

## WHAT THEOLOGICAL EXPLANATION COULD AND COULD NOT BE

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**Abstract.** The worldview of theism proposes an ultimate and global explanation of existence itself. What could such “theological explanation” possibly amount to? I shall consider what is unsatisfactory about a widely accepted answer—namely that existence is to be explained as produced and sustained by a supernatural personal agent of unsurpassably great power and goodness. I will suggest an alternative way in which existence could be open to a genuinely ultimate explanation, namely in terms of its being inherently directed upon a supremely good end or *telos* and existing just because that *telos* is concretely realized. On this “euteleological” view, theological explanation, though it may need to be compatible with our best scientific theoretical explanations, operates in a clearly distinct explanatory dimension.

### I. INTRODUCTION: THE “GOD-ROLE” AND WHAT MAY FILL IT

It is characteristic of the worldview of theist religions that belief in God is belief in that which provides an ultimate explanation of existence as a whole. This point may be put apparently more simply by saying that belief in God is belief in the Creator of all that exists—though one might then check oneself and say rather that the theist God is Creator of all *else* that exists, remembering that God’s own existence must have a special status. The significance of this qualification is a vexed topic and one to which I shall shortly return. But my starting point is just that God is understood as “ultimate explainer.” This is an essential component of what may usefully be called “the God-role.” The concept of God is, I maintain, a “role-concept”: belief in God fulfils certain functions in the way of life of believers. One such function is to provide an ultimate explanation of reality as a whole and humanity’s place in it. That is what I shall here mean by “theological explanation.”<sup>1</sup>

Recognizing that the concept of God is the concept of that which plays a certain kind of role has the advantage of clarifying what is intended when descriptions of God’s nature are offered. Sometimes what is described is just the God-role itself; and those descriptions therefore leave it to some extent open *what it is* that may fill the God-role. Anselm’s formula—God is “that than which a greater cannot be conceived”—is a case in point. Whatever counts as God, the sole fit object of worship, is such that nothing could even be conceived that is greater than it in being or in worth; yet what it is, in itself, Anselm’s formula leaves unspecified.

At other times, however, descriptions of God *are* intended to provide some positive specification of *what it is* that fills the God-role. Contemporary Anglophone analytical philosophers of religion tend to be more confident in affirming such substantive descriptions than were philosophical theologians of an earlier, classical, age for whom what Hume has Demea describe as “the adorable mysteriousness of the Divine Nature” seems to have had greater salience.<sup>2</sup> Consider, for example, Richard Swinburne’s defini-

1 This paper is an exercise, then, in interpreting the metaphysics of theist worldviews in so far as they propose an *ultimate* explanation for *all that exists* (for Reality as a whole). I am not considering in general the nature of explanations and theorizing in Theology; it is nevertheless fair to remark that all thinking in Theology occurs within a framework that affirms what I am here referring to as “theological explanation.”

2 David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. J.C.A. Gaskin (OUP, 1993), 48.

tion of God as “[a] person without a body (i.e. a spirit), who is eternal, free, able to do anything [omnipotent], knows everything [omniscient], is perfectly good ... the creator and sustainer of the Universe.”<sup>3</sup> Swinburne’s definition, we may say, provides a substantive *conception* of God — where “conception of God” is here used to refer to a philosophical or metaphysical description of *what it is* that fills the God-role as specified by the “concept” of God.<sup>4</sup>

The conception of God specified in Swinburne’s definition is widespread amongst contemporary analytical philosophers, and the debate over the existence of God is often taken to be strictly equivalent to a debate about whether there is something that fits this definition. Yet God, as characterized by Swinburne’s definition, is God *under a specific conception* — namely, God as “the personal omniGod,” to use a convenient label. But other conceptions of God may be admissible, and might be more adequate, philosophically and religiously, than the conception of God as the personal omniGod.

There is, of course, an important relation between the concept of God (or the God-role) and specific conceptions of God. For example, a conception of God could be adequate only if it was a conception of something *fit for the role* of ultimate explainer. Evidently, though, different understandings of a given feature of the God-role will allow different conceptions of what may fill that role. Views about what theological ultimate explanation could possibly be will thus have implications for the question of what conception of God could be adequate. And there may be traffic in the other direction: prior commitment to some specific conception of God may limit one’s view of what theological explanation could be. Indeed, I will be arguing that a prior assumption that God is the personal omniGod unsatisfactorily restricts our understanding of theological explanation. I shall then suggest an account of theological explanation that implies a theist conception of divinity distinct from that of the personal omniGod.

## II. THE ULTIMATE EXPLAINER AS NECESSARY “FIRST CAUSE”?

Theological explanation, then, purports to explain all that is in terms of God as ultimate explainer. What can this mean?

A well-established answer is that God is “First Cause.” That claim is no more than a semantic variant on the claim that God is ultimate explainer until one clarifies both the notion of causation and the notion of absolute priority implied in the idea of First Cause. God is First Cause in the sense of first *efficient* cause, using the Aristotelian notion of efficient cause as the kind of cause that explains why its effect is actual. When we think of God’s causing the Universe with a personal God in mind, we immediately identify this causing as *the kind of bringing about that obtains when personal agents act for reasons*. God’s bringing it about that the Universe exists is thus understood as an instance of *agent-causation*, the conceptually irreducible relation that obtains in intentional agency between the agent and the event intrinsic to the agent’s action.<sup>5</sup>

God’s agent-causing the Universe is not going to provide *ultimate* explanation, however, if God’s existence itself needs explanation. Many philosophers have therefore thought that, if there is to be a principled reason why explanation stops with God, God’s own existence must somehow be self-explanatory. This has been thought to entail both that God’s existence is explicable in terms of his essence (so that God somehow contains within himself the explanation of, or reason for, his existence), and also that God’s existence is logically necessary. These views about the special status of the supreme agent’s existence cause anxieties, however. For example, it may seem that if God’s existence were self-explanatory, then the Ontological Argument would

3 Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Clarendon Press, 1993), 1.

4 There need be no suggestion that anyone could — or would intend to — specify the “real essence” of divinity: the distinction I am drawing between *the concept* of God and *specific conceptions* of God must therefore be understood as a relative and not an absolute one. There are also, of course, “tradition-mediated” descriptions of God as related to humanity in specific ways, such as being the One who brought Israel out of slavery in Egypt, or the One who is the God and Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

5 I take it not to be controversial that this relation is *conceptually* irreducible. Whether it is *ontologically* reducible is a matter of sustained controversy, however, with “causalists” holding that actions are realized in the right kind of complex physical event-causal relations and “agent-causationists” rejecting any such ontological reduction.

be sound — and that, therefore, since the Ontological Argument is fallacious, there must be something wrong with this way of ensuring that God functions as a genuinely ultimate explainer. Some will express concern about the very coherence of the idea of a logically necessary *concrete existent*, endorsing Hume's view that logical necessity can attach only to truths about relations of ideas, and not to matters of fact and existence. Admittedly, with our contemporary familiarity with “possible worlds” semantics for counterfactuals, we readily allow that there might be inhabitants of all possible worlds. It is not clear, however, that this is a sufficient coherence proof for the idea of a logically necessary concrete existent.<sup>6</sup> Suffice it to say that, even if the coherence of God's necessary existence may be defended (perhaps by invoking some notion of non-logical, “metaphysical,” necessity), the suspicion will remain that recourse to it is *ad hoc*: what it means to say that God's existence is necessary *may in effect just amount to* its neither needing nor permitting further explanation.

It is important to add that there are also reasonable *religious* concerns about the concept of a being that *must* exist. It may be thought a distortion of the “spontaneity” and “giftedness” of existence to take the highest being — God's being — to have necessary existence, and maintain that all existence must be grounded in that necessary existence. Furthermore, since God must be the locus of ultimate worth, locating divine being on the other side of a radical ontological divide between God's necessity and our contingency risks devaluing our own realm of contingent existence, implying that what is of ultimate worth does not reside with us.<sup>7</sup>

### III. “FOUNDATIONAL” EXPLANATIONS: THEOLOGY AS CLAIMING “TRANS-SCIENTIFIC” ULTIMACY

Since the idea of a necessary existent in principle needing no further explanation is both religiously and philosophically problematic, one might therefore consider resting content with theological explanation that makes no attempt at absolute ultimacy yet is still all-encompassing and appropriately “foundational.” Hume captures such a more modest approach in the following speech he gives to his character Cleanthes:

... if I assign a cause for any event; is it any objection that I cannot assign the cause of that cause, and answer every new question which may incessantly be started? ... The order and arrangement of nature, the curious adjustment of final causes, the plain use and intention of every part and organ; all these bespeak in the clearest language an intelligent cause or Author. ... You ask me what is the cause of this cause? I know not; I care not; that concerns not me. I have found a Deity; and here I stop my enquiry. Let those go farther, who are wiser or more enterprising.<sup>8</sup>

Cleanthes is here proposing, in effect, that we treat theological explanation as the most foundational level of explanation in the domain of empirical scientific explanation. As Cleanthes' rhetorical question implies, scientific explanation is indeed no less an explanation if its explanans is not itself explained. Any chain of scientific explanation has to terminate somewhere in what is as such unexplained. The stopping point of any such chain might yet receive *future* scientific explanation — but this will, of course, merely advance the unexplained stopping point.

Could any such unexplained stopping point really count as “a Deity,” in the sense required to fill the God-role in the theist traditions? No: the very use of the indefinite article is enough to betray the inadequacy. The God-role in the theist traditions has to be filled by that which is *uniquely* and *in principle* not causally dependent on anything else, and whose reality is essentially not explicable, nor subject to becoming explicable, in terms of any other reality. One of Hume's main points is that the philosophers of the Enlightenment,

6 I suspect that, in adopting the “possible worlds” model in order to handle the semantics of counterfactual conditionals, we unwittingly invest metaphysical significance in the purely adventitious fact that nothing rules out, in the model, an entity that inhabits all possible worlds (or, at least, has “counterparts” in all possible worlds). There is a real question, though, whether the notion of any such entity is coherent — a question which is straightforwardly begged by appealing to this feature of the possible worlds model.

7 Admittedly, some forms of “other worldliness” do seem essential to theist religious traditions and to Christianity in particular. Yet, while Christians cannot deny the truth and importance of the Christ's assertion before Pilate that “my Kingdom is not of this world,” it is arguable that the sort of other worldliness here intended is not of this radical ontological kind. The Christ also proclaimed that the Kingdom was “at hand” and “among us.”

8 Hume, *Dialogues*, Part IV, 65.

in their attempt to defend a reasonable faith, have produced at best *a scientist's* God that falls short of the God of religion. Even if later logical positivist doubts about whether “the God hypothesis” can be factually meaningful are set aside, that hypothesis postulates only “a God of the gaps,” whose explanatory utility shifts and diminishes, and science soon finds that it “has no need of that hypothesis,” as the apocryphal story has it that Laplace replied to Napoleon. For scientific explanatory purposes, reality's existence as such is simply not an issue: science can proceed quite satisfactorily by taking existence as sheer brute fact.

It is thus of the first importance to recognize that theological explanation deals in an ultimacy that scientific explanation does not pretend to — a “trans-scientific” explanatory ultimacy that is foreign to science and which the philosophers of “scientific naturalism” regard with suspicion. The project of trying to render theological explanation reasonable by construing it as the most foundational level of explanation in the same explanatory dimension as natural scientific explanation is therefore doomed. The explanatory dimension in which science operates *necessarily* lacks any genuinely ultimate stopping place: it must always rest on our best current descriptions of how things are at the most basic level where our explanations contingently terminate. Questions such as why there should be anything at all in existence, or why what exists should possess rationally intelligible order, or whether Reality might have an overall purpose (and, if so, what that could be), science cannot answer. That is a limitation intrinsic to scientific explanation and certainly no defect in it. Theological explanation, however, *does* purport to tackle such questions — and philosophical theologians will need to explain to the sceptical how it can be that, though these apparently factual explanatory questions necessarily cannot be answered scientifically, they are nevertheless open to receiving genuinely meaningful answers of a theological kind.

#### IV. THEOLOGICAL EXPLANATION AS ULTIMATE INTENTIONAL EXPLANATION?

How may theists defend the ultimacy of theological explanation against this sceptical scrutiny? If they keep to the construal of theological explanation as resting on the existence of a supreme personal supernatural being, they must deal with the anxieties raised earlier about how such an existent could provide a genuinely ultimate explanation of all that exists. They must also explain how such an ultimate explanation could gain its explanatory force, if, as I have just been arguing, it does *not* function along the same explanatory dimension as scientific explanation.

Explaining the Universe as the personal omniGod's creation is an *intentional explanation* — an explanation that accounts for its explanandum in terms of the agent's reasons for bringing it about. Now, the explanatory force of an intentional explanation is quite unlike the explanatory force of a scientific explanation. This is because intentional explanation rests on *making intelligible sense* of the agent's behaviour in the light of the agent's reasons for acting. It is true that there is no explanation of behaviour in terms of the agent's reasons unless the agent's having those reasons actually caused the behaviour.<sup>9</sup> But *purely* causal knowledge of the antecedents of behaviour would not reveal its status as a specific intentional action; to discern the agent's behaviour as his or her specific action we have to grasp the *rational* relation that makes the explained behaviour reasonable in the light of the agent's purposes, intentions and beliefs.

Intentional explanations do, then, in terms of their explanatory force, operate in a different explanatory dimension from scientific explanations. They explain by exhibiting *the meaning, point or purpose of what happens*.<sup>10</sup> If the ultimate explanation of the Universe's existence is an intentional explanation, then it is an explanation that exhibits *the meaning, point, or purpose* of the Universe's being sustained in existence. Since that mode of making an explanandum intelligible is different from the mode employed

<sup>9</sup> This claim was famously established by Donald Davidson in his classic 1963 paper, “Actions, Reasons and Causes”: see *Essays on Actions and Events* (Clarendon Press, 1980), 3-19.

<sup>10</sup> It is true that we may accept a specific intentional explanation of a human agent's behaviour only if we accept that there *is* a causal explanation of the behaviour as resulting from antecedent conditions including the physical realization of (Davidson's term) the “rationalizing” intentional states. But we have no need to know — and, most probably, could not possibly know — the content of that physiological, physical, causal explanation: nevertheless, we may be properly satisfied with the explanatory job the intentional explanation does.

in scientific explanation, theological explanation so understood does not compete directly with any scientific explanation (though a theological claim about the Universe's overall purpose will arguably need to be compatible with our best natural scientific theories if it is to be reasonably accepted).

An overall intentional explanation can provide a *substantive* explanation of all existence — rather than just a schema for such an explanation — only if it *fills in the reasons* for which the personal omni-God produces and sustains the Universe. From the perspective of finite minds, God's actual reasons for creating (if such a God does indeed exist) may be largely inscrutable. Yet we may at least argue that, since the personal omniGod is perfectly good, and since a perfectly good agent acts always in accordance with and for the sake of the good (indeed, the supreme good), it follows that, if there is such an action as the personal omniGod's intentional action of creating the Universe, then the reasons for which that action is done must be in accordance with and for the sake of the supreme good.

On the personal omniGod conception, then, theological ultimate explanation is intentional explanation; and its explanatory force rests on attributing to God the intention to realize — or, more strictly, to realize further — the supreme good.<sup>11</sup> This theological intentional explanation may be materially elaborated by giving some specification of the nature of the supreme good — and claimed revelations that provide such specifications are at the heart of theist traditions. Christianity, for example, proclaims the Christ's mandate that we love one another as he has loved us — and this may support an account of the supreme good as *agapé*-love, as amounting to (or, at least, essentially including) perfectly loving and just relationships.

Now, the nature of the supreme good may be, in the traditional sense, incomprehensible — which is to say, not that it is unintelligible, but just that it is incapable of being *fully* grasped and mastered by human understanding. Nevertheless, as Aristotle argues, whatever the supreme good is, it serves as “the most final end” — something for the sake of which other things may be sought, but which is itself able to be sought only for its own sake.<sup>12</sup> The intention to realize the supreme good, then, is indisputably practically ultimate: what is done may be explained as done for the sake of the supreme good, but it makes no sense to ask to what further end the supreme good itself is sought; necessarily, the supreme good can be sought only for its own sake. In so far as it is plausible that love is, or belongs to, the supreme good, it must correspondingly be plausible that love can be sought only for its own sake and not for the sake of something else.<sup>13</sup>

The explanatory force of the theological explanation on the personal omniGod conception of the divine, then, rests on making sense of the Universe's existence as matching the divine intention to realize the supreme good, on some substantive characterization of what that supreme good is or, at least, essentially involves. But can theological explanation, thus understood, count as a genuinely ultimate explanation of all existence?

As already noted, whatever counts as the supreme good (if anything does) will be *practically* ultimate — something that gives point and purpose to other things chosen for its sake, but whose own point or purpose resides wholly in itself. It follows that a chain of reasons for acting necessarily terminates with the intention to achieve the supreme good. Accordingly, whatever results from carrying out the intention to achieve the supreme good (the Universe itself, as we are here envisaging) has *its point or purpose* ultimately explained thereby. However, for the Universe's *existence* to be ultimately explained, its causation by that intention must itself be ultimately explanatory — and, on the personal omniGod view, that requires

11 We need to say that God's intention is to realize “further” the supreme good so as to allow that God's eternal existence is *as such* supremely good. There is, of course, an issue about how that intention could be motivated in an agent who is “already” wholly and perfectly good. It is difficult to reconcile the freedom of God's act of creating the Universe with the necessity of God's motivation for so doing — a necessity that seems required if this explanation of the Universe is to be ultimate.

12 Aristotle holds that “the most final end” (*to teleiōtaton*) is *eudaimonia*, usually translated “happiness,” though strictly meaning “blessed with a good ‘guiding spirit’”: see *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I.

13 To support the plausibility of this claim, more needs to be said about just what conception of *agapé*-love is here presupposed. Love in the relevant sense does not imply any lack in the one who loves, for example; and, though love is an ultimate end, it is not, so to speak, a completable end — love, in this sense, does not admit of there being *enough* love.

that it be brought about, agent-caused, by an agent with a very special status, an agent whose intention and motivation to achieve the supreme good, and whose very existence as an agent with this intention, do not themselves need explanation in terms of anything else.

The envisaged theological intentional explanation of the Universe's existence, then, though it deploys a mode of explanation that is unlike scientific explanation because it deals in making what exists intelligible by exhibiting its purpose or rationale, nevertheless leads us back to the need to posit a unique kind of concrete entity — namely an entity that has to be the necessarily existing and necessarily unique instantiation of its kind. As I noted earlier, there are philosophical doubts about whether the notion of the required kind of entity is even coherent. But, even if those doubts are allayed, a problem remains for those who accept the claim (argued for above) that a theological explanation of all existence cannot be assimilated to any empirical scientific explanation, however “foundational.” The problem is that, if it is an intentional explanation, theological explanation must be understood as making a move characteristic of *scientific* theorising, namely explaining the explanandum (the Universe's existence) by postulating an unobservable entity (God, as supreme personal agent). How can an explanation rest on claiming that there is a uniquely special kind of real, concrete, entity and yet *not* belong to the scientific practice of explaining what is in terms of *something else* that is? I strongly suspect that the answer is: it can't. Theological explanation interpreted as attributing the purposiveness of existence to a supreme personal agent, who designs and produces the Universe to achieve his creative purpose, in effect posits God as a theoretical entity (albeit of a unique kind), and consigns God's existence to whatever fate awaits it at the hands of empirical scientific inquiry.

That outcome need not be too dismaying for theist metaphysicians who seek to preserve the trans-scientific ultimacy of theological explanation, so long as they can contemplate *rejecting* the conception of God as the supernatural personal omniGod. They need not find this prospect too unwelcome, however, since there are grounds for viewing the personal-omniGod conception with religious, as well as philosophical, suspicion. I suggested earlier that identifying supreme greatness in being with an all-powerful necessarily existent agent might be a religious error because it devalues the “giftedness” of contingency. We may now add that regarding God as “a” concrete entity — however supreme and however unique — may be a form of idolatry. That possibility is clearly envisaged by classical theist metaphysics. As David Burrell puts it, “to picture God as an additional being over against or parallel to the universe itself will be to treat God similarly to objects within the universe, related to the universe itself as objects within the world are related to each other.”<sup>14</sup> The Thomism that Burrell defends emphasises divine simplicity — a doctrine best interpreted apophatically as the claim that there is no composition in the divine nature. Specifically, God lacks the composition of essence and existence that characterizes concrete entities generally, which is just a way of saying, using the language of Aristotelian metaphysics, that God's reality is not the reality of any item that instantiates some specific kind.<sup>15</sup>

But why would it be idolatrous to worship a God conceived of as an existent item of some given kind? Surely idolatry is avoided by acknowledging the absolutely unique status of the existent item the personal omniGod is — unsurpassably great, and necessarily existent? Arguably, though, that is just where the idolatry lies. Belief in the supernatural personal omniGod may be idolatry sophisticated and insidious enough to get away with being widely identified as the essence of genuine religious commitment in the theist traditions. Seeking to maintain our own egocentric control over our lives and destinies we project onto reality the image of an Ego with *total* control, who will (under certain conditions) exercise that control in ways that favour our interests, not only in this life but in the next. To worship such a being is idolatry because it resists the very transformation away from self-centredness that theist religions hold to be the divine will, and the only route to genuine fulfilment and salvation.<sup>16</sup>

14 David Burrell, “The Attributes of God: (a) Simplesness”, in *Philosophy of Religion: A Guide to the Subject*, ed. Brian Davies (Cassell, 1998), 72.

15 I owe to Thomas Harvey my first coming to recognize the importance of apophatic interpretations of the classical divine attributes, including (especially) divine simplicity and divine necessity.

16 I am here influenced by Mark Johnston's use of theism's abhorrence of idolatry to criticise the theist religions themselves in his *Saving God: Religion after Idolatry* (Princeton Univ. Press, 2009), especially Chapter 2.

## V. A "EUTELEOLOGICAL" INTERPRETATION OF THEOLOGICAL EXPLANATION

What alternative can there be, then? If personal omniGod theism is philosophically problematic and even idolatrous, what other interpretation may be given of ultimate theological explanation which may pass muster, in both philosophical and religious respects? In this final section, I will consider whether we may *retain* the idea that ultimate theological explanation affirms that the Universe exists for the sake of the supreme good while *abstaining* from positing a supernatural agent who has the intention of realizing the supreme good and produces the Universe to fulfil that intention.<sup>17</sup>

I will consider, then, whether theological explanation might be, not intentional explanation, but still *teleological* explanation — that is, explanation of what exists in terms of what it is *for*. Could the Universe be explained in terms of its having an overall purpose, end, or *telos* without implying that it is produced by an agent who intends to achieve that end? Could the Universe constitute thereby a creation *ex nihilo* in a more radical sense than envisaged in personal omniGod theism — as existing “from nothing,” not simply because nothing material preceded it, but *without anything at all* being prior to it in the order of productive causality?

Teleological explanations are generally reducible in principle to causal explanations. They are either intentional explanations that posit agent-causation, or, as with teleological explanations in biology, they are in principle reducible to ordinary event-causal explanations that subsume events under natural laws. The present suggestion, however, is that ultimate theological explanation may be *irreducibly* teleological explanation.

Many philosophers will rule this suggestion out of court. To insist that no teleological explanation could be irreducible takes no account, however, of the fact that theological explanation is bound to have unique features because it has a unique explanandum, namely, the existence of *all* that is, was, and ever shall be, where “all” really does mean *all!*<sup>18</sup> Obviously, on any viable interpretation theological explanation must bear *enough analogy* with familiar forms of explanation for it to carry intelligible and satisfying explanatory force. It is only to be expected, however, that explaining The Whole will not belong to the familiar business of explaining some parts, features or aspects of existence in terms of other parts, features or aspects of it. Such a truly *overall* explanation of existence will show essential points of *disanalogy* to regular kinds of explanation and thus fall short of the comprehensibility those familiar forms of explanation can convey.

It follows, then, that anyone who proposes an interpretation of theological explanation in the sense used here (namely, an ultimate explanation of Reality as a whole) will be proposing an interpretation with features that are unique and mysterious because not fully comprehensible.<sup>19</sup> This is apparent on the “personal omniGod” construal of theological explanation as an intentional explanation. On this interpretation, the explanatory force of the ultimate explanation of existence is of the familiar “rationalizing” kind characteristic of intentional explanation. But the posited agent-causation is agent-causation by an immaterial and necessarily existent personal agent, which (if conceded as possible at all) is undoubtedly

<sup>17</sup> This proposal assumes that personal language about God found in scripture and used in devotional practices need not be transparent to the underlying metaphysics of the divine. For a defence of this assumption, which rests on the distinction between what is psychologically apt for intelligible human relationship with the divine and what an adequate metaphysical understanding may require, see Bishop and Perszyk, “God as Person — Religious Psychology and Metaphysical Understanding”, in *Rethinking the Concept of a Personal God: Classical Theism, Personal Theism and Alternative Concepts of God*, ed. Thomas Schärfl, Christian Tapp, and Veronika Wegener (Aschendorff, 2016).

<sup>18</sup> I have been saying that theological explanation explains the existence “of the Universe”, and it is easy to hear that phrase as referring just to our vast spatio-temporal universe with its origin in the Big Bang. As used to refer to the explanandum of theological explanation, however, “the Universe” includes literally everything. If, as some contemporary cosmological theories hold, there are likely to be indefinitely many spatio-temporal universes of which ours is just one, then what theological explanation purports ultimately to explain is this “multiverse” in all its unimaginable plenitude.

<sup>19</sup> Ultimate theological explanation is therefore open to objection as pseudo-explanation precisely on the grounds that it must have unique features that block full comprehension. It is beyond my present scope, however, to fend off scepticism about theological explanation altogether: my concern in this paper is with the attempt to understand how such truly overall explanation may reasonably be interpreted, granted the assumption that such explanation is viable at all.

unique both in relation to the agent and in relation to the agent-causation, whose mode of operation cannot be fully comprehensible.<sup>20</sup> On the proposed alternative interpretation, the same source of explanatory force is retained, but the unique and mysterious distinctiveness of theological explanation now arises in a different way from the simpler expedient of taking the Universe to be *inherently and irreducibly* directed upon the realization of the supreme good.<sup>21</sup>

Even if inherent teleology at the level of Reality as a whole is admitted, it may still be objected that explaining all that exists in terms of the supreme good as its ultimate *telos* couldn't amount to a full theological explanation. This is because it might be argued that inherent teleology can provide an explanation of all that exists only in terms of its ultimate *final* cause, whereas full theological explanation requires an ultimate *efficient* cause. An account of what Reality *is for* may perhaps not be enough to explain why Reality *is*. Theism claims that the Universe is a divine *creation*, which surely requires that the Universe has an ultimate efficient cause of its existence.

This objection may underestimate the significance of the theological identification of Reality's inherent *telos* as the supreme good. If Reality exists for the sake of realizing the supreme good, may it not then follow that the supreme good is *both final and efficient* cause of its existence?<sup>22</sup> The notion of the ultimate efficient causality of the Good is a Platonic trope, championed in our own day in the work of John Leslie. In a recent article, Leslie writes:

Couldn't Plato be right when he suggests in Book Six of his Republic that The Good, something itself "beyond existence," is "what gives existence to things"? Because, in an absence of all existing things, wouldn't it still be true that the coming to exist of good things would be something fortunate, the fulfilment of what was ethically required? So mightn't an ethical requirement or set of compatible requirements account for the existence of a complex universe, or perhaps of a universecreating deity? I see nothing absurd in this Platonic suggestion. It strikes me as quite probably right.<sup>23</sup>

This Platonic suggestion may be coherent, but only if a certain Platonic interactionist dualism of the unchanging world of the Forms and the changing world of appearances is itself coherent. If, as Leslie puts it, its "ethical requiredness" is the efficient cause of Reality as realizing the good, then this ethical requiredness must itself be real, since only a real cause can explain the reality of its effect. Now, the ethical requiredness of something good seems on the face of it to be abstract, and thus causally inert. To be assigned ultimate efficient causal efficacy, ethical requiredness must be assumed, following Plato, to subsist in some supernatural or non-natural realm "beyond ordinary existence." The Platonic creation theory, therefore, though it does not take the ultimate efficient cause of the Universe to be a personal agent, still locates that cause in a separate ontological realm.

20 God says 'let it be' and it is: but comprehending how such causation operates is necessarily beyond us. As to the uniqueness of the personal agent, this may be captured by describing that agent as an "infinite," or "wholly unlimited," person. It might be argued, however, that an infinite personal agent is not a personal agent at all, on the grounds that certain sorts of limitation are conceptually inherent in personal agency. One might accordingly wonder whether it is possible that "infinite" is actually functioning as a privative adjective in the phrase "infinite person." Some adjectives standardly function privatively — e.g., mock turtle soup is not turtle soup; a fictional person is not a person (though, interestingly, a fictional character *is* a character). Could "infinite person" be like "stone lion," where "stone" has a privative function in this context, but obviously does not do so always, e.g., "stone bridge"?

21 It will thus beg the question against this proposal of overall inherent teleology to appeal, without further argument, to the supposed principle that *all* teleological explanation must be reducible. It would, of course, equally beg the question against the personal-omniGod construal merely to insist that all intentional explanation must rest on agent-causation which is materially constituted or which, at least, has essential material correlates. But the objections raised earlier against the personal-omniGod interpretation do, I hope, go beyond any such merely dogmatic insistence.

22 That ultimate final and efficient causes may coincide in God is endorsed in classical theism — see Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Part I, Question 44, Articles 1 and 4.

23 John Leslie, "A Way of Picturing God", in *Alternative Concepts of God: Essays on the Metaphysics of the Divine*, ed. Andrei A. Buckareff and Yujin Nagasawa (OUP, 2016), 51. Leslie uses the term "axiarchism" to describe "theories picturing the world as ruled largely or entirely by Value" (*Value and Existence* (Blackwell, 1979), 6). *Extreme* axiarchism takes an ethical requirement *by itself* as sufficient explanation for existence, as in the Platonic creation theory which Leslie thinks is "quite probably right." Leslie himself deduces from extreme axiarchism a "pantheism of infinitely many infinite minds," with "the universe in which we find ourselves being nothing but a structure contemplated by one such mind" (see "A Way of Picturing God", 58-60).



Is there a way to vindicate a theological explanation of Reality as having an overall efficient cause of its existence, without ascribing Reality's teleological direction to a supernatural agent or agency? Here is a suggestion. Theism is committed, not only to the claim that Reality exists for the sake of the supreme good, but to the claim that the supreme good *actually is* realized. It's conceivable that something should have a *telos* which it doesn't actually fulfil; but theism excludes this possibility altogether for the Creation as a whole. Thus, a viable interpretation of theological explanation that takes Reality's directedness upon the supreme good to be inherent will *also* affirm that Reality contains within it concrete realizations of that supreme telic good. It may now be suggested that we add to the claims (i) that the Universe exists for the purpose of realizing the supreme good, and (ii) that this purpose is actually achieved, the further claim (iii) that *it is the very realization of the Universe's purpose that explains why the Universe is actual*. The ultimate efficient cause of the Universe's existence, on this proposal, then, is the fact that it contains realizations of its *telos*, manifestations or — one may even say, “incarnations” — of the supreme good.

The claim that Reality has the realization of the supreme good as its *telos*, and exists ultimately just because its *telos* is concretely realized, is what Ken Perszyk and I, in recent work, have called *euteleology*.<sup>24</sup> The euteleological interpretation of theological explanation understands it as claiming that Reality has an inherent directedness upon the supreme good and that Reality's existence is due to the concrete realization of the supreme good within it.<sup>25</sup>

But is this euteleological interpretation of the theological explanation of the Universe even barely intelligible? There already has to be a Universe for realizations of its *telos* to occur within it, so is it not incoherent to suggest that those realizations — or, more strictly, the fact of their occurrence — could explain why the Universe itself exists? This suggestion makes no sense on our usual assumption that efficient causality must essentially be the causality of productive agency in which one antecedently existing thing, the cause, produces another, the effect, which then counts as the cause's “product.” Strictly, however, an efficient cause is just that which explains why its effect is actual. There is thus conceptual space for efficient causes that are not literally *producers* of their effects: the idea of the concrete realization of the Universe's *telos* being its ultimate efficient cause is thus in principle admissible, even if such a coincidence of efficient with realized final cause is explanatorily unique.

As already remarked, theological explanation on any interpretation is bound to have unique explanatory features and to fall short of full comprehensibility. For euteleology, Reality's existence being ultimately explained by the realization of the supreme good is just such a unique and “incomprehensible” feature. It may perhaps be argued, though, that an idea of this startlingly “boot-strapping” kind is actually familiar from Christian scripture. Jesus Christ is identified in John's Gospel as the Word who “in the beginning,” “was with God, and was God” (John 1:1). This Word, furthermore, is such that “not one thing came into being except through him” (John 1:3, *New Jerusalem Bible*).<sup>26</sup> Yet the eternal creative Word is identified with one who *came into existence* “late in time”. Jesus is *both* “root” and “flower” of “Jesse's [his ancestor's] stem” (see Isaiah 11:1). And, as agreed at the Council of Ephesus in 431CE, his mother is the *theotokos*, the God-bearer, who gave birth to her own Creator. The idea that Jesse, and most proximally Mary, themselves creatures, were efficient causes of the existence of the Creator of all makes no sense in the mundane causal order of agent-producers and nomological networks of causes and effects. But such a claim may be coherent if a higher, transcendent, causal order can be recognized in which *ultimate* efficient causality is *not* a matter of

24 See Bishop and Perszyk, “Concepts of God and Problems of Evil”, in *Alternative Concepts of God: Essays on the Metaphysics of the Divine*, ed. A. Buckareff and Y. Nagasawa (OUP, 2016), “A Euteleological Conception of Divinity and Divine Agency”, in *Rethinking the Concept of a Personal God: Classical Theism, Personal Theism and Alternative Concepts of God*, ed. Thomas Schärtl, Christian Tapp, and Veronika Wegener (Aschendorff, 2016) and “The Divine Attributes and Non-personal Conceptions of God”, *Topoi* 36, no. 4 (2017).

25 Adding the prefix “eu-” to “teleology” is meant to connote both that Reality's inherent *telos* is the supreme good and the welcome fact that this ideal end is concretely realized and no mere abstraction or pipe-dream. Euteleology, as here described, is an axiarchism, but not an extreme axiarchism: a reference to Value is essential to euteleology's ultimate explanation of Reality, but its posited ultimate explainer is more than mere ‘ethical requiredness’.

26 “The Word” may not be the best translation of the Greek “*ho logos*.” “*Logos*” can mean “reason” or “rational principle” — and perhaps even “rationale” or “raison d'être”?

the production of effects by temporally antecedent causes.<sup>27</sup> In any case, euteleology posits just such a trans-mundane higher order of ultimate efficient causality. For euteleology, something dependent for its existence on antecedent causes in the mundane causal order (namely, realizations of the supreme good) may — in the transcendent higher order of ultimate causality — quite coherently be (or be essentially implicated in) the First Cause of all existence.

Finally, on the euteleological construal of theological explanation, what becomes of God? In the absence of a supernatural unproduced producer, with what may God be identified? Euteleology's claim that the Universe is inherently directed upon the supreme good as its *telos* and exists because that *telos* is realized seems, on the face of it, to make no reference to "God" at all. It might therefore seem that euteleology must be proposing a non-realist *revision* of theism, according to which God is a fictional being socially constructed to encourage community solidarity around shared values. Yet euteleology's rejecting the conception of God as supernatural Person does not amount to non-realism. Euteleology's central thesis is clearly a claim about *how Reality is*, most profoundly and ultimately, even though that claim does not entail that any particular real item, however uniquely exalted, is to be identified as God. In this respect, euteleology adheres to divine simplicity, and is fully as realist as were the classical theists who taught that philosophical doctrine.

For euteleology, then, the basic affirmation of theism is better expressed not as "that there is a God," but rather as (something like) "that Reality is the God-way": what is needed is a formula with the logic, not of an existential instantiation, nor of a subject-predicate attribution, but of a feature-placing statement such as "It's raining" — only a feature-placing statement applied to Reality as a whole. Odd as it may sound, the most apt formula may be something like "It's God-ding all over": all existence exists that the supreme good may be realized and, ultimately, just because it *is* realized.

No doubt it will be objected that euteleology is pantheist, and so cannot count as a satisfactory interpretation of *theism*. It is true that euteleology concurs with pantheism in holding that Reality as a whole is a unity — but, then, so too must *any* viable interpretation of theism! To put it provocatively, theism is "pantheism-plus," since its affirmation that Reality is a divine creation entails that it must incorporate pantheism's commitment to the overall unity of Reality. Of course, theism does not *merely identify* Reality with God; instead, theism *specifies* Reality's overall unity, *ascribing it* to God as ultimate source and end. Though the euteleological interpretation of theism does not take the unity of reality to be produced by the agency of a supernatural Person, it does specify Reality's unity as obtaining through inherent directedness upon the supreme good, as well as positing as First Cause (in the ultimate causal order) the fact that the supreme good is concretely realized. Under euteleology, then, there's no "pinpointing" the divine as a fixed item, but the divine nature may be identified with the supreme good, understood (in Christianity) as revealed in the Christ as *agapé*-love. The scriptural identification, "God is love", can then be given a meaningful endorsement.<sup>28</sup>

Much more needs to be said, of course, if euteleology is to be vindicated as an interpretation of a philosophically — and religiously — adequate theism. It needs to be explained, for example, how the traditional divine attributes could be accommodated on the euteleological account, and how such an account might reasonably construe a soteriology which seems to presuppose that God acts decisively as an individual agent within human history. I hope I have said enough, however, to support the claim that

27 As one of the Marian Antiphons puts it, addressing Mary, *tu quae genuisti, Natura mirante, tuum sanctum Genitorem* ("you who, while Nature marvelled, gave birth to your own holy Creator"). On the reading I am suggesting, Nature is marvelling at the apparent incoherence in mundane terms of the ultimate causal order. Those who think that efficient causality cannot — even ultimately — be anything other than the production of effects by antecedent causes will, of course, offer a different account of what is marvellous here — for example, by taking the Eternal Word to pre-exist His entry into Mary's womb, with her efficient causal contribution confined to bringing Him to birth in human form. I would myself question whether such an account fits the Chalcedonian definition of Jesus the Christ as having both a fully human and a fully divine nature *in one substance* — but these are deep Christological waters, not to be waded into here.

28 "God is love, and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in him" (I John 4:16b). I have no space here to elaborate what identifying God with love would mean on the euteleological view: for some further discussion see Bishop and Perszyk, "A Euteleological Conception of Divinity and Divine Agency", 221-4.

theological explanation may not have to be the kind of intentional explanation it is standardly assumed to be, and to commend a sympathetic consideration of an alternative euteleological construal that retains the interpretation of the Universe as existing for a supremely good purpose, yet without positing that the Universe has a supernatural personal agent as its Unproduced Producer.

In this discussion I have left wholly in the background the question whether it could be reasonable to commit oneself to the truth of theological explanation — either on its personal omniGod interpretation or on the euteleological one.<sup>29</sup> I will note, however, that when one does focus on the justifiability of accepting any overall theological explanation of existence, the problem of evil is bound to loom large. The existence of evil is indeed an obstacle to accepting that the Universe exists for the sake of realizing the supreme good. That obstacle is there on either of the two interpretations of theological explanation I have been considering. The kind of obstacle evil presents varies between the two interpretations, however, and it is, I believe, arguable that the euteleological construal has an advantage in avoiding the embarrassment of having to affirm that the good purpose for which everything exists is intended *by an agent* who could prevent, but in fact sustains, horrendous evils that blight our world.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> I have attempted to articulate and defend an account of justifiable faith-commitment beyond evidential support along the lines of William James’s “justification of faith” in his 1896 lecture “The Will to Believe” in John Bishop, *Believing by Faith: An Essay in the Epistemology and Ethics of Religious Belief* (OUP, 2007).

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