

TWO ARGUMENTS FOR THE INCOHERENCE OF NON-TELEOLOGICAL DEISM

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Abstract: I argue that one form of deism, what I shall call ‘*moderate non-teleological deism*’, seems *prima facie* incoherent (at least on the assumption of the intuitive Anselmian conception of God). I offer two arguments in support of the *prima facie* incoherence view: the moral irresponsibility argument and the practical irrationality argument. On the one hand, the moral responsibility argument suggests that three of the essential attributes of such a deistic God are inconsistent: omniscience, omnipotence and moral perfection. This is, of course, a variation of the well-known argument from evil.

On the other hand, the practical rationality argument suggests that were such a deistic God to create the universe

but have no further interest, plan or goal for the universe, the very act would have committed a deistic God to practical irrationality. I argue that this result follows from a widely accepted understanding of the nature of practical rationality and agency. I briefly examine some objections to the two arguments and conclude that moderate non-teleological deism seems *prima facie* incoherent.

1. Introduction

Suppose for the sake of argument that there is a metaphysically necessary divine being, God, who (a la Anselm) is omnipotent, omniscient and morally perfect.¹ Suppose also that deism is true, or at least that the following version of deism is true.² That is, that God is the kind of agent that has somehow caused the existence of the universe but has no further interest, plan, goal or interference with the workings of the universe.³ Rather, in

¹ This is a quite standard Anselmian, typical of classical theism understanding of God as exhibiting the three essential attributes (cf. Wierenga (1989:1)). Compare Swinburne (1994:125): ‘I suggest -provisionally-[that]...there exists necessarily and eternally a person essentially bodiless, omnipresent, creator and sustainer of any universe there may be, perfectly free, omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good, and a source of moral obligation’.

² Creation deism is to be distinguished from non-creation deism, namely, the *prima facie* logically possible scenario that a deistic God exists and an eternal physical universe exists without coming into existence by means of a deistic creation act. We will be dealing here with *creation* deism.

³ Cosmologically speaking, ‘universe’ here is theoretically neutral and bears no theoretical presuppositions (universe, multiverse etc.).

Aristotelian style, God is pure thought thinking itself (whatever that might exactly mean).⁴ This is all that divine agency amounts to.⁵

Would such a deistic conception of God be plausible? Although this conception of God has been historically influential, I argue that such a conception is *prima facie* incoherent (at least on the assumption of an Anselmian conception of God).⁶ I offer two arguments in support of

⁴ See Aristotle *Metaphysics* XII (1072b21). Of course, this is a broadly Aristotelian conception, even if it is not to be attributed to Aristotle with any plausibility. I have no interest in Aristotelian scholarship here.

⁵ It might be objected that I set up the argument in the backdrop of Anselmian-theistic assumptions about God from the outset and, therefore, it is unsurprising that I end up with incoherence for deism. This is exactly right, but it should be stressed that the Anselmian-theistic conception is *prima facie* very natural and intuitive. Any understanding of God that does not take into account the Anselmian qualities of divine agency (omnipotence, omniscience, omnibenevolence) would seem revisionary of our ordinary concept of God beyond repair. Hence, it is not unsurprising that the Anselmian conception of God is taken as a default assumption in the discussion. Thanks to an anonymous referee who pressed the point.

⁶ Deistic conceptions became prominent during the rise of modern science and the enlightenment (cf. Bristow (2010: section 2.3), Dawkins (2006)). Bristow (2010: section 2.3) suggests that 18th ce. English figures like John Toland, Antony Collins, Matthew Tindal were deists, as well as Robespierre's 'cult of the supreme being'. According to Dawkins (2006: 39, 60), Voltaire, Diderot, Thomas Paine and most of America's founding fathers like Thomas Jefferson and John Adams were deists. Dawkins (2006:36) himself is more sympathetic to deism than theism and, although he rejects any conception of God as unnecessary to postulate (2006:68), he makes clear that he is '... calling only

the *prima facie* incoherence of deism: the moral irresponsibility argument and the practical irrationality argument. Taken together, these arguments suggest that deism involves an incoherent and therefore practically irrational account of rational (divine) agency.

Of course, some may object from the outset that the project is of little interest because there are few (if any) vocal defenders of deism nowadays. But even if this is true, I think the project is worthwhile because it explores the coherence of a historically popular conceptual possibility. Let us clarify a bit the version of deism that we will be dealing with.

2. Teleological\Non-Teleological Deism and Classical Theism

Deism is to be carefully distinguished from classical theism. According to at least typical versions of theism, roughly, God is a transcendent, intentional agent (of sorts) that has an interest and plan for her created and conserved universe and may even interfere in its natural workings in order to make sure that everything will go according to divine plan.⁷ Such divine interference in the workings of

supernatural Gods delusional' (2006:36). Presumably, deism is false but can be taken more seriously than delusional theism.

⁷ Indeed, theists often talk of divine conservation, governance and 'providence' (cf. McCann (2012)). The idea is not only modern as it was also found in classical antiquity. Zagzebski (2007:31-2) finds the view in Cicero, for example. For some discussion of creation and conservation and its relation to theism\deism see Kvanvig and Vander Laan (2014).

nature might even circumvent some or other law of nature and constitute a miracle.⁸

The conception of God in the Abrahamic monotheistic world religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) seems to exactly fit this general pattern.⁹ A loving and morally perfect transcendent God somehow created and ever since conserves the universe and has a providential interest and plan for the universe that may even lead her to interfere with the laws of nature governing the universe.¹⁰

⁸ At least according to the classical, Humean definition of miracle as ‘a violation of a law of nature’ (cf. Hume (1777), Mavrodes (2005), McGrew (2014)). Of note, though, is that there might even be non-classical understandings of miracles that respect natural causal closure and the laws of nature. If, for example, God intervenes to cause a statistically improbable but physically possible event, this might often be called pure luck, but still be a miracle because it is the result of divine intervention. Such an understanding of miracles would, in principle, be consistent with a theistic ‘interfering’ God that respects the causal closure of the world.

⁹ There are also non-Abrahamic conceptions that subscribe to this general model of God. For example, some Indian thinkers have conceived of God in similar ways. Ramanuja, who flourished in the early 12th ce. and probably knew nothing of Abrahamic religions, provides a classic example. See Griffiths (2005: 60) for the point.

¹⁰ See Bowker (2014) for some discussion. Griffiths (2005:59-60) notes that one way to distinguish theistic from nontheistic conceptions of God is on the basis of naming the divine as a person or not. The idea is that theism attributes character traits to a divine person while nontheism does not. This seems, however, inadequate because although deism for example understands God in more impersonal terms, it still attributes traits to God. Perhaps a more promising way is to distinguish theism from nontheism in terms of the *kind* of traits that we attribute to God, that is, personal or impersonal.

In contrast to this theistic (and broadly Abrahamic) conception of God, some deistic conceptions of God envisage the role and nature of God as well as its relation to the universe of creation in more impersonal terms.¹¹ God created the universe but neither conserves nor has any interest and plan nor interferes with the workings of the universe.¹² Call these deistic conceptions of God *non-teleological* in order to distinguish them from *teleological* ones.

Teleological ones would instead stipulate that God creates the universe and intends her creation to evolve towards a final end\telos, according to a divine plan, but exclude any divine interference in the causal workings of the universe.¹³ Due to her omniscience and omnipotence, she can intentionally create the mechanical laws of nature and foresee how these will unfold and end and, moreover, actually intend to bring about this end. Teleological deism is sidelined for the rest of the paper and we focus on non-teleological deism.

Non-teleological deism may be distinguished between *moderate* and *radical*. The moderate version would stipulate

¹¹ See, for example, the discussion in Dawkins (2006) and Bristow (2010: section 2.3). Note also that some form of deism is not the only option for a nontheistic, impersonal God. For instance, a Spinozistic and pantheistic conception of God is another option. See Hoffman and Rosenkrantz (2002: 33-8) for some discussion and criticism of the Spinozistic view.

¹² See Dawkins (2006: 39) for a non-teleological understanding of deism.

¹³ See Bristow (2010: section 2.3) for a teleological understanding of deism. The difference between the teleological and the non-teleological version of creation deism is not often noted. Indeed, both Dawkins (2006) and Bristow (2010) miss the distinction. The distinction between moderate and radical non-teleological creation deism is also often missed.

that God intentionally creates the universe but has no *further* interest whatsoever about the universe of creation. She had some goal in mind that intended to promote with the act of creation but not afterwards. Instead, the radical version would stipulate that God creates the universe on the basis of no goal whatsoever. She just does. It is not that she has no further interest after the act of creation. She never had any interest in any goal but she just did create the universe.

In what follows, I will be assuming moderate non-teleological deism and tend to omit the cumbersome adjective of ‘moderate non-teleological’. I think the moderate version is the more promising of the two and, therefore, the more interesting philosophically to engage with here. This is, roughly, because the radical conception seems to portray a picture of divine agency that seems deeply irrational and whimsical (because it acts for no reason at all) and given that we would expect God to be ideally rational, this is a very unattractive position to assume about God.¹⁴

The sketched deistic conception of God seems to bear some theoretical attractions over theism.¹⁵ First, it is –

¹⁴ I also think that versions of the two arguments against moderate non-teleological deism would apply to the radical counterpart. Indeed, as I will indicate later on, the practical rationality argument directly applies to the radical version.

¹⁵ See for example Dawkins (2006:59), eloquent as ever: ‘Compared to the Old Testament’s psychotic delinquent, the deist God of the eighteenth-century is an altogether grander being: worthy of his cosmic creation, loftily unconcerned with human affairs, sublimely aloof from our private thoughts and hopes, caring nothing for our messy sins or mumbled contritions. The deist God is a physicist to end all physics...a hyper-engineer who set up the laws and constants of the universe, fine-tuned them with exquisite precision and foreknowledge, detonated what we

according to at least some views- less anthropomorphic and *prima facie* more philosophically sophisticated because God is envisaged as a disinterested and dispassionate, metaphysically necessary, Supreme Being without any down-to-earth Homeric affects, interests and plans.¹⁶ Second, it respects the causal closure of the natural world and the concomitant operation of the laws of nature, something that theism need not do, according to some understandings of theism (see fn. 8). Third, it denies the perpetual divine conservation of the universe and the existence of supernatural miraculous interventions etc. that many find mysterious and hard to believe in our profusely naturalistic times.¹⁷

According to the sketched deistic conception, God is quite like a clockmaker. She created the universe and by this act set the laws of nature but had no further interest in the

would now call the hot big bang, retired and was never heard from again'. Although Dawkins (2006:68) rejects any kind of God as unnecessary to postulate, he obviously has more respect for deism than for theism. Others, of course, such as Kvanvig and Vander Laan (2014) seem to think that the score sheet between the two is not as unequivocal.

¹⁶ I imply Homer's famous anthropomorphic portrayal of Gods as jealous, bellicose, vengeful, amorous etc. in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. A patently anthropomorphic depiction of God is often found in the Old Testament as well. See Rowe (2005) for some discussion.

¹⁷ See Kvanvig and Vander Laan (2014) for the point. Also, it is surely not accidental that the sketched version of theism is broadly similar to the conception of God that Abrahamic religions endorse, which of course, according to some opinions, it is not *prima facie* philosophically sophisticated, while the deistic God is more of a philosophical, indeed Aristotelian, conception of God. See Dawkins (2006:59) again for the point.

universe. Setting the causal order in motion (according to the laws of nature) was sufficient for the mechanical universe to operate. In contrast, according to the theistic conception, God created the universe and set the laws of nature in motion and continues to have an invested interest in the universe that in certain exceptional circumstances might even lead him to interfere through miraculous action.

Stipulating classical theism and distinguishing it from teleological/nonteleological deism (moderate and radical) is only a useful approximation but it will have to suffice for current purposes. Let us now turn to the two arguments for the incoherence of moderate non-teleological deism. First, we introduce the moral irresponsibility argument.

3. The Moral Irresponsibility Argument

In spite of its relative virtues and perhaps even its *prima facie* plausibility, deism seems to be incoherent (at least on the assumption of a broadly Anselmian conception of God). It is *prima facie* incoherent because it renders God a morally irresponsible being, something that contradicts her assumed moral perfection.

This is the case because if a deistic God exists, then she bears the three Anselmian attributes of omnipotence, omniscience and moral perfection (to the extent that this is logically and metaphysically possible, of course). As Anselm indicated, this much seems a conceptual truth because the three attributes seem essential 'for the greatest being we can conceive of'. That is, it is impossible for the greatest and most perfect being to be lacking in these three intrinsic aspects of (divine) agency, if it exists.

The problem is that the three attributes will *prima facie* contradict each other. They will contradict each other because were God to exist she would be omniscient and as

such she would foreknow what the created physical universe would contain and involve (as well as its final fate). True enough, philosophers of religion disagree about how much knowledge omniscience should involve and how exactly it works (if it is possible at all).¹⁸ But we need not make a stand on this vexing issue here. We can suggest that God would at least foreknow that at some point in the spatiotemporal, natural realm beings such as the *homo sapiens* species would evolve as a matter of physical-biological necessity.

God would foreknow this much because on the basis of the initial physical conditions of creation she could nomologically deduce (in the style of Laplace's demon) the inescapability of the evolution of sentient and sapient life and its future sufferings.¹⁹ Presumably, God knows the fundamental laws of nature that govern our universe, knows the initial physical conditions of creation, she is capable of infinite computational power, and, hence, she can deduce what out of physical necessity will follow. So,

¹⁸ For discussion of divine omniscience see Davis (1983), Wierenga (1989), Hughes (1995), Hoffman and Rosenkrantz (2002) and Zagzebski (2007).

¹⁹ It might be objected that this presupposes a deterministic picture of nature and there are very successful theories of physics, such as quantum mechanics, that seem to suggest an indeterministic picture of the natural realm. Two comments are due here. First, it is not entirely clear that we should take quantum mechanics to support indeterminism because there are interpretations of quantum mechanics that are compatible with determinism. Second, even if the world is indeterministic, as we understand it, it is not entirely clear to me that God couldn't in some way foreknow how the world will play out. Be that as it may, I assume here that God could in some way foreknow the suffering that will ensue from the act of creation.

even if as some have argued God does not know of future contingents, perhaps due to the agents' free will, and therefore she cannot be held responsible for moral evil (e.g. murder, rape, genocide etc.), she can definitely be held responsible for physical evil (e.g. tsunamis, quakes, diseases etc.).

Thus, God would know from the beginning of the universe of the forthcoming evolution of life and its sufferings due to physical evil. But given that were a deistic God to exist she should be morally perfect, she should also be perfectly morally responsible for her actions.²⁰ This seems to follow from the fact that it is an a priori conceptual truth that moral perfection (goodness, virtue, or what have you) implies moral responsibility.²¹ Intuitively, we would not call someone morally perfect (good or virtuous) if she were morally irresponsible, no matter how (ir)responsibility is to be exactly specified.²² Hence, if God exists she should be responsible for her actions on pain of not being morally perfect, as she essentially has to be, given the traditional conception of divine nature.

Moreover, someone who is morally responsible is also responsible for the reasonably foreseeable morally significant consequences of her actions.²³ If, for example, I

²⁰ See Kvanvig and Vander Laan (2014: section 2) for attribution of responsibility to a creator God for her creation.

²¹ Hughes (1995: 165) accepts this moral truth and its application to divine agency: '...agents can be held morally accountable for the reasonably foreseeable effects of their actions.'

²² That is, no matter how the metaphysics of free will and responsibility are to be specified. For some discussion of the puzzle of free will, see Pink (2004).

²³ Some Kant(ians) might be tempted to resist this moral principle on the basis of the idea that what bears moral worth is dutiful good intention (or will), not good consequences. In

am a responsible minister of energy pondering the use of nuclear reactors, I should also be taking into consideration the reasonably foreseeable (and morally significant) possible consequence of the contamination of the environment by radiation leaks for the generations to come. By parity of reasoning, God who is omniscient should also take into consideration all the foreseeable possible consequences of her actions that are morally significant because she is morally perfect.

Now, due to omniscience, God foreknows the pain, suffering and misery that rational life on earth (sentient and sapient) is going through and will continue to go through. And she is responsible for these hardships because, as a creator of the universe, it is a foreseeable, nomologically deducible, morally significant causal consequence of her act of creation. But as she is morally perfect, she cannot be irresponsible in the same way that an irresponsible parent abandons her child to her fate. And as she is also omnipotent she could, if she were to take an interest in the universe, forestall or at least ameliorate the conditions of life for living organisms. But given the obvious ubiquity of

tandem, there is no moral responsibility for egregious consequences if the act followed a good intention. I am skeptical of this line of thought about moral responsibility because I am skeptical of Kant(ian) approaches in ethics more generally. For one thing, it is very counterintuitive and does not reflect how ordinary agents tend to attribute responsibility. Agents should not typically be absolved of responsibility just because of their good intentions. As it is proverbially said, 'The road to hell is paved with good intentions'. Obviously, I cannot get into detail here but I would be more sympathetic to a broadly, Aristotelian 'mixed' account of responsibility that takes into consideration both good intention and reasonably foreseeable consequences.

physical evil, pain and suffering in the life of living organisms, she does not.²⁴

This is the crux of the matter. For if she is omniscient and omnipotent, and does nothing, then she is not morally perfect. If she is omnipotent and morally perfect and does nothing, then she is not omniscient. If she is omniscient and morally perfect and does nothing, then she is not omnipotent. So, it seems that the sketched deistic God's omniscience and omnipotence is in contradiction with her moral perfection. So if God exists, she cannot be the deistic God as sketched. It follows that either there is a non-deistic God or there is no God at all.²⁵

An obvious way out of the contradiction is to suggest that God could nomologically foreknow the physical evil and suffering to follow the act of creation due to physical necessity, but still allow for such evil because a greater aggregate of moral good would follow from such evil in the long run. That is, due to moral perfection, God would be metaphysically constrained from preventing a greater aggregate of moral good (via physical suffering) from taking

²⁴ It is interesting to note that evil is typically understood in such debates in broadly hedonistic terms as equating pain, suffering and misery. Yet, if Moorean (1903) 'open question arguments' can be run for hedonistic accounts of good, then by parity of reasoning they can be run for hedonistic accounts of evil as well. Such questions would raise qualms about the purported identification at the meta-level.

²⁵ Perhaps we could resist the conclusion if we could somehow restrict the strength of the three essential attributes. This might be a possible way out but it raises difficult problems of ad hoc *ness* from the start. For example, on the basis of what principled criterion can we restrict the strength of the attributes and to what extent? I discuss a bit this strategy of resisting the problem in a moment.

place. Although logically possible for God to interfere, it would be metaphysically impossible for a morally perfect being to prevent an overall morally better state of affairs (via physical suffering) from taking place.

However, this ‘greater moral good’ objection to the moral irresponsibility argument relies on the plausibility of a theodicy that would explain how physical evil and suffering in the long run conduce to greater aggregate of moral good. Such an explanation is possible and might be in the offing, but it is clear that such an explanation would be contentious.²⁶ And if the objection to the moral responsibility argument relies on a contentious explanation to be provided, the objection itself is contentious. So it would be premature to reject the moral irresponsibility argument on the basis of ‘the greater moral good’ objection.

Two more observations are due at this juncture. First, this responsibilist version of the argument from evil against deism is logically weaker than standard versions of the argument from evil against God in a dialectically elegant way.²⁷ It is an argument to the conclusion that only *deistic* conceptions of God are inconsistent, not that any conception of God is inconsistent. This leaves open the

²⁶ See Tooley (2015) for discussion of the problem of evil and various lines of reply.

²⁷ For the classic exposition of the logical problem of evil see Hume (1779\1990) and for a recent restatement see Mackie (1955, 1983). Hume attributes the problem to Epicurus but it is unclear if it is, indeed, his because it does not appear in the surviving Epicurus’ texts. At any rate, Zagzebski (2007: 146, fn.2) says that the argument is attributed to Epicurus by Lactantius’ *On the Anger of Gods*. For a round treatment of the various facets of the problem (logical, evidential, empirical) see Zagzebski (2007).

possibility that either there is some other non-deistic kind of God, who is responsible in accordance with what her essential attributes require, or that (Anselmian) God does not exist.²⁸

Classical theists, for example, could take advantage of this logical space (as they, no doubt, have) and try to support the idea that a creator God is somehow morally responsible for her act of creation in accordance with her assumed moral perfection. They could suggest that God can and perhaps sometimes does interfere to forestall or ameliorate physical evil. Of course, they would still have to, among other things, deal with the general problem of evil but they could in principle appeal to a coherent story that allows for theistic moral responsibility (and a theodicy).²⁹ Such a theodicy would not be available to deism because by definition God cannot interfere after the act of creation.

Second, the moral responsibility argument is different from the classic argument from evil because, although it also appeals to physical evil to indicate its inconsistency with the triad of divine essential attributes, it exploits specifically the dispassionate and disinterested nature of a *deistic* God to derive a contradiction. It shows in this way that the deistic virtue of portraying an impersonal, dispassionate and perhaps less anthropomorphic God backfires with regard to the attribute of moral perfection

²⁸ Of course, the conclusion does not follow if we jettison the Anselmian conception of God and the three essential attributes that standardly accompany it (omniscience, omnipotence, moral perfection). I come to this somewhat revisionary option in the text in a moment.

²⁹ For discussion of various theodicies and their problems and attractions, see Tooley (2015). For a defense of the logical compatibility of God and the problem of evil, see Plantinga (1974).

due to moral irresponsibility. So, too little of an anthropomorphic God might be as a problem as too much of an anthropomorphic God. Drawing the line between anthropomorphic/non-anthropomorphic God with precision is, inevitably, a difficult matter.

Let us formulate the moral responsibility argument against deism more carefully:

P1: If God exists, then she is (a la Anselm) omniscient, omnipotent and morally perfect (to the extent that this is logically and metaphysically possible).

P2: If an agent is morally perfect, then she is perfectly morally responsible.

P3: If an agent is perfectly morally responsible, then she is fully responsible for the foreseeable, morally significant consequences of her acts.

C1[by P1-P3]: If God exists, then she is fully responsible for the foreseeable, morally significant consequences of her acts.

P4: If a deistic God exists, then she has created the universe and has nomologically foreseen -due to omniscience- the full, morally significant consequences of the act of creation to the extent that these involve physical evil and suffering.

P5: The divinely foreseen full, morally significant consequences of the act of creation involve physical evil because evolved sentient and sapient life experiences pain, misery and suffering out of natural disasters, diseases etc.

P6: A deistic God is fully morally responsible for the foreseen physical evil consequences of the act of

creation to the extent that these concern sentient and sapient life.

P7: If an intentional agent foresees the physical evil consequences of her acts and can interfere to forestall them (or at least ameliorate them) but does nothing, then that agent is morally irresponsible.³⁰

P8: God foresees the physical evil consequences of her creation act –due to omniscience- and can interfere to forestall them (or at least ameliorate them) –due to omnipotence- but does not so intervene.

C2 [by C1-P8]: Hence, the divine agent is morally irresponsible, and, hence, not morally perfect.

P10: If God exists, then she cannot be a deistic God because that would leave her morally imperfect and (Anselmian) God -by the P1 assumption- cannot be morally imperfect.

C3[by C1-P10]: Hence, either a non-deistic God exists or God does not exist.

³⁰ It might be objected that if Hick's soul-making theodicy, that suggests that suffering helps us 'build soul' and bring us into communion with God, is correct then P7 is false. It could be that God foresees the physical suffering and she is not morally irresponsible, if the ultimate goal is soul-making and communion with God. But as Tooley (2015) notes, soul-making theodicy faces many thorny problems. For example, it does not explain away the suffering of animals, that presumably lack soul-making ability, of babies that never get the chance of soul-making and of the suffering of virtuous people that presumably are already of good character and in communion with God.

The argument is valid and the premises, as I have indicated above, bear at least some *prima facie* plausibility and, therefore, the conclusion is *prima facie* plausible to be sound. I cannot afford here to discuss all the possible ways that one may be tempted to try to resist the argument but there are at least two interesting ways to try to resist the conclusion of the argument: one Anselmian way via qualification of P1 and one Leibnizian via rejection of P7 and P8.

The Anselmian way to resist P1 is to try to qualify P1 by restricting the strength of at least one of the three divine attributes in an elegant way that, if possible, would not compromise beyond repair our intuitive, Anselmian conception of God as the maximally perfect agent. Besides, deity might be maximally knowing, powerful and good only in the way that is logically and metaphysically possible to be so.

Trivially, logical possibility constrains metaphysical possibility and intuitively there should be logical limitations to maximal knowledge, power and goodness that even God cannot transcend.³¹ God might be immensely powerful but

³¹ See Wierenga (1989:7-8), for a similar point. Also, this is how God (i.e. ‘demiurge’) is sketched in Plato’s *Timaeus*. Plato’s creator of cosmos out of chaos is constrained by the existence of independent ‘forms’ and truths. Hughes (1995:114) attributes the view that divine omnipotence is constrained by the laws of logic to Aquinas and to Ockham and perhaps to Descartes the view that divine omnipotence is not constrained by the laws of logic and God could, ‘if he so chose, alter the laws of logic themselves’. But a few pages later, Hughes (1995:125-6) indicates that Ockham was restricting divine omnipotence to what is non-contradictory. At any rate, I am more sympathetic to the logically constrained view of divine omnipotence. For one thing, it would seem to be contradictory even for God to rationally deny the law

it might not be in her power to undo (kill if you like) herself because she is a metaphysically necessary being. Or it might not be in her power to change the truth-value of a necessary truth like $1+1=2$ because it is mathematically impossible.

One idea would be to restrict omniscience. God might know everything that can logically and metaphysically be known and perhaps she cannot know the morally significant consequences of her act of creation for some reason (perhaps because this is the only way to allow for free will).³² That would mean that P4 is false because God cannot foresee the morally significant consequences of her act of creation and therefore the overall argument is invalid. But as we have suggested, even if this maneuver works with regard to moral evil, it does not work with regard to the nomologically deducible physical evil.

As we have seen, another idea would be to restrict omnipotence. God might be powerful enough to do anything that logically and metaphysically can be done and perhaps she cannot act in order to forestall or ameliorate suffering because, although logically possible, it is not metaphysically possible.³³ That would mean that P7 is false

of non-contradiction (cf. Putnam (1983) for a similar point against Quine (1953)).

³² See Davis (1983), Wierenga (1989), Hughes (1995), Hoffman and Rosenkrantz (2002) and Zagzebski (2007) for sustained discussion of the dilemma of the compatibility of free will and divine foreknowledge. Zagzebski (2007) presents the three classical attempts to address it: Aquinas, Ockham's and Molina's. Also, Hoffman and Rosenkrantz (2002:126-135) defend the incompatibilist view that God cannot foreknow, causally undetermined, free human actions.

³³ For a round treatment of the issue and a proposed understanding of omnipotence see Wierenga (1989: Ch. 1). See

because God is not responsible for something that is not in her power to prevent. For, trivially, responsibility implies at least some (direct or indirect) minimal control over action.³⁴ But as we have suggested, it is contentious whether a plausible explanation can be provided of why a greater moral good can come out of physical evil in the long run. So this reply is a hostage to the result of a different debate.

A third idea would be to restrict moral perfection. God might be benevolent only to the extent that this is logically and metaphysically possible and perhaps she is not responsible for the morally significant consequences of her act of creation because that is not logically and metaphysically morally possible.³⁵ That would mean that P6 is false, though, I submit that this route is very

also Rowe (2005). For both Wierenga (1989:16) and Rowe (2005), logical possibility is not sufficient to restrict enough divine omnipotence because there might be things that are logically possible but are not metaphysically possible for God for some reason (e.g. interfere with individual, human free action). In other words, the problem is that metaphysical possibility entails logical possibility but not vice versa. The fact that logical possibility does not entail metaphysical possibility leaves open the possibility that some facts are logically possible but not metaphysically possible for God. For example, it might be logically possible for God to determine one's choice but it might not be metaphysically possible.

³⁴ Moral responsibility is a much more complicated issue than this sweeping statement seems to allow. Much of recent debate has focused on Frankfurt's (1969) work on the principle of alternate possibilities. For some discussion see Van Inwagen (1983) and Wierenga (1989:74-85)

³⁵ Some, however, have gone as far as saying that God is amoral. Hoffman and Rosenkrantz (2002: 35) attribute the view to Spinoza and subject it to criticism.

counterintuitive because it seems to defy the a priori conceptual truth that moral perfection implies moral responsibility about reasonably foreseeable morally significant consequences.

The more Leibnizian route to resist the argument is to deny P7 and P8. That is, we could assume with Leibniz (1985) that our actual world is the best of all possible worlds in spite of the existence of much of evil (other possible worlds have even more aggregate amount of evil perhaps, for one thing, because there is no free will or because there is much more physical evil etc.) and God is constrained by metaphysical necessity not to intervene to forestall or ameliorate evil.³⁶ God is morally perfect, omniscient and omnipotent but although it is logically possible for God to intervene, it is not metaphysically possible for God (perhaps she is constrained by her own nature).

One objection that might be leveled at the Leibnizian approach is that it saddles us with all the typical objections that the Leibnizian philosophy of religion typically meets. Thus, it keeps this route of escape hostage to Leibnizian fortune. For example, intuitively, God could have created at least a slightly better world (e.g. with no cancer or no malaria). If this is the case, then we are goaded towards fideism or skeptical theism because we should invest God with some trust about her choice, even though it is conceivable that we could have a better world. Perhaps God knows more than we can and do know about what is overall the best world and we should trust her judgment.

A fortiori, in contrast to Leibniz's own *theistic* philosophy of religion, this Leibnizian *deistic* picture seems to incur trouble that specifically has to do with the deistic feature. That is, it leaves God totally withdrawn from the

³⁶ See Leibniz (1985) and Perkins (2007: Ch. 2) for discussion.

sphere of creation and as a result the worry about divine moral irresponsibility resurfaces. The worry would be that God has created a world with much physical evil and even though she had foreknown of the post-creation physical evil and that she would not be able to ameliorate things due to metaphysical impossibility once the world is created, she nevertheless plunged forward to create that world. Yet this is the kind of practical situation that the agent would be deemed morally responsible.

Be that as it may, one of these sketched routes or even some other might offer a plausible way to resist the argument, although this remains to be shown. For the time being, we cannot afford to pursue further the matter here and will leave it as a challenge to anyone who would be tempted to resist the argument. Let us now turn to the second argument.

4. The Practical Irrationality Argument

As we have seen, according to creation deism, God creates the universe and has no further interest, plan or goal about the universe, something that invites serious misgivings about divine moral responsibility (at least if God is understood in broadly Anselmian terms). Moreover, it is also a good question *why* would God somehow create the universe, if she would subsequently have no further interest and plan in that universe, as creation deism suggests.

This is a pertinent question because intentional, practically rational agents act for reasons, according to their best judgment, in order to satisfy their goals, and they do not tend to lose interest in their goals, unless there is at least a (subjectively-perceived) good reason for such a shift

in interest.³⁷ Indeed, acting for reasons on the basis of careful long-term planning is one of the trademark features of rational practical agency according to some philosophers of action.³⁸ What then could be the reason for God's shift in interest in the goal after the creation act? Could there be such a reason at all and if not, what this can tell us about deistic practical rationality and agency?

Before coming to these questions, some conceptual analysis of intentional practical rationality is called for. Consider how we typically understand intentional, instrumental practical rationality. Minimally rational, intentional agents act on the basis of reasons according to their best judgment in order to promote their goals.³⁹ This is what the principle of instrumental practical reason indicates, namely, that minimally rational, intentional agents have to abide by instrumental rationality. In other words, an instrumentally rational agent *A* *φ*-ies according to her best judgment *J* with the intention *I* to satisfy some goal *G*. She has at least some reason *R* to believe that *φ*-ing would be likely to satisfy *G* and proceeds to act accordingly.

For example, if I want an ice cream (and endorse this as a goal⁴⁰) and I am instrumentally rational I should act on the basis of reasons, according to my best judgment, in order to find the best means to satisfy my goal of having an

³⁷ See Worsnip (2018) for the instrumental coherence requirement of structural rationality.

³⁸ See Bratman (1987).

³⁹ See Anscombe (1958) and Davidson (1963) for some related classic work in the philosophy of action. See also Michael Smith (1994) for a more recent statement. For a Kantian position on practical reason, see Korsgaard (1986, 1996, 1997) for example.

⁴⁰ See Frankfurt (1998) on identification and alien desires\intentions.

ice cream. I might reason that the best quality of ice cream is found further down the road and that I can get there on foot in ten minutes, that I need some cash etc. I act because there is some goal that I intend to satisfy with my act and I have some reasons to think that my act is at least likely to satisfy the goal.

So, if an instrumentally practically rational agent acts intentionally, then by so acting she intends to promote or satisfy some goal (even if the agent is not explicitly aware of the goal or does not take the best available measures to satisfy the goal). Let us call this necessary condition on practical rationality '*the teleological principle of instrumental practical rationality*'. The teleological principle of instrumental practical reason is widely accepted among moral philosophers and philosophers of action. The principle is even accepted by moral philosophers (e.g. Kantians or Aristotelians) who deny that practical reason is ultimately reducible to Humean instrumental reason.⁴¹

Of note, is that while intentional practical rationality is teleological in the sense of being goal-oriented, a *radical* non-teleological deistic act of creation would by definition be non-teleological, which means that such a deistic God would not be practically rational in the teleological sense. Hence, the radical version would breach 'the teleological

⁴¹ See Anscombe (1957), Davidson (1963), Smith (1994), Foley (1987). For a Kantian position on practical reason, see Korsgaard (1986, 1996, 1997) for example and for an Aristotelian McDowell (1998). Note, however, that the teleological principle is a very weak principle of instrumental practical rationality because it allows for the agent to be practically rational even if she does not take the best available means to satisfy the goal or she is not consciously aware of what the goal is. Both of these phenomena are psychologically possible and actually seem to be widespread.

principle of instrumental practical rationality'.⁴² However, at least in the case of the *moderate* non-teleological creation deism that we are examining, the problem is avoided because the act of creation is supposed to be teleological\goal-oriented. It is only afterwards that God has no further interest in the created universe and the intended goal. Thus, the teleological principle is satisfied by the moderate version.

Yet, this only leads to other problems for the moderate version. For, it is a constraint of *diachronic* practical rationality that we remain committed to the goals we value as worthwhile, unless there is (at least a subjectively-perceived) good reason not to. Call this '*the diachronic teleology principle of instrumental practical rationality*'. It is this principle that the moderate version violates.

According to the moderate version, God created the universe with the intention to promote some goal, but afterwards without any obvious good reason lost interest in the goal. But if God is omniscient she should foreknow all the relevant details about the goal (such as its normative justification and how to promote it) and any good reasons not to commit to the goal before the creation act. She would also be morally perfect and, therefore, aiming at the good, and omnipotent (and free) and, therefore, could well decide not to pursue the goal.

Nevertheless, although omniscient, morally perfect and omnipotent she decided to pursue the goal with the act of creation but afterwards aborted the project. But if she were omniscient, omnipotent and morally perfect it would seem that she had no good reason to embark on the project in

⁴² I would take Spinoza's rejection of teleology tout court and his understanding of physical reality as a necessary, purposeless emanation from God's nature to be exactly rejecting 'the teleological principle of instrumental practical rationality'.

the first place because she would foreknow the reasons that subsequently would render the project worthless. Given moral perfection she would be aiming at the good and given omnipotence she could well not engage in the pursuit of the goal in the first place.

This leaves us with a puzzle because if God were practically rational, omniscient, omnipotent and morally perfect, then either she should not have committed herself to the project in the first place because there were good reasons against the project or once committed to the project not abort the project just after the creation act without a good reason. But she did commit to the project only to abort it without a possible good reason, which leaves her practically irrational (at least on the assumption of the Anselmian God).

Some may respond that God might have had good reasons for aborting the plan (that the creation act intended to promote) that we ignore because of our humanly fallible epistemic position. Therefore, in this case God would satisfy ‘the diachronic teleology principle of instrumental practical rationality’. Yet this answer misses the point because it compromises the attribute of divine omniscience. That is, if God had foreknowledge about the goal and its details, then if there were a possible good reason to abort the plan she would have foreknown it and, consequently, should never embarked in its promotion with the act of creation.

In other words, given divine omniscience, God would have no possible good reason to abort the goal after the act of creation (and once she committed herself to the goal).⁴³ She knew what she was up to due to her omniscient nature – creation was not an involuntary knee-jerk reflex-, could

⁴³ Of note, is that given omniscience such reasons would have been factive and entailing truth.

well decide not to create the universe due to her omnipotence (and freedom) if there were good reasons not to and was well-meaning due to moral perfection. Besides, if a deistic God in Aristotelian spirit spends her eternal⁴⁴ days (figuratively speaking, for the sake of the analogy) thinking of herself she at least should satisfy the Socratic ‘know thyself’ and know of her proper intentions, goals and acts. The sense is that an omniscient God should and could have known better.

In the vein of skeptical theism, it might also be objected that God never aborted the plan she had in mind. She only created the world with that goal in mind and for some reason decided not to interfere in the workings of nature in any way. But given the epistemic gap between us limited and fallible beings and God we can never fully understand why she made these decisions. The obvious, albeit inadequately brief reply to this skeptical line of thought, is that it appears ad hoc. If we can know that God created the world with some goal in mind and that for some reason decided not to interfere in the world, why can’t we know more about the reasons behind these decisions? Besides, if we can have some such metaphysical knowledge, there is no obvious reason why we cannot have some more.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Of interest, is that God’s attribute of eternity may be understood either as atemporality (i.e. timelessness) or everlastingness. Atemporality is the condition of absence of time (i.e. timelessness) while everlastingness the condition of time without termination. According to Hughes (1995: 69, 79), Aquinas supported the former position, and Ockham the latter. For a defense of the latter see Davis (1983) and Hoffman and Rosenkrantz (2002: Ch.5).

⁴⁵ I understand that this much of discussion of skeptical theism is inadequate, but I cannot delve into the matter here. See Dougherty (2014) for some discussion of skeptical theism.

Let us now pull the strings of our minimal analysis of intentional practical rationality together and see where we have arrived so far. Intentional practical rationality requires at least satisfaction of the following principles:

- (a) *'the teleological principle of instrumental practical rationality'*.
- (b) *'the diachronic teleology principle of instrumental practical rationality'*

A deistic God is committed to violating 'the diachronic teleology principle of instrumental practical rationality'. God, any plausible conception of God, of course cannot be practically irrational and this seems to follow from the essential attribute of moral perfection. If an agent is morally perfect then she should also be practically rational in the minimal sense that it satisfies the indicated constraints.⁴⁶ That is, she acts according to her best judgment in order to employ what she takes to be the best means for promoting or fulfilling her independently justified goals and does not abandon the goals, unless there is good reason for so doing.

This much seems again to be an a priori conceptual truth. That is, it seems to necessarily follow from our concept of 'intentional, practically rational agency'. I conclude that a deistic God who creates the universe intentionally but has no further interest and plan about the universe would be practically irrational because it would have acted with a specific goal in mind but then abandoned

⁴⁶ The idea that moral perfection or perfect virtue implies practical rationality is clearly found in Aristotle. As is well-known Aristotle distinguished between the virtuous, the continent, the incontinent and the base agent (*Nicomachean Ethics* VI). Only the virtuous is fully practically rational (in the broad sense).

the goal without a good reason. Thus, a deistic God violates the diachronic teleology principle of instrumental practical rationality.

Let us now formulate the argument from practical rationality for the incoherence of creation deism:

P1: Intentional practical rationality requires agents to act for reasons, according to their best judgment, in order to promote their goals (implicit or explicit). Moreover, practical rationality requires that they should not abandon their goals unless there is good reason for so doing.⁴⁷

P2: Creation deism proposes that God created the universe but has no further interest, plan or goal for the universe.

P3: If God created the universe but has no further interest or plan for the universe, then God acted with a goal in mind and subsequently lost any interest in the goal.

C1[by P1-P3]: A deistic God is practically irrational because in the act of creation she acted with some goal in mind but abandoned the goal without a good reason. Thus, she violated the diachronic teleological principle of practical rationality.

P4: If an agent is practically irrational then she is not practically (and morally) perfect.

P5: A deistic God is an agent (of sorts) who is practically (and morally) irrational.

⁴⁷ I assume here the orthodox view that the enkratic requirement is a requirement of rationality. See Worsnip (2018) for some discussion.

C2[by C1-P5]: A deistic God is not practically rational and therefore not morally perfect.

P6: If God exists, then she is omniscient, omnipotent and morally perfect (to the extent that this logically and metaphysically possible).

C3[by C2, P6]: Hence, either a non-deistic God exists or God does not exist.⁴⁸

The argument concludes that from the deistic version of God we have sketched we can derive a contradiction between intentional practical rationality and the essential attribute of moral perfection. It is a valid argument with, as we have argued, *prima facie* plausible premises something that entails that the conclusion is *prima facie* plausible to be sound. Again, I cannot afford here to discuss the various

⁴⁸ It is interesting to note that *teleological* deism would *prima facie* solve the practical rationality problem -though not obviously the moral responsibility problem- but at the price of raising a further dilemma: either human history goes according to divine plan or not. Humans have free will so they might not behave as God would like them to do. But then human history might not go according to plan. So, it seems that teleological creation deism would instead have a version of the dilemma of the compatibility of divine foreknowledge and free will. Either human history will go according to plan and God foreknows this due to omniscience, but humans have no free will; or humans have free will, human history might not go according to plan and God has no foreknowledge of the fate of human history. Anyone who wants to resist the incompatibility must find a way to steer via the horns of the dilemma. Of note, is that the dilemma is particularly acute for the deist because if human history does not go according to plan, by definition God cannot intervene to set things right. For some discussion of the classic problem of the compatibility of free will and divine foreknowledge see Wierenga (1989) and Zagzebski (2007).

ways that one may be tempted to try to resist the argument but at least one way to try to resist the conclusion of the argument is via P4 (and hence C2).

Some may be tempted to deny that if an agent is practically irrational, then she must be considered also practically and morally imperfect. They might contest for example that agents can and often are practically irrational but still virtuous enough.⁴⁹ They might appeal for example to Dostoyevskyan characters (e.g. Dmitri Karamazov) that are torn by their passions, like drinking and compulsive gambling, but still they seem good-hearted and sufficiently virtuous in the sense that they have virtuous character traits that dispose them to systematically do the morally right thing. This could happen even in the case of a deistic God. She might be practically irrational in the stipulated sense but still be perfectly virtuous and morally perfect.

Very briefly, this is not a promising line of argument because it misconstrues the thrust of the argument. Note that P4 asserts that if you are practically irrational then you are not practically\morally *perfect*. It does not speak of *sufficient* virtue but of *perfect* virtue, if you like. So even if it is the case that practically irrational agents can be sufficiently virtuous, something that Dostoyevskyan characters may illustrate, the P4 is still unscathed because it talks of perfect virtue or moral perfection. So, we should be wary not to conflate sufficient human virtue with divine perfect virtue because that would miss the point of P4.

Again, there might be some other plausible way to resist the argument although this is something that remains to be shown. We cannot afford to pursue further the discussion here and will address the challenge towards those who would be tempted to resist the argument.

⁴⁹ This idea would of course clash with the Aristotelian understanding of virtuous agency as fully practically rational.

5. Conclusion

I have argued that moderate non-teleological deism is prima facie incoherent because the broadly Anselmian nature of the assumed deity entails prima facie contradictions with regard to moral perfection, namely, the moral irresponsibility contradiction and the practical irrationality contradiction. These prima facie contradictions spring from a conflict between the deistic understanding of divine practical agency and the essential attribute of moral perfection. This result might indicate either of two things: either that we need a conception of divine practical agency that would not contradict the constraints that the attribute of moral perfection implies, such as moral responsibility and practical rationality. Or that we need to reconsider the classic Anselmian triad of divine attributes: omniscience, omnipotence and moral perfection.

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