading by seeing her rapt expression as she traces her finger down the text at a reading pace, mouths words to herself, and flips pages in haste. Imagine that God can see not only the external things that Sam can see, but God, as it were, has a window into her mind. Is there any reason to think that God couldn't know the distinctive human character of Mary's reading through such a window? One might doubt whether this gets us close enough to the experience of creatures for omnisubjectivity, but note that on the perceptual model, the experience of creatures itself is part of God's perceptual experience. In contrast, it isn't a part of a simulation of a creature's experience. In fact, a creature's existence isn't required for a simulation of that creature. Instead, a divine simulation would involve God imagining a very good simulacrum of what a certain kind of creature would experience.

Consider, once more, then, the rationale for omnisubjectivity when it comes to omniscience.

The crucial point is that he [God] would lack something, and what he would lack is cognitive. He would not fully cognitively grasp everything that happens in his creation. Each of us cognitively grasps what it is like to be in the conscious states we are in right now, and those states are parts of the created world. If God does not grasp those states and grasp them as well as we do, God is not cognitively perfect. (15)

On a perceptual model, God cognitively grasps everything that happens in his creation perceptually. Re-creating an independent representation of the world within himself is unnecessary.

One might suppose that a process that is not dependent on the existence of a creature would actually be an advantage when it comes to grounding omnisubjectivity. Consider God's relationship with possible creatures. God can't know what it's like to be a unicorn by perception if God never created any such thing, but one might think that God needs such knowledge in order to have all knowledge (cf. 36). If God doesn't know what a unicorn would experience if it existed, then there's something God doesn't know. I think this objection has some force so far as it goes. I have no problem affirming, however, that God has lots of knowledge relevant to what possible creatures would experience. The perceptual model of actual creatures' experiences doesn't even preclude positing that God uses imaginative projection to gain a sense of what possible creatures would experience. My claim instead is that there would be something missing if God did not have a unique relationship to the experiences of actual creatures and that the perceptual model gives one a good way of thinking about what that is.

Here is an argument that helps to counterbalance the force of the objection. So long as there is any room for God to do differently than he in fact does, then God's experience could have been different while he yet remained perfect. God would, presumably, be perfect without creating a cosmos for example. It seems like which subset of God's possible experiences are realized should play a role in determining what God's experience is like. It would be more than a little odd, for example, to assert that God's experience would be completely unaffected by whether or not he created a cosmos. For one thing, God would experience himself as creating a cosmos in the one case and not the other. Therefore, if there is any kind of knowledge that is experience dependent, then God will not have all the knowledge of that kind so long as he doesn't have every possible experience. I would think God's freedom requires that he not have to bring about every possible experience for himself. Moreover, some experiences are not compossible. God cannot choose to have the experience of creating a cosmos and the experience of not having created one. Consequently, one might think in general that God does not have all the experience dependent knowledge that it is possible for him to have and that this isn't a problem. If it isn't a problem in general, then it shouldn't be a problem when applied to experiencing creatures specifically. In motivating the need for omnisubjectivity, Zagzebski assumed that there is something about one's subjective experience that cannot be reduced to something else such that what it feels like to have an experience cannot be known without the relevant experience. One might, then, think that it is problematic for a view if it gives the same

account of how one gets experiential knowledge from one's actual experiences as well as for one's possible experiences.

With this much in hand, consider the following two stage example to help us connect empathy with the perceptual model:

Stage 1: Upon exiting a supermarket, I see a woman who appears to have locked her keys within her car. I experience her as extremely distressed, as panicked if not beside herself. Shaped by sexist attitudes in my society, I experience her negatively as overreacting and unreasonable. If I am to resist this prejudice, it will have to be through a reflective over-riding of the culturally influenced gestalt I experience of the whole. I begin to reason about whether there is anything I am able to do that would help and whether I am obligated to do so.

Stage 2: I then see a child in the locked car. My experience of the situation completely changes. I now feel a powerful pull towards the woman and her situation. I experience her panic as important, as justified, and as something I care about. I feel psychologically connected to her and her situation. I acquire an urgent need of my own to get the car open, though it is coupled with and reinforced by the experience of the mother and the baby. It isn't that I experience it from her point of view so much as I experience her with her point of view, and I experience her as someone I care about (even if just for the duration of this emergency).

I want to suggest that empathy in this case is adverbial. It is a way of experiencing the mother in distress. In the first stage, my experience of the woman is rendered shallow by seeing her through a sexist stereotype. In the second stage, noticing the child empowers me to see her more truly. My caring for her and her situation partly piggybacks on and partly is a constitutive part of how I experience her distress in the second stage of the example. It may be possible to have a neutral experience of the mother and child and then to have an empathic response to this neutral experience. What is more typical, however, is for empathy to germinate in and flow from a way of experiencing the other person that draws you to her experience of the world. To have empathy for a person is to locate the experience of the other person within one's inner world of values and concerns and to register her position with appropriate fellow feeling. Emotional contagion is the spread of the same affect across a psychic border. Empathy, I submit, is a way of relating to another person that directs one towards a coming along side of the

other person qua experiencing subject. This affective coming along side of another person doesn't have to be a matter of acquiring her affect. The empathic experience needs to be complementary rather than identical to that of the subject being empathized with.⁷

Consider, for instance, someone enduring the pain of loss who has emotionally shut down as a result of her experience. Her experience may actually be one of numbness. If her grief grieves me, my experience won't also be one of numbness. I might actually be in a better position to enter into the pain of her loss at that time than she is. Moreover, to return to a point made before, the object of the grief I feel is not what grieves her so much as it is her grief. It is not identical to her grief, but it is not independent either. It is a grief that of its nature fits with her experience of grief. As similarly tuned pitchforks will vibrate because the other vibrates, so it is that the grief of someone I care about should lead me to grieve at her grief, to grieve in a way that is channeled through our relational ties.

On the picture I want to suggest, God not only has a perfect window onto the inner lives of all God's creatures, but God is also the perfect empathizer. God is not subject to emotional contagion. He does not acquire our creaturely feelings, which would be unworthy of God. Rather, in experiencing us, God experiences what is awful about our grief infinitely more deeply than we do or can, and God experiences what is good in us and our experience with infinitely more joy than we can get our minds around. God comes alongside of our experience in a complementary but still transcendent way, as God experiences us through the relational ties that tie an interested, provident, loving God to his creatures.

In Christianity, one of the most important relational ties between God and God's creatures is through the Incarnation. Interestingly, nothing in Zagzebski's discussion, nor in my counterproposal, depends on or even need reference the Incarnation. One might then wonder how it fits in. On the one hand, the way in which God is interested in us on the Christian story makes divine omnisubjectivity and a connection between omnisubjectivity and empathy more appealing. Divine creation or even divine law-giving don't require positing a God who is interested in what it is like to be us. If, however, God actually desires relationship with us, so much so that God in Christ became incarnate to facilitate that relationship, then the idea that God cares

about the texture of our experience becomes more plausible. On the other hand, one might think at first glance that omnisubjectivity robs the Incarnation of any cognitive distinctiveness. If God already knows what it is like to be a human being and perfectly empathizes with us, then, for these things at least, Incarnation is unnecessary. In the next section, I will show how the Incarnation could both be an expression of the novel divine perfections being discussed while also adding something new and distinctive to God's experience.

3 Incarnation

Positing a divine trait of omnisubjectivity only makes sense if there is something unique about subjective experience such that one cannot know all there is to know about a subjective experience without sampling it directly. In the last section, I argued that one can gain knowledge of what it is like to be in a subjective state not only from inside that state but also through a second-personal relation. There is one kind of subjective experience within the created order that cannot be gotten by God through a purely second-personal relation, however.

According to the Christian tradition, God, in the second person of the Trinity, became incarnated as a man, both fully God and fully man without separation or division as the creed says. If there is something it is like to be incarnated, and presumably there is, Christ does not gain this knowledge perceptually. In the Incarnation we find a kind of experiential knowledge of what it is like to be a human being that, indeed, can only be gained through first person experience, namely what it is like to be a human being who is God incarnate.⁸

In exploring different models of omnisubjectivity, we are put in a position to appreciate how unique this restriction to first person access is. Once one sets aside psychic co-habitation and pantheism, the remaining models, simulation via imaginative projection and perception, do not provide one with or require access to the first-personal state being experienced. Imaginative projection recreates someone else's first person experience within a fiction within one's own mind. Perception may be directed upon someone else, but it is second personal, not first personal. Christ's access to the experience of being incarnated, however, would not be an imaginative simulacrum

⁷ The term "empathy," of course, gets used in different ways. I note briefly the resonance between how I am describing empathy here and how psychologist Daniel Batson describes "empathic concern". He says that it is, "an other-oriented emotion elicited by and congruent with the perceived welfare of someone in need" (Batson 2011, 11). Moreover, he explicitly distinguishes what he thinks empathy concerns from acquiring the same emotion as another, from simulating another's mental state, or imagining oneself in another's situation.

⁸ Perhaps the other members of the trinity can come by this knowledge via the perceptual route when Jesus gains it in the first personal way, although, depending on one's model of the Trinity, they might not need to access the experience via that route.

nor would it be interpersonal perception.⁹ Instead, God would for the first time have *first personal* access to what it is like to be human. God wouldn't learn what human experience is like through being incarnated. To borrow a metaphor used earlier in this essay, God in the person of Christ would go from knowing what's inside a human room by looking through the window to knowing what's inside by being inside one. On the perceptual model, God would know what it is like to be a human being already via perception of our subjective experience, but the experience would nonetheless be unique in the way it was accessed.

I think we can, however, say that even an omniscient God would learn some new things through the experience of being incarnated (and not simply things accessed in a new way). Once again, the reader should remember that omniscience only makes sense as a divine attribute if one endorses the claim that there is experience dependent knowledge and that, whatever overlap there may be between experience dependent knowledge and other kinds of knowledge, the overlap is never complete. There are kinds of experiences that God would not have if God were never incarnated, and thus, there are kinds of experience dependent knowledge that are unavailable without an incarnation.

First, in being incarnated, Christ gains the new experience of experiencing what it is like for human beings to come to know an incarnate deity. When it comes to the Christian notion of the incarnation at least, this new experience would split into two forms. The first involves experiencing what it is like for human beings to experience someone who is perfect in his humanity.¹⁰ On the Christian conception, Christ is, of course, fully human but also a unique human being. Thus, Christ would gain the experience of what the subjective experience of a perfect human being is like¹¹ as well as the experience of what it is like for a perfect human being to be experienced by others. The second involves experiencing what it is like for human beings to experience God using the means that they normally use for other human beings. One might say that this involves experiencing what it is like for human beings to be able to direct their social minds upon God through that

social medium, inter-personal human interaction, that most centrally figures in our cognitive design.

I turn now to a more radical suggestion. One might think that Christ would gain the experience of what it is like to be limited to a human perspective. God's unincarnate experience is, obviously, not limited like a human being's is. God has all knowledge and has access to the full tapestry of subjective qualia. What even an omniscient God might not have access to is what it is like to be restricted to just a narrow bandwidth of experience. On the perceptual model, God sees the contents of minds and sees their boundaries. God does not, in seeing those bounded minds, experience his own perspective as bounded. Likewise, recall that imaginative projection needs to be nested in a meta-cognitive perspective lest one have a contagion problem in which God really takes on the unworthy states of creatures. A simulating God would never experience what it's like to be left within the subjective confines of human experience. It should be noted that in the case of the Incarnation, unlike that of the simulation of human beings, contagion is not a problem because Christ is perfect, and Christ's perfected humanity has to be such that it can be included in the inner life of God on pain of denying the Incarnation in the first place. Thus, in Christ's Incarnation, God would have access to a novel new experience that could not be available to an unincarnate deity.

The easiest case to be made for Christ gaining this experience of limitation would be on a kenotic model, but the self-emptying need be only modest. Suppose, for instance, that Christ's human mind relates to the divine mind in a way analogous to the way our conscious mind relates to the subconscious or, alternatively, that only as much of the divine mind bleeds over into conscious thought as a human intellect can contain or operate in conjunction with (cf. Loke 2012; Moreland and Craig 2003). Even though, on the perceptual model, Christ already knows via perception what human minds contain, Christ gains the experience of being conscious in a limited human way, which is different from the way a divine mind operates when not incarnated.

Even if we try to avoid a kenotic Christology, Christ might still acquire the experience of what it is like to operate within human limitations. The rationale for denying even modest kenosis would presumably go like this. To be fully God, Christ has to exercise the divine perfections. Restricting the subjective experience of the divine nature in Christ to human proportions would thus compromise a divine perfection. Consequently, kenosis is excluded. Given the Chalcedonian formula, however, one has to affirm the full humanity of Christ as well as his full divinity. So, even the opponent of a modest kenosis should affirm by parity of logic that Christ's subjective human experience should not be tampered with lest we

⁹ If one's model of self-knowledge made introspection out to be perceptual, then Christ's experience of being incarnated would technically be perceptual. That technicality does not affect the basic point that the experience of being a human being who is also God incarnate requires God to have first-person access to it.

¹⁰ I realize Catholics might have qualms here because Mary is supposed to be sinless. Even for a Catholic, though, I am given to understand that the sinlessness of Mary and the perfection of Jesus are not equivalent.

¹¹ Technically, that's yet another new experience, but it would distract to take it up separately here.

compromise Christ's full humanity. Insofar as Christ is fully human, however, Christ will have human experiences, which include operating within a limited bandwidth when it comes to subjective human experiences. I leave it to the proponent of such a view to make sense of what looks initially like a two-track mind, but, however the two minds of Christ would go together on this model, Christ, *qua* human, should experience human limitation. Therefore, since Christ must be a single, united person on the Chalcedonian formula, God in the person of Christ experiences human limitation in a unique way, one that is not normally available even for an omnisubjective God.

For the penultimate thought for this section, I would draw the reader's attention to a well-known passage from the letter to the Hebrews in the Christian New Testament.

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. (Hebrews 4:15, ESV)

The idea that Jesus was tempted has long been a subject of speculation in philosophical theology. The discussion typically centers on how Jesus could be genuinely tempted unless he were also able to sin and proceeds by focusing on issues related to the freedom of the will as they pertain to Christ. What does not get so much attention, at least not focally, is that, *qua* God, Jesus introduces something new into the divine life, the first personal experience of temptation. The fact of temptation rather than the experience of temptation is the traditional focus. One might think that what makes this experience possible, whatever one's verdict on the further topic of how Christ's free will operated in response to temptation, is the introduction of the experience of human limitation. God cannot be tempted, but a perfect human being can. Why is that? One might well think that the answer has to do with the way that God experiences a complete picture of the world that makes the absurdity of a wrong choice obvious. Given that frame of reference, it is impossible for God to experience a wrong course of action as appealing. In contrast, even a perfect human being, especially when

living in a corrupt world, can be given a partial window on the world that invites one to make what would be recognized as an error from a complete picture of the world. Thus, even if perfectly resisted, the idea that God in Christ acquires the experience of human limitation helps one make sense of how it could be that a single person who is not only a morally perfect human but also God could experience temptation, when God is not supposed to be the kind of being that can be tempted.

One might further suppose that the way to interpret this verse from Hebrews philosophically is to assert that Christ gains a new experience in becoming incarnated that allows Christ to extend empathy in a way that was unavailable before. As a final thought, I want to flip this natural thought on its head and suggest that the Incarnation reflects instead the way in which perfect empathy moves one to seek out opportunities to come alongside the experiences of the other. The new experiences made available in the incarnation should not be seen as the cause of greater empathy in God. Rather, condescending to experience our limitations firsthand and to experience our failure to receive an incarnate deity is our own window into the subjective experience of an omnisubjective and perfectly empathic God.

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