

# On Divine Explanation and Divine Freedom<sup>1</sup>

Jason Zarri

## Abstract

When theists try to justify their belief in God they often argue that God's existence could explain certain facts about the world: why it is orderly, why it is hospitable to life, or why it even exists at all. In this paper I will argue that, though we may have good reason to believe the existence of God could explain these facts, there is a tension between God's role as an explanation and the traditional view that He is a free agent. To put it roughly, in order for God to explain, e.g., the orderliness of our world, there must be constraints on what God can will: If there are not it would be no more likely for God to create worlds like ours than it would be for Him to create worlds that are disorderly, and the mystery as to why the universe is as orderly as it is gets replaced by the mystery as to why God chooses as He does. However, if there are some things that God cannot will it would appear that God is not completely free, a conclusion which many theists would find unpalatable. As we shall see, the orthodox doctrine of Divine Simplicity complicates things a bit, but at the end of the day it doesn't make things any easier for the theist.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is an elaboration of some blog posts of mine, and the objections of Brandon Watson which are incorporated below are his responses to some of them. For references, see the bibliography.

## 1. Introduction

I think one of the deepest questions philosophy can ask is why the universe exhibits the orderliness it does, and one of the most fundamental divisions among philosophers is between those who think it is capable of explanation and those who do not. In Western philosophy, the most common explanation proposed in answer to this question has been that the universe is the product of some kind of design or creative intention, on the part of a spiritual being<sup>2</sup> such as God. If there is indeed a God who is roughly that of traditional theism—i.e., a spiritual, omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent (etc.) being—it would seem that we have, on the face of it, a good explanation for the existence of an ordered, law-governed, and relatively life-friendly universe such as we find ourselves in. For God, according to theists, is a personal being. While perhaps not having a psychology like ours—God probably doesn’t think discursively, with one thought following after another—He is nevertheless an agent who acts for the sake of ends. As an omnibenevolent being, God would plausibly have the desire to create other, in some respects similar beings with whom God could share His love. And since He is an omniscient and omnipotent being, God would certainly have the knowledge of how to create them and the power to do so. Furthermore, on most traditional views God possesses *libertarian freedom*, which means that His choices are not inevitable, that while He actually did things one way He could have done things quite differently. In what follows I will explore the relationship between God’s freedom and his ability to explain why the universe is as orderly as it is.

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<sup>2</sup> By ‘spiritual being’ I mean an agent who is, at least in part, *immaterial*. Something is immaterial insofar as it is not composed of physical things—protons, neutrons, electrons, etc.—and does not have physical properties—mass, charge, spin, etc. (with the possible exception of spatial or temporal location, if those count as physical properties).

## 2. *The need for explanation*

There are some things about the universe that cry out for explanation. One is the fact that the universe is *orderly*. In a great many instances, similar causes produce similar effects, and the past can serve as a guide to the future. To make this point clearer and more precise, I think it will be instructive to consider the views of causation put forward by the philosophers Brand Blanshard<sup>3</sup> and A.C. Ewing<sup>4</sup>, who gave similar arguments for the claim that causal relations are “logically necessary”. Given that their views of logic are somewhat unorthodox by the standards of analytic philosophers, I think it would be more accurate and less confusing to talk of *metaphysical necessity* in causation, and I will do so in what follows.

A “rational reconstruction” of their arguments goes something like this: If causal connections are not metaphysically necessary, the fact that similar effects follow upon similar causes, or that there are certain, seemingly exceptionless regularities in nature—which can be expressed in laws of nature—is quite remarkable. If “anything can cause anything”, as Humeans sometimes say, we have a tremendous coincidence, “an outrageous run of luck”, as Blanshard puts it<sup>5</sup>, which is comparable to rolling a die and getting a 4 a trillion times in a row. But if causal connections *are* metaphysically necessary, we have a good explanation for the fact that similar effects follow upon similar causes, or that there are exceptionless regularities in nature: they obtain because they must. If events of type B *necessarily* follow upon events of type A, any token A event will be followed by a token B event.<sup>6</sup> Granting that, we may be able to justify instances of inductive inference that fit the following schema: Events of type A *have always*

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<sup>3</sup> *The Nature of Thought (second edition)*, vol. 2, Ch. XXXII, “Concrete Necessity and Internal Relations”; *Reason and Analysis*, Ch. XI, “Necessity in Causation”.

<sup>4</sup> *Non-Linguistic Philosophy*: Ch. VI, “Causation and Induction”.

<sup>5</sup> *The Nature of Thought*, vol. 2, p. 505.

<sup>6</sup> Of course, we may not perceive this necessity. We could perceive it only if we had some kind of direct insight into the natures of type A events and type B events.

*been* followed by events of type B, hence, events of type A *will always be* followed by events of type B.

The argument for this schema is this: In certain cases we take ourselves to have established that every observed event of type A has been followed by an observed event of type B. We also note that, since type A events are observed *very* frequently, it is extremely unlikely (though possible) that their association with type B events is a matter of chance. So there appear to be two alternatives: Either the association is an astronomically improbable coincidence, or there is a necessary connection between them, albeit one that we may not be able to discern.

Next we consider the principle of Inference to the Best Explanation (IBE): This principle says, very roughly, that if we have multiple hypotheses vying to account for some phenomenon, it is most reasonable to accept that the hypothesis which best explains it is the true one. If having *any* explanation is rationally preferable to having none—assuming we have no evidence which rules out all the candidate explanations, or which renders them extremely improbable—IBE tells us that it is more reasonable to accept an explanatory hypothesis over a non-explanatory one. Since coincidence is no explanation, in the present case IBE counsels us to accept the hypothesis that there is a metaphysically necessary connection between type A events and type B events—as long as there is no other alternative. Because of this necessary connection, we can conclude that type A events will always be followed by type B events, just as they always have been.

Note that we have justified the schema neither deductively nor inductively: We have not deduced, and neither have we seen through “rational insight”, that it is necessary that type A events will always be followed by type B events based on knowledge of their natures, nor have we concluded that type A events will always be followed by type B events just because they have always been so followed in the past. We have relied instead on IBE. Neither have we

invoked the principle of sufficient reason or the idea that every event must have a cause; we have only said that it is *more reasonable* to believe in a necessary connection than an astronomical coincidence. Thus the objections that can be raised against such principles cannot be raised against the present argument.

I think this argument is a good one, but it does not *quite* establish its conclusion: While it is rationally preferable, given IBE, to hold that chance is not the true account of the orderliness of the universe, metaphysically necessary causal connections are not the only alternative. Indeed, in some cases they are seemingly not even a *possible* alternative. For quantum mechanics tells us, on most of its interpretations, that many of the most basic regularities in nature are probabilistic. Unless we're prepared to posit "probabilistic necessities"—i.e., that it could be necessary that something happens only in a certain percentage of cases—many of the regularities described by quantum mechanics cannot be necessary. So how *could* we explain them?

If we accept theism, there is a way. God, being all powerful, could surely act in such a manner that certain things happen only with a certain frequency, not all the time. Provided that He desires to create a world that is orderly—perhaps because only such worlds are hospitable to life or sentience—it would be extremely probable, or even certain, that such a world would be actual. If there is such a God we certainly have a better account than we would have if we thought such regularities were merely "an outrageous run of luck".

Now, if we consider the matter from the armchair, we can't rule out the possibility that there are many "possible Gods", or "ways God could be". It could be that a great many of them would have no desire to create worlds that are orderly. Although we can't dismiss these Gods *a priori*, I think a theist should insist that *given our actual evidence we aren't justified in believing*

*in them*, because it is only if we posit a God who desires to create a world that exhibits regularities, albeit probabilistic ones, that we have reason to expect such a world to be actual.

So the observed regularities of the world do cry out for explanation, but on this view their probabilistic nature favors a theistic account. Given the constancy of God's nature and purposes, we can confidently expect them to persist in the future. The above account, if true, would not constitute an airtight proof that our inductive schema is reliable, but I think it would give us a good (though defeasible) reason to accept it.

### *3. How free is God's will?*

We have seen that one of the main reasons we can have for believing in God is that, if God exists, we have a good explanation for the existence of an orderly and relatively life-friendly universe such as the one in which we find ourselves. But we have reason to suspect this is true only if God's will is not completely free.

To see why this is so, let us consider two sets of possible worlds: The first is the set of *all* possible worlds, and the second is the set of all possible worlds where God exists. I am supposing that God, if He exists, is a contingent being, i.e., that He does not exist in all possible worlds. I realize this is highly controversial, so if you disagree, consider two different *ways of envisioning* the space of *all* possible worlds: One in which God exists in all, and another in which He exists in none.<sup>7</sup>

My question is: Does God's nature impose any constraints on which possible worlds He can actualize? Of course, if God exists, it follows that God cannot actualize any possible worlds where He does not exist, and so in this sense the answer to my question is surely "yes". But are

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<sup>7</sup>. These 'ways of envisioning' should be taken to represent *epistemic* possibilities, since it's not metaphysically possible that there are different ways that the space of all metaphysically possible worlds could have turned out.

there any constraints besides this? Or is the set of worlds in which God exists, apart from His existence, exactly the same as the set of worlds in which God does not exist? To clarify: Is God's existence compatible with possible worlds which are disordered, hostile to life, and which perhaps contain no sentient beings at all? If it is, the existence of God cannot explain why our universe has these characteristics because they are no more likely if God exists than if He doesn't. But if God's nature *does* impose constraints on which worlds God can actualize—constraints which, as above, rule out possible worlds which are too disorderly to accommodate life or sentience of any sort—then there are significant constraints on what God can will, for then God cannot actualize just any possible world. God's will would not be completely free.<sup>8</sup>

The upshot of our considerations is that theists face a dilemma: On the one hand, if God's will is completely free, there are no constraints on which worlds God can actualize, and hence God's existence does not explain the existence of an orderly, life-friendly universe. One of the main reasons we could have for believing that God exists would be undercut. On the other hand, if God's nature does impose constraints on which worlds He can actualize, there are significant constraints on His free will, which would be considered unorthodox by many theists.

#### *4. First objection*

Brandon Watson has advanced the following objection to this argument<sup>9</sup>:

I think the argument is falling victim to an ambiguity about what is meant when we say, "Y is explained by X's existence." On the one hand, we could mean that Y is explained by the bare fact of X's existence: from the proposition "X exists" we can directly infer (either defeasibly or indefeasibly) "Y exists (or occurs)."

However, if we think about how we talk about causal explanation, we virtually never talk about causal

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<sup>8</sup> This does not entail that God is "forced" to actualize only orderly, life-friendly worlds against His will; it may be that those are the only kinds of worlds God *could desire* to actualize.

<sup>9</sup> See: <http://branemrys.blogspot.com/2010/03/existence-and-causal-explanation.html>

explanations in such a way as to mean this. If I say, "The trash is gone because there is a trash collector," I am not saying that from "This person that is the trash collector exists" I can infer "The trash is gone." I am saying instead that "The trash is gone" can be explained given that there is a trash collector who takes away the trash; the one explains the other because from "The trash is gone" I can reasonably conclude "The trash collector did the sort of thing that makes it to be the case that the trash be gone." What explains here is not mere fact of existence but the fact that the existent thing is engaging in a particular kind of action; in other words, what explains is not simply that something exists but that it exists in a particular causal role.

Likewise here. When someone says, "The existence of order in the universe can be explained by God's existence," they aren't saying that you can infer anything from God's existence, but that you can explain the explanandum if there is something that exists in the right kind of explaining role, e.g., God. Thus the advocate of the teleological argument is saying that the order and life-friendliness of the universe can be explained if something, namely God, does a particular sort of thing, which requires, of course, that God exist, not that the order and life-friendliness of the universe can be explained simply by an appeal to God's existence.

I agree with Brandon that in virtually all cases where we say something of the form "Y is explained by X's existence" we do not mean that Y is explained by the bare existence of X. Normally, we think that Y is explained by reference to the fact that X engages in certain kinds of action or that X exemplifies certain properties. Furthermore, we normally think that X could have existed but failed to engage in those actions or to exemplify those properties, and thus that X could have existed without explaining Y. However, we have reason to think the distinction Brandon makes does not apply to God as traditionally conceived.

### *5. The argument refined*

Traditionally, it has been thought that God is completely *simple*. In God there is no division between essence and existence, matter and form, subject and accident. One way of



understanding this is in terms of identity. God's essence is identical to God's existence—as are all of God's attributes, or “properties”, as I will call them. God *just is* his own omniscience, omnipotence, goodness, wisdom, mercy, etc. Understood in this way, Divine Simplicity entails that God cannot have any property in one possible world that He fails to have in others. Since God is identical to whatever properties He has, if God has the property *being F* in one world—call it 'w<sub>1</sub>'—God is identical to *being F* in w<sub>1</sub>. And since identities are necessary, if God is identical to *being F* in one world, He is identical to *being F* in *all* worlds where He exists. So if God exists in some other world w<sub>2</sub>, God also *has*, and *is*, the property *being F* there. Similar reasoning should convince us that God could not engage in any actions in one possible world that He does not engage in in others. God does not have any contingent properties, nor does God engage in any contingent actions. If that's right, I think the distinction that Brandon wants to make collapses in the case of God.

Theists could try to avoid their dilemma by giving an “externalist” account of God's actions. One might say that God counts as performing an action in one possible world and not in another, not because God is intrinsically different in those worlds, but simply because the outcome that is the effect of God's action obtains in the one world and not the other.

To illustrate, suppose that a certain area has suffered a long drought, and one of its inhabitants, Jones, prays for rain. God can either will it to rain, or will it not to rain. The question is: What is the difference between God's willing it to rain and His willing it not to rain? There is certainly a difference in the results: In one case it rains, in the other it doesn't. But what is the difference *with respect to God*? According to the view under consideration, there is no difference, because God is wholly simple, and thus identical to His attributes. So there is nothing about *God* which could account for the different results in the two cases, for God's nature is

precisely the same in each. If one nevertheless insists that God “wills” something different in the two cases, one must admit that God’s will is not supervenient on God’s nature, for God’s will can vary across possible worlds although His nature never does.

From the above it follows that God’s will and God’s nature are distinct, and hence that God’s will is not a property of God. What then can it mean to say that God wills something? Nothing, I think, except that God exists and that it is the case. For if one wants to say that God wills *p* to be the case, one must also hold that God exists, for if God did not exist, it could not be true that *He* wills *p*. And if God exists and *p* is *not* the case, it also could not be true that God wills *p*, because God is omnipotent: If God wills *p*, *p* must be the case. This notion of God’s willing something is a tenuous one, but if we still wish to say, e.g., that God wills it to rain, I cannot think of any more appropriate situation to say so than when it rains.

However, it seems to me that this externalist account gets things backwards. According to it, God’s will has nothing to do with God’s nature, for God’s will differs in different possible worlds although God’s nature remains the same no matter what is the case. If this view is right, it would seem more accurate to say that God wills something in virtue of its happening than that something happens in virtue of God’s willing it. God’s “answering Jones’s prayer”, if He does, amounts to no more than that Jones prayed for rain, that God exists, and that it rained. In general, to say that God answers prayers amounts to no more than that God exists and that—sometimes—what people pray for comes to pass. Whether true or false, the externalist account of God’s actions doesn’t seem very pious. In any event, if it is true, we cannot say that God *affects* the world in any substantive sense, nor, consequently, that God’s character or actions *explain* why the world is the way it is. So we could not say, for example, that “...the order and life-friendliness of the universe can be explained if something, namely God, does a particular sort of

thing...”. God doesn’t really *do* anything to bring about the order and life friendliness of the universe. God exists, and the universe is ordered and life-friendly, but we cannot appeal to the fact that God contingently has any properties in order to truly *explain* those effects.

But I’m convinced that most theists *would* want to say “...the order and life-friendliness of the universe can be explained if something, namely God, does a particular sort of thing...”, or something close to it. There are two ways in which they might proceed, depending on what they think of Divine Simplicity and whether they feel that giving it up would be worse than compromising God’s freedom.

First, they could give up on the orthodox doctrine of Divine Simplicity, and say that God’s nature varies from world to world. If God wills it to rain in one world and not in another, that is because he contingently has some properties in each world that he fails to have in the other. In that case, Brandon’s criticisms of my argument would be sound. But giving up Divine Simplicity is something that Christians, for example, cannot do without impugning their orthodoxy, and for many that is too high a price to pay.

Second, they could accept Divine Simplicity and adopt the view that God necessarily wills whatever He wills. This view has it that, while there are many different ways in which things could have been different, God’s nature dictates that every world which God could actualize has some minimal amount of order. We can make sense of this in terms of the notion of a *conditional decree*, my term for something which is nicely spelled out by Alexander Pruss in his post “Creation, Aseity, and Providence” at the blog *Prosblogion*.<sup>10</sup> On this view, a great many of the things God wills are (pairs of) conditionals of the forms “If p then q”, and “If not-p

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<sup>10</sup> See <http://prosblogion.ektopos.com/archives/2007/06/creation-aseity.html>

then  $r$ ”, where God both permits  $p$  to be true and permits not- $p$  to be true, leaving the outcome unsettled. For example, God could accommodate human freedom by making such conditional decrees as “If Scott freely chooses to do A,  $x$  will follow”, and “If Scott freely chooses to do B,  $y$  will follow”, and “If Scott freely chooses to do C,  $z$  will follow”...where God leaves Scott’s choice between A, B, C (and so on) unsettled. In this way God can plan “for all possible contingencies”, as Pruss puts it, so that even though certain matters are left unsettled, something which God wants will occur in any case.

If this account of God’s creative plan is correct, we can suppose that God makes the same decrees, both conditional and unconditional, in all possible worlds where God exists. God could decree, both necessarily and unconditionally, that the universe be ordered and life-friendly, that some living beings will eventually come to exist, that some of them are to be conscious and intelligent (etc.), while leaving it unsettled in what particular way all this will come to pass. God could then use conditional decrees to cover all the matters that are left unsettled by God’s unconditional decrees.<sup>11</sup>

This view has its attractions. For one thing, we may not have to explain how it comes about that God wills one thing rather than another, for God wills whatever He wills *necessarily*, and it is not obvious that necessities need to be explained. And yet, because some of God’s decrees are *conditional*, God’s existence is compatible with a wide variety of different possible

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<sup>11</sup> I suppose one *could* hold the necessitarian view and maintain that God leaves it unsettled whether the universe is to be ordered and life-friendly or not. In that case, neither God’s existence nor God’s nature would explain why the actual world is ordered and life-friendly, for God’s existence and His nature are the same in every possible world, and on this supposition they are compatible with an infinite number of worlds that are disordered or hostile to life. On this view God is both unfree *and* unexplanatory, and while a theist could accept it, I cannot see why they would want to. I will accordingly set this option aside.

worlds. We also wouldn't have to worry about explanatory loops in which God's decrees depend on God's foreknowledge of what will actually happen and *vice versa*, for on the present view God's decrees are necessary while his foreknowledge is contingent: God's decrees do not vary from world to world, but his foreknowledge does, depending for its content on what is actually the case.

So on this account God's will *constrains* reality without determining it in every detail, although nothing occurs without God's *permission*. Thomas Aquinas once said that it does not follow from the fact that certain things change that God's will changes, only that God wills that things should change<sup>12</sup>. In much the same spirit, we could say that from the fact that certain things happen differently in different possible worlds, it does not follow that God's will differs in different possible worlds, only that God wills that certain things should happen differently in different ones. If this is right, God would explain the order and life-friendliness of the universe, but He would not have libertarian freedom, because He wills whatever He wills necessarily.

## 6. A final objection

My way of understanding Divine Simplicity is not the only one. Brandon characterizes it in these terms<sup>13</sup>:

Simplicity is fundamentally not a doctrine about identity; it is not the claim that God "just is" His attributes. Rather, it is the claim that God is not composite, that He is not composed of anything. Aquinas at one point, I forget exactly where, gives us a list of kinds of composition that are not in God, and it is clear that he regards it as exhaustive:

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<sup>12</sup> Summa Theologiae (A.k.a. Summa Theologica), Prima Pars, Question 19, Article 7: <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/1019.htm#article7>)

<sup>13</sup> See: <http://branemrys.blogspot.com/2010/10/of-simplicity-and-sameness.html>

- 1) part and whole
- 2) matter and form
- 3) nature and supposit
- 4) essence and esse
- 5) genus and difference
- 6) subject and accident

All of these compositions in a true and proper sense of the term because on Aquinas's account of composition you have composition only when two things are related in such a way that one is potential to another. Part is potential to whole, matter to form, nature to supposit, essence to actual being, genus to difference, subject to accident. Thus since nothing in God is potential to anything else in God (for various reasons I won't go into here), God is not *complex*; He is *simplex*. What is very noticeable about this account is that it doesn't rule out distinctions as long as they don't introduce potential-actual distinctions.

[...]

In any case, the point is that divine simplicity is merely divine noncompositeness; this does not require the identity thesis, and thus one can easily have divine simplicity while rejecting the account of it Jason is assuming here. So God can be free and simple and explanatory.”

Brandon may be right about the correct characterization of Divine Simplicity, but I think the real crux of the issue is this: Does God have different properties in different possible worlds? Call the thesis that He does *not* “Divine Invariance”. Divine Invariance clearly holds on my understanding of Divine Simplicity, and it would seem to hold on Brandon’s as well. But if Divine Invariance holds my arguments still go through. For if God has the same properties in every possible world, we cannot appeal to the fact that God has different properties in different worlds in order to explain why things happen differently in different ones, and this is true *even if*

*God is not identical to (some of) His properties.* The only requirement is that, whatever those properties are, God has them in all possible worlds where He exists.

At this point the question arises: Can someone reject Divine Invariance and still believe in Divine Simplicity? I think not, for it seems to me that if God has different properties in different worlds that would entail that God is composed of subject and accident, and hence that there are potential-actual distinctions in God, which is inconsistent with Divine Simplicity whether we understand it in terms of identity or not. To reject Divine Invariance is thus to reject Divine Simplicity, even as Brandon understands that doctrine.

## *7. Conclusion*

In the end, I think the theist has three main options: First, they could accept the externalist account of God's actions, which would preserve God's freedom and His simplicity, at the cost of committing them to hold that God could not explain why the world is the way it is in any substantive sense. Second, they could reject Divine Simplicity and hold that God is both free and explanatory, but in doing so they would be giving up a long-held orthodox belief. Third, they could maintain that God is both simple and explanatory but unfree in a libertarian sense, because His will is the same in every possible world—a position which, as it involves the idea that God could not create a world that is disordered or hostile to life, is also unorthodox by traditional standards. All three of these options have their pros and cons, and things are not as simple as they may first appear. Nevertheless, I think the belief that God has libertarian freedom and the belief that God explains the orderliness of the universe do not sit easily together, unless one is prepared to jettison Divine Simplicity.

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