

Reasons and Divine Action: A Dilemma¹

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Many theistic philosophers conceive of God's activity in agent-causal terms. That is, they view divine action as an instance of (perhaps the paradigm case of) substance causation. At the same time, many theists endorse the claim that God acts for reasons, and not merely wantonly. It is the aim of this paper to show that a commitment to both theses gives rise to a dilemma. I present the dilemma and then spend the bulk of the paper defending its premises. I conclude with some suggestions for how one might carve out an alternative model of divine action.

I. God as Rational Agent-Cause

The Agent-Causal Theory of Action is a view about the nature of action. (Sometimes it is put forward more specifically as a view about the nature of *free* action.²) As a theory of action, it says that an event counts as an action when, and only when, it is caused by an agent. Agent-causation is thought to be a *sui generis* species of causation distinct from, and not reducible to, event-causation. As such, the view competes with other theories of action including the Causal Theory of Action (CTA), according to which an event counts as an action if and only if it is caused (in the right, event-causal way) by the appropriate mental item(s), and noncausal theories of action which are too varied to characterize briefly here, but which agree that whatever the conditions for action may be, causality is not one of them. It is not my goal here to argue for, or

¹ Thanks to Forrest Baird, Nate King, Steve Layman, Patrick McDonald, Joshue Orozco, Leland Saunders, Daniel Speak, Kevin Timpe, and Keith Wyma for comments on earlier drafts of this chapter.

² For example, Randolph Clarke (2003) accepts causalism as a theory of action, but favors agent-causalism as a theory of free action.

against, a particular theory of action. Instead, the purpose of this paper is to explore a certain conception of divine action – one that views God’s activity in agent-causal terms – and to do so in light of the *prima facie* plausible supposition that God’s actions are performed for reasons. The question before us, then, is whether viewing God as an agent-cause makes problems for an otherwise attractive conception of God as a rational agent (and vice versa). As will become clear, I believe that it does.

Discussions regarding divine action often focus on such things as the proper theistic understanding of science, or of natural laws, or else on God’s essential goodness, or God’s freedom (or lack thereof). Such discussions only infrequently explore the nature of divine action itself. That’s not to say that theistic philosophers don’t have a view on the matter. Several do. But since the focus of many of the relevant discussions is on other (albeit related) matters, one rarely finds well worked-out arguments for a given theory about the nature of divine action. Even so, in the context of these and other discussions, several prominent philosophers of religion construe divine action in explicitly agent-causal terms. For example, in a discussion of divine freedom, William Alston writes,

To say that God is supremely free implies that He has the capacity to refrain from doing *A* whatever the strength of a tendency to do *A* that issues from His attitudes and knowledge. This is not, of course, to say that God wills at random, nor is it to deny that He can be depended on to act in accordance with His nature and to act for the good. It is only to say that God’s free choice is interposed between any tendencies issuing from His nature and His activity. God’s activity is the activity of a free agent in the most unqualified sense. Not only are the things He directly brings about the result of “agent causality” rather than “event causality,” even where the events or states are states of His

own psyche; it is also the case, if this is indeed a separate point, that no exercise of this agent causality is determined by anything, not even by states of Himself.³

Alston's position is clear. God's free actions are a result of God's having agent-caused them. Alston explicitly rejects a view of divine causation according to which God's actions are brought about by mental or psychological states *of* God. At the same time, we here see Alston affirm that God can properly be understood to act *for* the good, and, in his words, not "at random." I take it that by excluding random actions, Alston means to suggest that God does not act without reason, or for no reason, but that God's actions are rational, perhaps even explainable (at least in principle).

Similarly, in a brief discussion of the divine attributes, Richard Swinburne says, "By God's being perfectly free I understand that no object or event or state (including past states of himself) *in any way causally influences* him to do the actions which he does – his own choice at the moment of action alone determines what he does."⁴ If Swinburne was merely interested in ruling out a deterministic version of CTA, he would only need to assert that nothing – including no states or events of God – determine what God does. But instead he insists that such states or events do not in any way causally influence that which God does. The suggestion appears to be that God's actions are not caused (deterministically or indeterministically) by states or events in God, but by God himself. Indeed, Swinburne has more recently affirmed the view that "all

³ Alston (1988), p. 269

⁴ Swinburne (1991), p. 8 (italics mine). Thanks to Steve Layman for the reference. In what follows, I will not take issue with the truth of this particular statement by Swinburne. On the view of divine action that I characterize at the conclusion of this chapter, God's acting just is (i.e., consists in) states of God bringing about effects. That's quite different from claiming that states of God cause God to act.

causation is by substances (and not by events).”⁵ If, then, God’s actions are produced by anything, they are produced by a substance (i.e., God).

Yet Swinburne also insists that “God, like man, cannot just act. He must act for a purpose and see his action as in some way a good thing.”⁶ Indeed, as Swinburne puts it, “nothing would count as an action of God unless God in some way saw the doing of it as a good thing.”⁷ So, Swinburne’s view appears to be that God is an agent-cause and that, like you and me, God acts for reasons.

But can an agent-causal view of divine action deliver a satisfying account of what it is to act for a reason? I am doubtful that it can. But before defending that claim, I offer the following argument in which my controversial claim features as the first premise.

II. The Dilemma

In what follows, let “A” stand for the proposition, “God is an agent-cause,” and let “R” stand for the proposition, “God acts for reasons.”

1. $\sim(A \ \& \ R)$.
2. So, $(\sim A \vee \sim R)$.
3. If $\sim A$, then God’s actions are not brought about by God, but (perhaps) by states/events “within”/of God.
4. If $\sim R$, then God’s actions are capricious.
5. So, either God’s actions are not brought about by God or they are capricious.

⁵ Swinburne (2013), p. 140.

⁶ Swinburne (1991), p. 98

⁷ Ibid. Note that Swinburne here also describes God as having intentions to act. On his view, these intentions are not brought about by anything other than God’s (direct) choice.

Now, let me say at the outset that I do not take the considerations I will offer in favor of premise 1 to be decisive, though I do take them to constitute reason for serious doubt about the prospects for a satisfying account of reasons explanation on an agent-causal conception of divine action. If I'm right about this, and premise 1 has a real shot at being true, then given that its truth gives rise to the dilemma I characterize here, we have good reason to explore an alternative account of divine action – one that, in particular, is not committed to the claim that God is an agent-cause. Of course, the first order of business is to motivate premise 1. It is to this task that I now turn.

III. The Role of Reasons

Before inquiring into divine action, it may be helpful to focus on the more familiar case of human action. A distinctive feature of human beings is that when we act, we generally do so for reasons. In the typical case, these reasons motivate or prompt us to do what we do. In this way, it makes sense to talk about an agent's acting for, or in light of, a reason or a set of reasons. When Jim drives to the store to buy milk, his action – his driving to the store – is motivated by (perhaps among other things) his desire to buy milk.⁸ Indeed, we might say that Jim drove to the store *because* he wanted to buy milk.

Now, if we observed Jim in his car and we have an interest in understanding what Jim was up to, we might ask him why he behaved as he did. When Jim responds by explaining that

⁸ I've opted to characterize Jim's reason for driving to the store as a desire, but I could just as well have characterized it as an intention of some kind. Action theorists vary with respect to their preferred way of characterizing the content of reasons. As it is my goal to remain neutral on this matter, I will simply mention that whatever the precise nature of reasons (and I'm inclined to think "reasons" are a category with a rather diverse population), they are internal, mental items that are – at least in principle – available to the agent in a first-personal, privileged way. On this point, I differ from reasons externalists, like Stoutland (1998, 2001) and Dancy (2002), who allow that "external situations" can be reasons for action. Where Stoutland contends that when I bring my car to a halt at the intersection the stop sign is my reason for stopping, I prefer to say that it is my belief about the stop sign that constitutes my reason for stopping.

he drove to the store because he wanted to buy some milk, his reason – in this case, his desire to buy milk – explains his action. That is, it leads us to understand what it is that Jim saw in driving to the store such that it seemed to him the thing to do. It is in large part because reasons motivate actions that they also explain them. Now, not all of the reasons an agent has in favor of a given action motivate that action. In addition to wanting to buy milk, perhaps Jim also wanted to pick up the newspaper. Either of these desires (or both jointly) could have explained – and indeed justified – Jim’s driving to the store. But let us suppose that, on this occasion, Jim’s baby was fussy and there was no milk in the house, and what prompted Jim to drive to the store was his desire to buy some milk. To use Donald Davidson’s now familiar language, while Jim may have had several reasons for driving to the store, his desire to buy milk was the reason *for which* he so drove. When we give an explanation of an agent’s action in terms of the reason or reasons that motivated it, we give a reasons – or rationalizing - explanation of that action. And in Davidson’s words,

A reason rationalizes an action only if it leads us to see something the agent saw, or thought he saw, in his action – some feature, consequence, or aspect of the action the agent wanted, desired, prized, held dear, thought dutiful, beneficial, obligatory, or agreeable.⁹

It is sensible to expect that a reasons explanation will be available (at least to the agent, and even if only when pressed) in the vast majority of cases of human action.¹⁰ For if that were not the

⁹ Ibid., p. 3.

¹⁰ There is a body of psychological literature which suggests that the reasons we provide for many paradigmatic types of action are confabulations, so that we are not aware, after all, of our motivations for acting as we do. See, for example, Nisbett and Wilson (1977), Gazzaniga (1995, 2000), Wilson (2002), and Carruthers (2010). An adequate response to this suggestion and the studies out of which it comes cannot be accomplished here. So let me say just two things. (1) I have real doubts about the strength of the evidence provided for such claims and (2) if the studies show what they are claimed to show, then this is grave news indeed for our view of ourselves as rational agents.

case, it would seem our very concept of ourselves as agents would be in jeopardy. Consider the following two episodes described by Jaegwon Kim:

Late one night, you find yourself in the kitchen, holding the refrigerator door open and peeking inside, but you have forgotten what it is that you are looking for. Is it a piece of cheese, or some orange juice, or perhaps a bottle of beer that you wanted out of the fridge? Perhaps you wanted to check on the supply of milk and eggs. You are befuddled, and feel foolish – even a bit helpless. You feel sort of frozen, as if in a paralysis, in the middle of an action. Here is another such episode: As you are making your way down the stairway from your study, you suddenly realize that you have no idea why you are going downstairs. Are you getting the day's mail? Are you going to pick up the evening paper? To take a break from your work and listen to some music? To feed the cat? You aren't sure, and your steps slow down – perhaps you will come to a complete stop. Perhaps, you will continue to proceed downstairs, hoping that you will remember your reason for going down. Or you see no point in continuing your descent and decide to return to your study.”¹¹

Episodes like those Kim describes here are familiar enough. At such times we are doing something – holding open a door, proceeding down the stairs – and we are aware of doing so. What we fail to know is *why* we are doing them. According to Kim, in failing to know *why* I am holding open the fridge, there is an important sense in which I fail to know *what* it is I am doing. This can lead to a problematic variety of estrangement from one's own action. After all, if I don't know what I'm doing (Am I getting juice? Pickles? Putting something away?), then how can I

That is, I would not be inclined to simply suggest that we've had the requirements for rational agency wrong and that, in fact, we might be rational actors even if overwhelmingly, the reasons that prompt us to act are reasons we are not the least bit aware of. What's more, rational agency cannot be salvaged by an insistence that even if reasons don't motivate actions, they can still explain them since my having a reason *r* to do *a* is not the same as my doing *a* for reason *r*.

¹¹ Kim (2010), p. 105.

properly be said to be the agent of my action? While episodes involving fridge-starings, interrupted staircase descents, and the like may be familiar, they are not so widespread as to represent the majority of human behavior. And it's important that they aren't or else our view of ourselves as the agents of our actions would seem to be threatened. Kim takes such considerations to show that self-understanding (in a distinctively first-personal way) is essential to agency.

Interestingly, the subject who finds herself unaware of her reasons for descending the stairs – and who therefore fails to know what she is doing – is in precisely the epistemic situation regarding her own behavior that we are all in with regard to the actions of others. Unless we know why an agent behaves as she does, there is an important sense in which we fail to know what she is doing. Suppose you are walking from one end of the room to the other and back again. Are you pacing? Are you exercising? Has your foot fallen asleep and you're attempting to resuscitate it? I see that you are moving your limbs in such a way so as to be walking from one location to another, but I do not know your reason(s) for moving as you do. And because I don't, I fail, in an important sense, to know what it is you are doing.

All of this suggests that, properly understood, human action permits of reasons explanation. The question now before us is whether the same is properly said of divine action. Does God act for reasons? I confess that it's hard to imagine why any theist would say no. After all, theists appear to attribute reasons to God fairly routinely, as when they say that God created the universe out of love, or that he forgives humankind because of his mercy. Are we to imagine that God does the loving or merciful thing (perfectly, in fact, owing to his essential goodness), but that his seeing certain actions as merciful, or loving, or good does not motivate his performing such actions? There is a concern among some theists, I think, that to attribute

motivations to God would be to posit a cause of God's behavior other than God himself. We'll come back to this point in section V, but for now I'll make two brief comments: (1) It's not clear that to claim that God's actions are motivated is akin to claiming that they are caused (by anything, so far as I can tell). Though it is my view that motivations are best understood causally, it would beg the question against the noncausalist to simply assume this at the outset. (2) Even if reasons are causes of divine action, it's not (as of yet) clear why this should pose a theological problem, as the cause of divine action needn't be conceived as something external to God. In any case, the question before us now simply asks whether it is right to say of God that in, say, creating the universe, there was something God saw in the act of creating such that creating seemed to him the thing to do.¹² It seems to me that overwhelmingly theists will answer in the affirmative.¹³

There is perhaps more to be said here. Recall Alston's claim that God does not act randomly, but that he can be relied on to act for the good. Clearly Alston is highlighting God's perfect goodness. God doesn't act in just any old way, but in a morally perfect way, so that – minimally – he performs all morally obligatory acts and performs no morally impermissible acts. But I don't think Alston's claim is merely a statement about God's essential goodness – or, in any case, I don't see that it need be read as such. Rather, "random" might suggest "without reason" or "for no purpose," as when one acts on a whim. There would seem something, well, less-than-perfect about a being who was prone to act impulsively, or in any case without reason

¹² Of course, unlike the case of you and me, its seeming to God that ϕ is the thing to do entails that ϕ is indeed the thing to do.

¹³ Interestingly, Alexander Pruss suggests that God's "omnirationality" implies that "whenever [God] does anything, he does it for *all and only* the unexcluded reasons that favor the action, and he always acts for reasons." (2013), p. 1. Pruss himself defends *weak* omnirationality which does not imply that God always act for at least one reason. I'll come back to this, but for now I note simply that the view that God acts for reasons certainly has its defenders, and likely a good number of them. I suppose one notable exception might be certain defenders of a divine command theory of ethics.

for so acting. This is undoubtedly true when the action in question is a morally salient one. But it seems true of actions generally.¹⁴

Of course, being omniscient, there will be no threat that in acting capriciously, God might inadvertently bring about some regrettable state of affairs (as might very well happen when you or I act impulsively) since God would be aware of all potential results of all possible actions, and by his goodness, compelled to avoid any bad ones. But recall that reasons play a motivational role in action. And they do so whether they're good (justified) reasons or not. My desire to further my own career will explain my spreading rumors about a coworker so long as the desire in question (and perhaps the belief that the rumors will result in my being promoted rather than my coworker) is indeed what motivated my acting as I did. And this will be true even if the belief is false and the desire depraved. A reasons explanation yields an understanding of the motivation for the action explained. Accordingly, to say of any being – including God – that he routinely acts for no reason, is to say that his actions are unexplainable, and there is no answer to the question, “Why did God Φ ?” We might wonder whether such a being is in control of his actions in the way an agent must be to properly count as the agent of them. What's more, if such a being is essentially good, then though he will always and only do the good, it will presumably be because his nature dictates that he does so, and not because, in his view, the good is worth doing. But is such a being perfectly good? It's not difficult to imagine a morally better being – namely, one who always does the good and does so because it is good. The upshot is that the

¹⁴ I do not endorse the strong principle that for any action *a*, the reason which explains *a* must explain *why a rather than b*. That is, I am not suggesting that reasons need provide contrastive explanations. Suppose I want to eat a grape. My desire (in conjunction, perhaps with certain relevant beliefs) constitutes my reason for eating *this* grape. But I needn't have a reason for eating this grape rather than one of the other equally succulent grapes in the bunch. My wanting to eat a grape is reason enough (to explain) my eating the grape I eat. Thanks to Daniel Speak for pressing me on this point and for the example.

thesis that God acts for reasons ought to be affirmed by the theist on pain of deflating the very concept of God.

IV Agent Causation and Reasons Explanation

It is by now a well-known charge against the agent-causal theory of action that it fails to adequately account for what it is to act for a reason.¹⁵ Consider first “pure” versions of the view according to which an agent’s reasons are not even partial causal contributors of her action.

Timothy O’Connor’s view offers a nice paradigm. According to O’Connor, an agent agent-causes the coming to be of a complex intention (to so act here and now to satisfy her desire that *d*) and the intention then event-causes the action. Now, because *d* is a desire the agent has both antecedent to, and concurrent with, her acting and because *d* features in the content of the action-triggering intention, O’Connor claims that the action can be given a reasons explanation by appealing to *d*. In other words, *d* can properly be said to constitute the agent’s reason for acting.¹⁶ Suppose an agent, Mabel, wants to let the cat out. And let us suppose that the intention she forms as a result of an agent-causal process has the following content: “I hereby open the door in order to let the cat out.” O’Connor tells us that because Mabel’s intention makes reference to a desire she in fact has prior to, and at the time of, her opening the door, the desire explains her behavior.

¹⁵ For articulations of the objection from reasons explanation, see Feldman and Buckareff (2003), Clarke (2003), Rice (2011). The arguments in this section draw from my (2011), though this time with application to divine action.

¹⁶ More precisely, O’Connor gives the following account of acting for a reason (desire). (O’Connor 2000), p. 86.
If an agent acted in order to satisfy his antecedent desire that Θ , then:
1. prior to this action, the agent had a desire that Θ and believed that by so acting he would satisfy (or contribute to satisfying) that desire;
2. the agent’s action was initiated (in part) by his own self-determining causal activity, the event component of which is the-coming-to-be-of-an-action-triggering-intention-to-so-act-here-and-now-to-satisfy- Θ ;
3. concurrent with this action, he continued to desire that Θ and intended of this action that it satisfy (or contribute to satisfying) that desire; and
4. the concurrent intention was a direct consequence (intuitively, a continuation) of the action-triggering intention brought about by the agent, and it causally sustained the completion of the action.

And it does so simply in virtue of its featuring in the content of the relevant intention. It is perhaps helpful to make explicit that while O'Connor's theory of (free) action is agent-causal, his account of reasons explanation is noncausal. An agent's reason – in this case, Mabel's desire to let the cat out – plays no causal role in the production of the action-triggering intention. And yet, on O'Connor's view, Mabel's desire explains her opening the door.

Contra O'Connor, however, the mere having of a certain desire (or reason, more generally) does not imply that it played the appropriate motivational role. An agent might have multiple reasons for forming a given intention, but only one reason for which she forms it. And since O'Connor grants explanatory status to a desire that is present in the agent prior to, and during, the action, even desires which did not motivate the agent to act as she did can properly explain her action. To be clear, I am not suggesting that all action explanations must be contrastive, in the sense that they need explain why subject *S* performed action *a* rather than action *b*. My complaint is that the pure agency theory allows that an agent's having desire *d* is sufficient for *d*'s featuring in an explanation of any action of *S*'s that it makes the least bit of sense to say might have been motivated by *d*. But this disregards a critical feature of an agent's psychology: Her being motivated by *d* to perform *a*. When we ask for an explanation of *S*'s *a*-ing, we are seeking some insight into what it is *S* actually saw in *a*-ing such that *a*-ing seemed to *S* the thing to do. In the event that *d* causes *a*, there is a real-world link between *S*'s having of *d* and *S*'s performing *a*. In denying such a link, the pure agency theorist is burdened with the task of providing an alternative account of why Mabel forms the intention to open the door. Notice that it will not do to simply insist that Mabel formed the intention *because* she desired to let the cat out – not, in any case, without some substantive account of how to understand the because-relation in noncausal terms.

O'Connor has attempted to resolve this by arguing that reasons may causally influence an agent's free decisions (without producing them) by "structuring the agent-causal capacity, giving us varying propensities towards different outcomes."¹⁷ So, while an agent's reasons make her objectively likely to act as she does, they in no way bring about her forming the requisite action-triggering intention.¹⁸ O'Connor claims that this provides the following (minimal) account of reasons explanation: "S acts on reason *r* in causing intention *i* just in case *r* is a nonproducing probability raiser of *S's causing i*."¹⁹ Now, it is far from clear that viewing an agent's reasons as structuring causes in this way alleviates our present worry. In the first place, it's not clear what is supposed to ground the objective probability of an agent's exercising (or not) her agent-causal power. But laying that concern to one side, and allowing for such objective probabilities, it is nevertheless the case that the degree to which a given reason makes *S's* forming of *i* likely is incidental to whether or not the agent so intends. That's because on an agent-causal view like O'Connor's, whether an agent forms the intention or not is purely a matter of her exercising her agent-causal capacity to bring it about. She may act in accordance with what her reasons make likely, or she may not. And if she does, will her intention be formed *for* the reason it cites? It needn't be. Or, in any case, there is nothing built into the pure agency theory to rule out the possibility that she forms the intention for an altogether different reason, or for no reason at all. The agent-causal theorist cannot say that the agent's forming of the requisite intention is itself caused by one of the agent's reasons on pain of undermining the very agent-causalism the pure agency view means to defend. Indeed, so long as the agent's reasons play no productive role – so

¹⁷ O'Connor (2005), p. 223.

¹⁸ On some understandings of causation, what O'Connor introduces here is as full-fledged as causation gets, in which case his amended view collapses into a version of CTA. As O'Connor is a nonreductionist about causation, he believes such a view lacks an essential and irreducible feature of causation – namely, production.

¹⁹ Ibid.

long as they are inefficacious with regard to bringing about her forming of the intention – it would seem that her having those reasons will not explain her acting as she did. For she might have reasons that make likely a certain action (by making it likely that she will form an intention to so act), though such reasons do not turn out to be the reasons for which she acted.

Moving from the human case to the divine case arguably doesn't change matters much. For the challenge for the pure agency view concerns its ability to ascribe to reasons their proper role as motivators of action. If we're willing to grant that in acting, God acts for a reason (or a set of reasons), where that reason motivates God to so act, then there will be some true account of reasons explanation for divine action. And like humans, it would seem God could perform an action for which he has multiple reasons, and yet only one of these constitutes the reason for which he performs it.²⁰ Suppose God decides to perform some morally neutral act (or, in any case, an act that is neither impermissible nor obligatory) – say, creating *ex nihilo* a planet in some distant region of the universe containing only a single mountain. And let's suppose that among God's reasons for doing so are (a) a desire that there exist an additional thing of beauty, (b) a hankering to exercise his creative capacity, and (c) a general preference – all other things being equal - for tall things. Now, while any of (a) – (c) could themselves rationalize God's creating the planet, or all of them jointly, suppose that the action-triggering intention God forms is, "I hereby create a lone-mountain-planet in order to create a thing of beauty."

According to O'Connor, we have a reasons explanation of God's act of creating the planet in terms of (a) precisely because (a) features in the content of the intention in the requisite

²⁰ We have to tread a bit carefully here. After all, if the action is a morally salient one, then it would seem God, being essentially good, would need to act for the morally best reason, or for at least one among the set of competing best reasons, or else be justified in some way in failing to act on the morally best reason. Additionally, as an omniscient being, God will never find himself in a situation familiar enough to human persons whereby he forgets, or fails to attend to, the reasons he has for performing a given action. So, the scenario we're imagining must be one in which God is simply motivated, on a given occasion, to act – say - for reason (a) rather than for some other reason he has, e.g., reason (b).

way and is had by God prior to, and throughout the duration of, the act. Now, God is of course never misled – in the ways we humans sometimes are – about his motivations. But it remains an open question why God formed the intention he did. What is the relationship between God’s desire that there exist an additional beautiful thing and his forming the intention to so create that thing? On the pure agency view, (a) does not cause God’s coming to have the relevant intention nor does it bring about the action. What explains God’s forming the relevant intention (and ultimately creating the planet) is his exercise of agent-causal power. But this is not to give a reasons explanation since it remains altogether unclear in what sense the intention was formed *for a reason*.

Perhaps the description of the divine psychology I’ve offered is precluded by other facts about God. According to Alexander Pruss, God never acts for just one (or for some subset) of his available reasons. Indeed, owing to his “omnirationality,” whenever God acts for a reason, he acts for all and only the (unexcluded) reasons that favor the action.²¹ So, the scenario I’ve described is quite impossible for God. But should we think that God is omnirational, in this sense? Pruss offers four arguments, two of which I’ll consider here.²² First, according to Pruss, God must act for all of his (unexcluded) reasons because “it would not be rational for God to ignore an unexcluded good reason that favors the course he has in fact chosen.”²³ Now, I confess to some confusion over the use of “good reason” in addition to “reason that favors.” Is a good

²¹ Pruss (2013). More precisely, Pruss argues that God is *weakly* omnirational. It is weak because Pruss does not rule out the possibility that God act for no reason. An unexcluded reason is one whose rational force is not precluded by a second order reason, as in the case where my desire to refrain from spending the day reading blue books is rationally excluded (outweighed) by my having promised my students I would return their graded exams tomorrow.

²² Pruss’ remaining two arguments are these: (1) The claim that God acts for fewer than all of the reasons he has in favor of the action violates a consequence of divine simplicity – namely, that God lacks intrinsic accidental properties. (2) Omnirationality provides a solution to certain problems – e.g., the challenge of ruling out accidental unifications in science and problems pertaining to the efficacy of petitionary prayer in religion. (1) brings to bear the doctrine of divine simplicity which I take up in section V. (2) takes us far afield from our present concern. Accordingly, I will leave it to one side.

²³ Pruss (2013), p. 6.

reason for *a*-ing something other than a reason that favors *a*-ing? If so, it would be helpful to know what feature of the reason “good” is picking out, exactly. If not, it appears we’ve not been given an argument for omnirationality after all, but merely a restatement of it since we’ve been told that failing to act on a reason that favors an action is a failure in rationality and thus any being guilty of so failing cannot be omnirational. But what is needed is an argument for the claim that God’s “ignoring” (or, likely better, God’s not acting *for*) a reason that favors some action of his constitutes a failure of rationality.

Pruss’ second argument flows from a principle he takes to be true of all agents – namely, that “if *x* performs an action *A*, then for any *R*, *x* performs the action at least in part for *R* if and only if *R* is a motivationally live reason for *x* for that action.”²⁴ Since God is omniscient and “perfectly rational,” all of the unexcluded reasons will, according to Pruss, be motivationally live for God. Notice that God’s omniscience in conjunction with his status as an agent does not suffice to deliver the conclusion Pruss desires. For even if God, as an agent, only ever acts on motivationally live reasons, and even if he, being omniscient, knows what all of the unexcluded reasons are, it doesn’t follow that all of the unexcluded reasons will be motivationally live for God. That’s precisely what needs to be shown. Of course, Pruss isn’t suggesting that God’s omniscience and agency do all the work here. What he says is that God’s status as an agent, his omniscience, *and* his “perfect rationality” imply his omnirationality. But what exactly is it for an agent, *x*, to be perfectly rational? On pain of circularity, it can’t just mean that for any unexcluded reason *r* that *x* is aware of having, *r* is motivationally live for *x* (since that’s just the definition of omnirationality). Intuitively, a rational agent acts on the basis of (unexcluded) reasons that in fact favor the action in question. A perfectly rational being would seem to be one

²⁴ Ibid., p. 5.

that always acts on the basis of such reasons. But we should not yet be convinced that a perfectly rational being must be one that acts on the basis of all of the unexcluded reasons favoring a given action.

Largely owing to the objection from reasons explanation, some agent-causalists have abandoned the project of giving an account of acting for a reason that insists reasons play no causal role in the etiology of action. Randolph Clarke has carved out an integrated account according to which (free) actions are brought about both by the agent (via an irreducible, agent-causal process) and also (in a nondeterministic, probabilistic, event-causal way) by her reasons.²⁵ According to Clarke's version of the agent-causal view, when an agent performs an action for a reason, the action is rationalizable in virtue of the antecedent mental item's having probabilistically caused the behavior in question. Unlike O'Connor, Clarke allows that an agent's reason is causally efficacious in bringing about the action. Clarke believes that this affords him a more satisfying account of reasons explanation than that offered by pure agency views since, for example, Mabel's opening the door is explained by her desire to let the cat out since it was caused by that desire. And yet, on Clarke's view, that Mabel's desire causes her action doesn't preclude Mabel's also agent-causing it. In fact, as Clarke sees it, Mabel's desire to let the cat out would not have caused her action had Mabel not agent-caused it. What accounts for the relationship between what an agent agent-causes and what her reasons cause? Clarke says,

[S]uppose that, as a matter of nomological necessity...whichever...[decision] the agent makes, that decision will be made, and it will be caused by the agent's having the reasons that favor it (together with her having the intention to make up her mind) only if the agent causes that decision."²⁶

²⁵ Clarke 1993 and 2003.

²⁶ Clarke (2003), p. 136.

It is a matter of natural law, then, that an action which is agent-caused is also probabilistically caused by the reason that favors it. Now, to say a reason “favors” an action is not to suggest that the reason enjoys any particular amount of deliberative weight as compared with other considerations relevant to the agent’s deliberative process (if indeed she undergoes such a process). Instead, “favors” means “makes probable to some nonzero degree.”

In my view, the central problem with the integrated view is that it makes the explanation of an agent’s action in terms of her reason parasitic on what the agent agent-causes. Imagine again our agent, Mabel. Instead of worrying about the cat, Mabel is deciding how she wants to spend her Saturday morning.²⁷ The options she considers are: (A_1) to finish her cross-stitching, (A_2) to work in the garden, and (A_3) to brush up on Astrophysics. Let’s suppose Mabel is considering the following reasons, each of which best rationalizes just one of (A_1) – (A_3): (R_1) she wants to surprise her granddaughter with a cross-stitched pillow in time for her birthday, (R_2) she’s hoping to get the new flower bulbs in before the rain hits, and (R_3) since retirement, Mabel has read very little Astrophysics, and a former colleague has just sent her a book she’s very interested in reading. We might represent Mabel’s mental situation this way:

(R_1) rationalizes (A_1)

(R_2) rationalizes (A_2)

(R_3) rationalizes (A_3)

For any of (A_1) – (A_3) that Mabel might perform, the relevant reason (R_1 , R_2 , or R_3) will rationalize it because, in addition to Mabel’s agent-causing the action, it will be event-caused by the relevant reason. Now, the causation involved (between the reason and the action) must be

²⁷ This case is fashioned after one I give in Rice (2011). See p. 340.

indeterministic in order to leave room for the agent to agent-cause the action.²⁸ After all, on just about any version of the agent-causal view, the agent may exercise her causal power in a way that is contrary to reasons she has. Each of $(R_1) - (R_3)$ rationalizes its respective action because, in addition to Mabel's bringing it about, the reason causes it. In this way, the agent-cause and the appropriate reason-cause are jointly sufficient to bring about the action.

Suppose that on the Saturday in question, Mabel reads the Astrophysics book, thereby performing (A_3) . On Clarke's view, (R_3) rationalizes (A_3) in virtue of having caused it. But, importantly, (R_3) plays this causal role only in the event that Mabel agent-causes (A_3) . The result is that which reason provides the rationalizing explanation depends, in a significant way, on which action the agent selects. Perhaps the agent-causal theorist will respond by claiming that this result is just as she would have it be since which reason is efficacious is, in an important sense, up to the agent. My reply is this: Contrary to what it purports to do, the theory currently under consideration does not offer an explanation of an agent's actions in terms of her reasons. For it tells us that which reason explains the action depends on what the agent does. But this story has the "explanatory arrow" pointing in the wrong direction. Philosophers sometimes talk about a "causal arrow" which points from cause to effect. The arrow represents the asymmetric, one-directional feature of the causal relation. The explanatory relation is similarly asymmetric and one-directional. And its "arrow" properly points from explanans to explanandum. On the account of reasons explanation offered by the integrated agency theorist, it would seem that the action Mabel performs explains – or accounts for – which reason rationalizes it. And this is simply to put matters the wrong way round. Indeed, I consider (R_3) analogous to the contents of a knapsack that a person brings with her on a stroll, though she may never have bothered to look at

²⁸ Overwhelmingly, agent-causal theorists are libertarians. A notable exception is Ned Markosian (1999, 2012).

what's inside. When a passerby asks, "Why do you carry that sack?" she can pull out the contents and provide an answer. But whatever is in the sack clearly didn't motivate her carrying the sack. So, again, the agent-causal view struggles to account for the agent's motivation in acting.

It is perhaps worth noting that it is dubious to suppose that Mabel was motivated by (R_3) to perform (A_3) since, other than stipulating (R_3) as a co-cause of (A_3), the integrated view provides no way of understanding an agent's exercising her agent-causal capacity *for a reason*. Indeed, while it's true that (R_3) causes (A_3) only if Mabel does, it's false that (R_3) causes Mabel's agent-causing of (A_3). For if the integrated view posited that (R_3) caused Mabel to perform (A_3), it would cease to be an agent-causal view and would instead collapse into a version of CTA.²⁹ For it would be the reason, ultimately, and not the agent, that causes and (and thereby explains) the action.

Unsurprisingly, some adjustments will need to be made to the integrated agency view if it is to serve as a theory of divine action. First, it will not do to account for the relationship between the agent-cause and the reason-cause in terms of nomological necessity where the agent in question is God. We would need to posit something stronger – say, metaphysical or logical necessity. Perhaps, as a matter of logical necessity, then, when God agent-causes an action, the action is also caused by the reason that favors it. Additionally, it's an interesting question

²⁹ In "Agency," Davidson raises what has become a widely-cited dilemma for the agent-causal view. It goes like this: An agent's causing of her action is itself either an action or it isn't. If it is an action, then like all cases of action it too must be agent-caused (and we're off to the races in an infinite regress of agent-causings). If it is not an action, then it is altogether mysterious how something that merely befalls the agent can, when it does occur, make the difference as to whether her behavior counts as an exercise of her own control. The consequence is that the agent-causal theory appears to be either absurd or useless. The response to this objection has typically been to claim that it rests on a misunderstanding. Contrary to what the first horn of the dilemma supposes, agents do not cause their agent-causings. Rather, the exertion of her agent-causal capacity is the means by which the agent produces an action. Indeed, O'Connor (2000) claims that agent-causings are altogether uncaused. He says, "[T]here is no direct cause of my causing an intention to A, if that is what I do. No factor, internal or external, deterministic or indeterministic, brings about my acting." (p. 97)

whether the theist will want to insist that the reason-cause be indeterministic. On the one hand, this would seem important if one wants to uphold a certain view of divine freedom. On the other hand, problems may surface if, instead of desires and beliefs, reasons are construed as intentions. After all, if God intends that action *a* occur, it would seem that, of necessity, *a* occurs. And then the reason (in this case, the intention to *a*) can hardly be a mere indeterministic causal antecedent of *a*. But as these considerations involve questions about the nature of reasons – and divine reasons, at that – as well as questions about how properly to conceive of divine freedom, I will leave them to one side.

I have complained that the integrated agent-causal view allows for an action performed merely on a whim, say, to be explained by appeal to the reason that favored it. To illustrate, we need simply imagine a case in which an agent has, but does not attend to, a reason that probabilistically causes a given action. Then we imagine that the agent agent-causes precisely that action, whereby the reason can properly be said to have caused, and thereby explained, the agent's doing what she does. Notably, the epistemic situation our human agent finds herself in (or might find herself in) with respect to her reasons won't apply to an omniscient being. For any reason *r* and action *a*, if God has *r* for doing *a*, then God is aware of having *r* for *a*. However, this difference is not enough to salvage the integrated view's account of reasons explanation for divine action. For on the integrated view, it will be true of any being - even one aware of all of his reasons for the various actions he might perform – that whatever his reasons event-cause will be explanatorily secondary to what he agent-causes. And, as I've argued, any view that allows for this result has failed to appreciate the proper role of reasons in action.

V. Divine Action Reconceived

In section II, I offered the following dilemma for divine action (where “A” stands for “God is an agent-cause” and “R” stands for “God acts for reasons”):

1. $\sim(A \ \& \ R)$.
2. So, $(\sim A \vee \sim R)$.
3. If $\sim A$, then God’s actions are not brought about God, but (perhaps) by states/events “within”/of God.
4. If $\sim R$, then God’s actions are capricious.
5. So, either God’s actions are not brought about by God or they are capricious.

Thus far it has been my primary concern to defend premise 1. Premise 2 follows straightforwardly from 1. And along the way – most especially in section III – I have argued for premise 4. I should clarify the meaning of premise 4 slightly since, as should now be apparent, if God does not act for reasons, then God’s actions are “capricious” in the sense that they are without motive, or arbitrary.

That leaves premise 3. If God is not an agent-cause, then God’s actions are not brought about by God – or, in any case, they are not directly brought about by God *qua substance*. This is a problem for theism only if there does not exist a satisfying alternative to agent-causation for conceiving of divine action. So, let me conclude by sketching what I take to be a promising candidate:

CTA_(divine): For every event *e* in the life of God, *e* is an action of God’s iff *e* is caused by the appropriate (rationalizing) mental items.

In the case of human action, CTA typically stipulates that *e* be caused *in the right way* so as to rule out cases involving wayward causal chains.³⁰ But as such cases involve unanticipated processes or involuntary behaviors, they would seem automatically precluded in the divine case.³¹ Causal theorists vary with respect to which mental items they deem the “appropriate” causal antecedents to action. Davidson’s original formulation of the view featured belief-desire pairs as “primary reasons,” while more recent causal theorists tend to prefer intentions of a certain specified sort. My formulation is intentionally neutral on this point. Whatever the particulars, mental items are well-suited to provide a rationalizing explanation of action given their availability to the agent in a privileged, first-personal way. What’s more, CTA is notable for its ability to distinguish between the reasons an agent has in favor of an action, and the reason or reasons for which she acts. The reason for which the agent acts is the reason that caused her action. More precisely, for any subject *s* and reason *r* that *s* has at *t*, *r* rationalizes *s*’s action *a* only if *r* caused *a*.

In the case of God, then, CTA_(divine) posits that psychological states or events in God bring about the events which count as his actions. And in doing so, these mental states or events provide a rationalizing explanation of God’s actions.

Now, I suspect a causal theory of divine action will pretty quickly give rise to (at least) the following objections, and I’d like to offer some brief comments about each.

³⁰ For an example of deviance, see Davidson (2001), p. 79.

³¹ Whether deviance remains a problem for divine action will depend, I suppose, on just what one takes the problem to be. If it is a matter of the causation progressing in the “right” way, then it would seem not to be a problem for actions brought about by an omnipotent and omniscient being. But if the problem is deemed a more fundamental one – that waywardness is ineliminable in cases of event-causation – then it would seem the problem persists for divine action. Naturally, I remain unconvinced of the second formulation of the problem and I think answers to the first problem are available. But because a defense of these claims would distract from the matters currently under discussion, I will simply mention that debate over the objection to causal theories of action from causal deviance is ongoing. Thanks to Daniel Speak for pressing me for clarification here.

Objection 1: If divine actions issue from God's psychological states/events, then they are brought about by "parts" of God, rather than by God. And, of course, being simple, God doesn't have parts. So CTA_(divine) is false.

First, I'll confess that it's far from clear to me just what the doctrine of divine simplicity implies. But I can think of no good reason – on any plausible metaphysical picture – for thinking that it follows from its being true that God's actions are brought about by states of, or events involving, God, that such states or events constitute parts of God. God's psychological events no more constitute parts of God than my morning walk constitutes a part of me. So, it's not clear to me that CTA_(divine) violates divine simplicity by implying that God has parts.

Perhaps rather than attributing parthood to God, CTA_(divine) implies a different sort of divine metaphysical complexity, namely that of exemplifying properties that are ontologically distinct from God. While I intentionally avoided property talk in characterizing CTA_(divine) (note that I said God's actions are brought about by states of, or events involving, God rather than that they are brought about by psychological properties of God), CTA_(divine) would seem to imply that there is a distinction between God and God's reasons. Those who take such an assertion to be theologically problematic are often motivated by a concern that this sort of complexity – as is characteristic of humans like me, where my being of short stature is a property that has its existence independently of me – suggests an untoward kind of independence of the divine attributes, or even worse, a dependence of God on the divine attributes.

In this way, the view I've characterized violates what Thomas Morris calls "property simplicity."³² This is a considerably stronger version of simplicity than is required for the denial that God has parts. And it seems to me that the theist routinely violates it when she says of God that he is good, or that he is all-powerful, or – interestingly enough – when she says that he is simple. But the advocate of property simplicity might respond that such assertions are best understood as identity claims (*God is Perfect Goodness*, *God is Omnipotence*) than as property attributions. As Morris points out, however, "if these are identities, then it follows by the laws governing identity that Perfect Goodness is Omnipotence."³³ Perhaps one could claim instead that there is only one divine property with which God is identical, namely, Divinity. Simplicity, then, is not the property of having no properties, but rather "a name for the mysterious way in which the being of God supports our many true characterizations of him without ultimately being divisible into substance and attributes, as are his creatures."³⁴ Now, this is a puzzling view indeed and as it's far from clear that it's truth is required to support other things theists care about (divine aseity, eternity, and immutability, for example), I'm inclined to agree with Morris that one is wise not to insist on so strong a version of the doctrine of simplicity.³⁵ Undoubtedly, many will disagree, and as the issues are a good deal more nuanced than I can represent here, I will not pretend to have settled the matter. For our present purposes, the upshot is this: Either CTA_(divine) violates simplicity or it doesn't. If it does, and an agent-causal theory of divine action is incompatible with God's acting for reasons, then in the absence of a better theory of divine

³² Morris (1991), p. 114. A slightly more lenient version insists that God lacks intrinsic accidental properties. This would allow that God have, say, the property of believing that I am hailing a taxi now, but would exclude – importantly for our purposes – God's having multiple reasons for performing an action, *a*, but *a*-ing for just one of those reasons. See Pruss (2013), p. 7.

³³ Ibid., p. 115

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ See Ibid, pp. 115-118 where Morris argues that the things simplicity advocates want can be attained via the various divine attributes plus modal facts pertaining to God's having of those attributes (God's essential goodness and necessary existence, for example).

action, the conclusion that CTA_(divine) ought to be abandoned - as opposed to the version of divine simplicity that precludes it – is too quick.

Objection 2: If CTA_(divine) is true, then God's actions are not the result of God's bringing them about. They are rather the result of states or events *in* God. But causally efficacious divine states or events cannot themselves count as divine action. As David Velleman puts it with regard to human action, "Psychological...events take place inside a person, but the person serves merely as the arena for these events: he takes no active part."³⁶

I suspect considerations like these lie at the heart of many agent-causal theorists' dissatisfaction with CTA. I'll simply say that according to CTA, a scenario in which one's action issues from the requisite psychological states just is a case of an agent's doing something. Accordingly, it seems to me the proponent of the objection needs to show why it is that a causal theory of divine action has the consequence that God's actions are not brought about by God. For if the causal theorist is right – and, indeed, if CTA_(divine) is true – then divine action just is a case of God's reasons issuing in action. And on that basis, I'm inclined to reject premise 3 of the dilemma. Of course, CTA_(divine) is sure to meet with challenges. At a minimum, it will inherit the various objections launched against the causal theory of human action.³⁷ Whether such challenges are tractable is of course a matter of lively debate in action theory. But if one is committed to the view that in acting, God acts for reasons, then one might do well to give CTA_(divine) serious consideration.

³⁶ Velleman (1992), p. 461.

³⁷ With the exception of the problem of causal deviance, perhaps. See note 31.

Recall Alston's claim that "God's free choice is interposed between any tendencies issuing from His nature and His activity" so that "the things He directly brings about [are] the result of 'agent causality' rather than 'event causality,' even where the events or states are states of His own psyche."³⁸ I have argued that such an account of divine action makes trouble for a further insistence that "this is not...to say that God wills at random, nor is it to deny that He can be depended on to act in accordance with His nature and to act for the good."³⁹ But this conception of divine action can be replaced with an alternative that better accounts for the proper role of reasons in divine action and one that nevertheless has the consequence – which both Alston and I find palatable – "that no exercise of [God's] agent causality is determined by anything, not even by states of Himself."⁴⁰ Indeed God's causing, say, the universe to come into existence is not itself brought about by psychological states of God. Both agent-causal views and CTA_(divine) deny this (though for quite different reasons).⁴¹ On CTA_(divine), it is the universe's coming to be that is brought about by states of God. Divine psychological states do not cause God to bring it about. So, nothing causes God to do anything. Rather, God's creating the universe just is a case of the universe's coming about *because* – and we are now at liberty to read the italicized word causally – God desired that it do so.

³⁸ Alston (1988), p. 268

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Alston (1988), p. 269

⁴¹ Agent-causalists will deny that anything can cause God's agent-causings. And proponents of CTA_(divine) will reject the very agent-causal capacity being attributed to God.

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