# An Argument for Theological Incompatibilism

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## 8.1 Introduction

The goal of this essay is to present a plausibly sound argument for *theological incompatibilism*, where:

> *Theological incompatibilism* is the thesis that if theological determinism is true, then for any created agent *S*, any time *t*, and any proposition *p*, it is not up to *S* at *t* whether *p*,[1]

and:

> *Theological determinism* is the thesis that (i) God's[2] willing what God wills *necessitates* every other contingent fact[3] and (ii) God's willing what God wills *explains* every other contingent fact.[4]

The argument on offer here will be similar to arguments that others have already offered insofar as it (a) appeals to a principle similar to van Inwagen's famous "rule β"[5] and (b) includes as a premise (a variation on) the claim that it is never up to any created agent whether God wills what God wills.[6] However, the argument of this essay is distinct from others insofar as it employs the technical notions of a *metaphysically generative relation* and of *thorough ontological priority* – notions that I will introduce and define in what follows.[7] In introducing these technical notions,

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[1] I am hereby *stipulating* to this definition; I will say more about this definition in what follows.

[2] Throughout this essay, I follow Furlong (2019) in intending "God" to refer to "the sort of being often associated with Western monotheisms … an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good being" (16).

[3] Throughout this essay, I will proceed on the assumption that the fact that God wills what God wills is contingent.

[4] As I note in what follows, White (2016: 78) is the source of this definition.

[5] As presented in, e.g., van Inwagen (1983: 94). In the present context, there is no need to consider van Inwagen's precise formulation of β. The basic idea is this: if a proposition *p* is true and it is not and never has been up to anyone whether *p* (is true), and if *p* implies *q* and it is not and never has been up to anyone whether *p* implies *q*, then *q* is true and it is not and never has been up to anyone whether *q* (is true).

[6] Notably Vicens (2012) and Furlong (2019).

[7] That is, I will define them to the extent that I take definition to be possible.

my aim is to be as transparent and as precise as possible in formulating the relevant line of reasoning; by extension, I hope to ward off potential objections based on confusion or misunderstanding.

I will begin by attending to some preliminary matters, stating the assumptions upon which I will rely and specifying how I will use various terms. Next, I will home in on the definition of theological determinism, carefully considering what it is for God's willing what God wills to (i) *necessitate* and (ii) *explain* every other contingent fact. Finally, I will present the argument for theological incompatibilism itself.

## 8.2   Preliminary Matters

In order to facilitate discussion in what follows, I will rely on certain assumptions and adopt certain conventions. For instance, I will adopt what Paul Audi calls "the *worldly* conception of facts" where:

> Facts, on this conception, are … obtaining states of affairs[8,9]… It is opposed to the conceptual view of facts, according to which facts will differ if they pick out an object or property via different concepts. It is not part of my theory that facts are a fundamental category of entity. Properties, particulars, and instantiation are fundamental. A fact is just a thing's instantiating a property (or some things' instantiating a relation). (2012a: 103)

I will assume, that is, that:

> $x$ is a fact $=_{df.}$ $x$ is identical to (i) some object's instantiating some property or properties or some objects' instantiating some property or properties or (ii) some object's standing in some relation or relations to itself or some object(s) distinct from itself or some objects' standing in some relation or relations to themselves or some object(s) distinct from themselves.[10]

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[8]  In the interest of full disclosure, I note that the first set of ellipses replaces Audi's claim that facts "are not true propositions." Though I myself am inclined to agree (because I am inclined to think that all propositions are abstract objects whereas some facts are concrete), everything that I argue in this essay is consistent with the thesis true propositions are identical to facts. Given that the non-identity of facts and true propositions is beside the point in the present context, I omitted it from the characterization of the "worldly conception of facts."

[9]  In agreeing with Audi that each fact is (identical to) the obtaining of some state of affairs, I assume that there are states of affairs that exist but do not obtain; moreover, I assume that:

Some state of affairs $O_x$ obtains $=_{df.}$ (i) some object instantiates some property or properties or some objects instantiate some property or properties or (ii) some object stands in some relation or relations to itself or some object(s) distinct from itself or some objects stand in some relation or relations to themselves or some object(s) distinct from themselves.

[10]  Each "or" here is inclusive.

Moreover, I will assume that all *events* are facts (though I will *not* assume that all facts are events).[11] In addition, I will assume that for every fact *x*, there is proposition $p_x$ that *corresponds to x*, where:

> Proposition $p_x$ *corresponds to x* $=_{df.}$ (i) $p_x$ is true if and only if *x* is a fact and (ii) either (a) $p_x$'s being true is *identical to x*'s being a fact or (b) $p_x$ is true *because x* is fact.[12]

Finally, I will assume that:

> *x* is a contingent fact $=_{df.}$ (i) *x* is a fact and (ii) *x* is not necessarily a fact; and $p_x$ is contingently true $=_{df.}$ (i) $p_x$ is true and (ii) $p_x$ is not necessarily true,

where "necessarily" (and its cognates) indicates *broadly logical necessity* and where *broadly logical necessity* may be understood in terms possible worlds. In this case:

> *x* is necessarily a fact if and only if *x* is a fact in every possible world; and *p* is necessarily true if and only if *p* is true in every possible world.

As far as terminology goes, I will use "the proposition that corresponds to *x*" as a term of art in accordance with the preceding definition. Moreover, I will use the variables *x* and *y* only to refer to facts (and not, for instance, to refer to individual *objects*). Furthermore, I hereby stipulate that:

> "*x* exists" and "*x* is a fact" may be used interchangeably;
> "*x*," "*x*'s existing," and "*x*'s being a fact" may be used interchangeably;
> "God's willing what God wills" and "the fact that God wills what God wills" may be used interchangeably; and
> "*x*" and "the fact that $p_x$" may be used interchangeably if $p_x$ is the proposition that corresponds to *x*.

With these stipulations in place, I will take up the task of considering what the thesis of theological determinism amounts to.

## 8.3    Theological Determinism

In defining theological determinism as I do, I take myself to be *stipulating* to a particular definition. Moreover, I take myself to be stipulating to the

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[11] I realize, of course, that each of these assumptions is controversial; I certainly do not expect all participants in the debate over theological incompatibilism to grant their truth, and I want to be clear that in proceeding *as if* the relevant assumptions were true, my only aim is to streamline discussion. As far as I can tell, the success of my argument does not depend on the truth of the relevant assumptions. Granted, I may need to formulate the argument in slightly different terms; the substance of the argument, however, would remain the same even if I were working with, for instance, a different definition of *facts*.

[12] I intend this definition to be consistent with the identity theory of truth as well as any theory of truth according to which "truth depends on being" and/or "being determines truth." I will say more about *because* in what follows.

definition of theological determinism that White (2016) introduced, and that Furlong (2019: 15) explicitly adopted. According to White,

> Theological determinism is of course a form of determinism. Determinism is a form of conditional necessity: given these facts or events over here, some other fact or event over there *must be the case* or *must occur* [where the "must"] is a "must" of metaphysical necessity. It is a further requirement on determinism that the determining facts explain the determined facts and not vice versa. [In the case of theological determinism], the determining factor is God's will, and the determined facts are every (other) contingent state of affairs. (78)

"For precision," White offers, "Theological determinism: (i) the facts about God's will wholly determine every other contingent fact and (ii) the facts about God's will explain every other contingent fact" (79). In light of these remarks, I take myself to be stipulating to the same definition as White and Furlong in defining theological determinism as the conjunction of:

> *The Necessitation Thesis*: For any *x* such that *x* is a contingent fact and *x* is not identical to the fact that God wills what God wills, the fact that God wills what God wills *necessitates x*;

and:

> *The Explanation Thesis*: For any *x* such that *x* is a contingent fact and *x* is not identical to the fact that God wills what God wills, the fact that God wills what God wills *explains x*.[13]

With respect to the Necessitation Thesis, Furlong clarifies that "We will say that *x* determines *y* just in case *x* is a fact or event that necessitates *y*" (16) and that "To say that given *x*, *y* must be the case or must occur, is to say nothing more than that in every possible world containing *x*, *y* is the case or occurs" (16). It seems to follow from these remarks that the Necessitation Thesis may be expressed as:

> *The Necessitation Thesis\**: For any *x* such that *x* is a contingent fact and *x* is not identical to God's willing what God wills, if "$p_x$" designates the proposition that corresponds to *x*, "$P_G$" designates the proposition that corresponds to God's willing what God wills and "$\square$" designates a modal operator corresponding to (broadly logical) necessity, $\square(P_G \rightarrow p_x)$.

Moreover, it seems clear enough – at least in the present context – what the Necessitation Thesis\* amounts to.

The Explanation Thesis, however, is comparatively opaque. After all, "It has often been noted that the word 'explanation' is used in a wide variety

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[13]  Though neither White nor Furlong uses "The Necessitation Thesis" or "The Explanation Thesis."

of ways in ordinary English" (Woodward and Ross 2021). Moreover, in his oft-cited *Explaining Explanation*, David-Hillel Ruben contends that "The linguistic evidence points to two different senses of 'explanation' … [I]n speaking of an explanation, one might be referring to an act of explaining, or to the product of such an act" (2012: 6). For her part, Karen Bennett distinguishes between the "purely metaphysical" and the "epistemic" senses of "explain" (2017: 61) while Carl Craver "disambiguate[s] four ways of talking about explanation: as a communicative act, as a representation or text, as a cognitive act, and as an objective structure" (2014: 29). Given the many uses of "explanation" and its cognates, the Explanation Thesis seems to stand in need of clarification.

Then again, as Ruben himself notes, "Usually, the author [who invokes the concept of *explanation*] presupposes that the audience will have no difficulty in identifying which concept it is … This may be an acceptable presupposition in [at least some] discussions" (2012: 1). Notably, both White (2016) and Furlong (2019) seem to have made the relevant presupposition, and it is at the very least *arguable* that they were justified in doing so. They do, after all, manage to conduct fruitful, insightful investigations into theological determinism, and it seems unlikely that competent readers found themselves hopelessly confused by the relevant uses of "explains." Indeed, I take it that I myself have a relatively firm grip on the meaning of "God's willing what God wills explains every other contingent fact"; that is, I think I have understood *well enough* what White and Furlong intend the Explanation Thesis to convey.[14] In light of these considerations, the content of the Explanation Thesis might seem *clear enough* for present purposes.

While I am happy to concede that there are many contexts in which the content of the Explanation Thesis is indeed *clear enough*, I deny that the present context is one of them. As I have said, the ultimate purpose of this essay is to present a plausibly sound argument for theological incompatibilism. Moreover, given the many uses of "explains," it seems clear that the Explanation Thesis might be interpreted in any number of ways, just as it seems clear that many (if not most) of these interpretations would render my argument unsound – or, at the very least, exceedingly vulnerable to

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[14] Of course, I may be mistaken; that is, I may be confused by the relevant uses of "explains." Assuming that I am, in fact, a competent reader, my confusion would actually lend support to the case that I am about to make – that is, my case for the claim that at least in the present context, the Explanation Thesis stands in need of clarification.

objection(s). Given my ultimate goal, then, it seems I ought to attempt to be as explicit, as clear, and as precise as possible in explaining what I take the Explanation Thesis to amount to. I will make such an attempt in what follows, drawing not only from White (2016) and Furlong (2019) but from recent philosophical discussions of *explanation*, *grounding*, and *ontological priority*.

Within discussions of explanation itself, participants sometimes distinguish between *realism* and *anti-realism* with respect to explanation. As Mayes (2021) characterizes this distinction,

> A realist interpretation of explanation holds that the entities or processes an explanation posits actually exist – the explanation is a literal description of external reality. An epistemic [i.e., anti-realist] interpretation, on the contrary, holds that such entities or processes do not necessarily exist in any literal sense but are simply useful for organizing human experience and the results of scientific experiments.

As a first point of clarification, I note that in defining theological determinism as the conjunction of the Necessitation Thesis and the Explanation Thesis, I presuppose a realist (rather than an anti-realist) interpretation of explanation. That is, I assume that if the Explanation Thesis is true, it *literally* describes "external reality."

In fact, I assume something close to *explanatory realism* as Kim (1988) characterizes this position. Kim first proposes that "We can think of an explanation as a complex of propositions or statements divisible into two parts, *explanans* and *explanandum proposition*" (225); he then suggests that we "focus on explanations of individual events" (226). According to Kim, "Such explanations typically explain an event (why a given event occurred) by reference to another event (or set of events)" (226). He then asks that we "Let $E$ be the explanandum, to the effect that a certain event $e$ occurred. Let $C$ be an explanans for this explanandum. $C$, let us assume, is the statement that event $c$ occurred" (226). From here, Kim poses a crucial question: "What is the relationship between events $c$ and $e$?" (226); he then emphasizes that realism and anti-realism offer radically different responses:

> [E]*xplanatory realism* takes the following position: $C$ is an explanans for $E$ *in virtue of* the fact that $c$ bears to $e$ some determinate objective relation $R$ … What matters to [explanatory] realism is that the truth of an explanation requires an objective relationship between the events involved. By an "objective relation," I have in mind a relation that at least meets the following condition: that it is instantiated does not entail anything about the existence or nonexistence of any intentional psychological state – in

particular, an epistemological or doxastic state – except, of course, when it is instantiated by such states. (226)

By contrast, "*Explanatory irrealism* would be the view that the relation of being an explanans for, as it relates *C* and *E* within our epistemic corpus, is not, and need not be, 'grounded' in any objective relation between events *c* and *e*. It is solely a matter of some 'internal' relationship between items of knowledge" (226–227).

Given the way that I have defined my terms (and given, in particular, the worldly conception of facts), the following characterization of *explanatory realism* is obviously in the spirit of Kim's:

> (ER) *Explanatory realism* is the thesis that for any fact *x* and for any fact *y*, if $P_x$ is the proposition that corresponds to *x* and $P_y$ is the proposition that corresponds *y*, $P_x$ is the explanans for $P_y$ if and only if (i) for some (objective) relation *R*, *x* stands in *R* to *y* and (ii) $P_x$ is the explanans for *P because*[15] *x* stands in *R* to *y*.

And likewise for:

> (ER*) *Explanatory realism* is the thesis that for any fact *x* and for any fact *y*, *x* explains *y* if and only if (i) for some (objective) relation *R*, *x* stands in *R* to *y* and (ii) *x* explains *y* *because x* stands in *R* to *y*.

In order to streamline discussion in what follows, I will assume that the latter (i.e., (ER*)) adequately characterizes the position known as *explanatory realism*.

In assuming that the Explanation Thesis presupposes or entails something close to explanatory realism, I take it as obvious that the Explanation Thesis is a thesis about how various (worldly) facts are (objectively) related to one another; it seems obvious that this thesis is not *merely* about "internal relations" between and among "items of knowledge." Indeed, I take it that the Explanation Thesis is a thesis of *metaphysics* – a thesis about how the *things* of the world *are*. More to the point, I take it as obvious that the Explanation Thesis is a thesis about how God's willing what God wills is *objectively related* to every other contingent fact. As I understand the Explanation Thesis, then, it entails,

> *The (Objective) Relation(s) Thesis*:[16] There is some relation *R* (or there are some relations $R_1 … R_n$) such that for any *x* such that *x* is a contingent fact

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[15] I use "because" where Kim uses "in virtue of the fact that" in order to streamline discussion in what follows.

[16] Hereafter, I will omit the qualifier "(objective)"; in what follows, "relation(s)" should be read as "objective relation(s)."

and $x$ is not identical to God's willing what God wills, God's willing what God wills stands in the $R$ relation to $x$ (or God's willing what God wills stands in the $R_1$ relation or … the $R_n$ relation to $x$).

That said, the thesis of explanatory realism has two clauses, and the second seems to posit an ontologically significant distinction between an explanation, on the one hand, and the relation(s) in virtue of which (or because of which) a particular explanation is "true" or "correct" on the other. Or, to use the language that participants in the relevant discussions often use, explanatory realism seems to presuppose an ontologically significant distinction between explanations and the relations that "back" these explanations, where "Backing relations are the worldly determination relations that explanations track or correspond to" (Bliss and Trogdon).

Kim himself has good reason to emphasize the relevant distinction, given his view that "Explaining is an epistemological activity" (1988: 225). So, too, for Ruben, who contends that "explanation is an epistemological idea" (2012: 194) and that "explanation is not just a relation between facts as constituted by worldly particulars and their properties … explanation is a relation between ordinary facts plus the ways in which those facts are … conceptualized" (157–158). If, however, one denies that explanation is essentially epistemic and allows for the possibility that *the explanation relation itself* is instantiated by (worldly) facts or events, it is not clear why one could not affirm explanatory realism (as opposed to anti-realism) without positing an ontologically significant distinction between explanations and the relations that back them.

As a matter of historical fact, though, most discussions of explanatory realism seem to proceed *as if* such a distinction exists. Or, at least, this distinction seems to be presupposed in those discussions of explanatory realism that I myself have found most helpful in the context of articulating what I take the Explanation Thesis to amount to. Given that this is the case, and given that my argument for theological incompatibilism does not depend on either the existence or the nonexistence of an ontologically significant distinction between explanations and the relations that back them, I will hereafter proceed on the assumption that such a distinction exists. I emphasize, though, that I make this assumption only for rhetorical ease; in the present context, nothing of philosophical significance depends on its truth. With this qualification in mind, I offer that the Explanation Thesis is more perspicuously construed as:

*The Explanation\* Thesis*: There is some relation $R$ (or there are some relations $R_1$ … $R_n$) such that for any $x$ such that $x$ is a contingent fact and $x$ is

not identical to God's willing what God wills, (i) God's willing what God wills stands in the $R$ relation to $x$ (or God's willing what God wills stands in the $R_1$ relation or ... the $R_n$ relation to $x$) and (ii) God's willing what God wills explains $x$ *because* God's willing what God wills stands in the $R$ relation to $x$ (or God's willing what God wills stands in the $R_1$ relation or ... the $R_n$ relation to $x$).[17]

In short, I take it that the Explanation Thesis amounts to the Explanation* Thesis. More to the point: I take it that insofar as the Explanation Thesis is a thesis of metaphysics – a thesis about how the *things* of the world *are* – it is a thesis about the $R$ relation (or about the relations $R_1 \ldots R_n$) to which the Explanation* Thesis refers. In order to consider the metaphysical implications of the Explanation Thesis, then, one must understand the metaphysics of $R$ (or of $R_1 \ldots R_n$).

But exactly what *is* this $R$ relation (or what *are* relations $R_1 \ldots R_n$)? One response seems especially obvious: $R$ is nothing other than the causal relation (and there is no need to posit additional relations $R_1 \ldots R_n$). The tendency to associate explanation with causation seems long-standing and deep, and as anyone familiar with the relevant literature can attest, explanatory realists regularly treat causation as the paradigmatic example of a backing relation. Moreover, White himself seems to suggest that $R$ is the causal relation when he describes theological determinists as affirming that "God has caused the entire world down to the last detail" (85) and that

> [W]hile there may be events undetermined by physical causes there are no earthly events undetermined by any causes ... God is the ultimate agent, the one that makes it all happen, including the other agents and their exercises of agency. What they do, they do because of God's will, and there is no looseness in the causal relations between his will and theirs. (79–80)

Indeed, one might simply *assume* that causation is the objective relation posited by the Explanation* Thesis.

In the present context, though, this assumption ought to be rejected. To be clear: I do not mean to suggest that the assumption is *false*; rather, I contend that in the context of arguing for theological incompatibilism, it is *imprudent* to make it. My reasoning is relatively simple. First, as I have already indicated, I take it that if one's goal is to argue for

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[17] Those who deny the relevant distinction could simply replace (ii) with "$R$ is the *explaining* relation." They would, presumably, then face questions about the nature of this relation. It seems to me that they could help themselves to everything that I say in what follows.

theological incompatibilism, one ought to be as explicit, as clear, and as precise as possible in explaining what the Explanation Thesis amounts to. The current proposal is that the Explanation Thesis amounts to something like:

> *The Causation Thesis*: For any *x* such that *x* is a contingent fact and *x* is not identical to God's willing what God wills, (i) God's willing what God wills stands in the *causal relation* to *x* and (ii) God's willing what God wills explains *x because* God's willing what God wills stands in the causal relation to *x.*

I take it that it is prudent to adopt this proposal only if the Causation Thesis is less opaque than the Explanation Thesis itself. More precisely, I take it that there is no practical advantage in construing the Explanation Thesis as the Causation Thesis unless it is (or, at least, *could be*) relatively clear what the Causation Thesis amounts to. As a matter of fact – and as anyone familiar with the relevant debates can attest – philosophers (and, I assume, theologians) hold wildly divergent views not only about the meaning of "cause" and its cognates but also about the metaphysics of the causal relation itself. With respect to the metaphysics, different participants in the relevant philosophical debates apparently have different "intuitions" about what it is for one thing to cause another and, as such, reach drastically different conclusions about the nature of the causal relation itself. Given what we know about the intensity and the extent of philosophical disagreement about causation, it seems clear that (i) no one should accept the proposal that the Explanation Thesis amounts to the Causation Thesis without demanding clarification about what the Causation Thesis itself amounts to and that (ii) any attempt to provide the relevant clarification will generate tremendous controversy. In order to avoid getting embroiled in debates about the nature and existence of causation itself, then, it seems prudent to reject the proposal in question.

To recap: I claimed that insofar as the Explanation Thesis is a thesis of metaphysics – a thesis about how the *things* of the world *are* – it is a thesis about the *R* relation (or about the relations $R_1 \ldots R_n$) to which the Explanation* Thesis refers; as such, in order to consider the metaphysical implications of the Explanation Thesis, one must consider the metaphysics of *R* (or of $R_1 \ldots R_n$). I then offered a reasonable proposal for what the *R* relation might be (i.e., causation) and presented a pragmatic argument against adopting it.

At this point, one might expect me to (a) offer a new proposal regarding the identity of *R* (or $R_1 \ldots R_n$) and then (b) discuss the metaphysics of this particular relation(s). As it happens, though, I am at a loss as to what

*R* might be if *R* is not causation; relatedly, I am at a loss as to whether the relevant explanations are backed by a single relation (i.e., *R*) or by many different relations (i.e., $R_1 \ldots R_n$). So, instead of attempting to identify *R* (or $R_1 \ldots R_n$), I will take a cue from those explanatory realists who manage to discuss the metaphysics of backing relations without making controversial claims about which relations, in particular, are under discussion. That is, by drawing on recent work by explanatory realists, I will consider – in as general a way as possible – which features are essential to the *R* relation (or the $R_1 \ldots R_n$ relations). In adopting this strategy, I not only avoid making controversial claims about the metaphysics of any backing relation in particular (e.g., causation) but also remain neutral about the number of relations backing the relevant explanations.

In the present context, I am especially interested in those explanatory realists who have spoken in terms of *determination* (or *determinative*) *relations* and *dependence relations*, and who have emphasized that (i) causation is a paradigmatic example of such a relation; (ii) these relations *structure* the facts (or events) of the world, and (iii) in talking about *how* these relations structure the world, *causal language* is appropriate (where "causal language" includes "bringing about," "being responsible for, "making happen," "producing," "generating," and, of course, "because" and "because of").

Kim, for instance, offers that "The causal relation is a paradigmatic case of what I shall call relations of 'dependency' or 'determination' between events and states" (1974: 41) and that "[I]t is these relations, along with temporal and spatial ones, that give a significant structure to the world of events" (1974: 52). In his own discussion of relations of determination and dependency,[18] Ruben explicitly agrees with Kim that "Causation is a particular kind of determinative relation, but it is not the only such determinative relation" (2012: 213) just as he explicitly adopts Kim's slogan that "explanation tracks dependency relations" (213; Kim 1994: 68). Moreover, Ruben, like Kim, emphasizes that the relevant relations are *structural*. He tells us, for instance, that "*Objects or events in the world must really stand in some appropriate 'structural' relation before explanation is possible.* Explanations work, when they do, only in virtue of underlying determinative or dependency structural relations in the world" (2012: 194). And, significantly, Ruben uses causal language in discussing the relevant "structure." According to Ruben, "There is a unifying, if ambiguous, thought that unites all of these cases: explanations work in virtue of something

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[18] See especially Ruben (2012), chapter 7.

determining or being responsible for something" (213); "Explanations work only because things make things happen or make things have some feature" (214); and "we explain something by showing what is responsible for it or what makes it as it is" (214).

Citing both Kim and Ruben, Paul Audi not only contends that *determination relations* back explanations and but also that determination relations *structure* the world in a particular way: "The correctness or incorrectness of an explanation, I assume, is at least in part a matter of its matching up with the structure of the world, structure that is conferred by the determination relations that hold among the world's inhabitants" (2012a: 105). Having clearly stated that causation is one type of determination relation (2012b: 690), he uses causal language in characterizing determination in general: "For one thing to determine another is for the first to bring about or be responsible for the second" (2012b: 691). He helpfully adds that determination is (i) *irreflexive* (691), (ii) *asymmetric* (692), (iii) *singular* ("in the sense that it is a relation between particulars (such as events, objects, or facts")" (692), (iv) *factive* (so that "If one thing determines another, then both in fact obtain or occur") (693), and (v) "nonmonotonic in the sense that it does not follow from $x$'s determining $y$ that $x$ and $z$ together determine $y$ (even for some $z$ assumed compossible with $x$ and $y$)" (693).

Taken together, these passages offer an array of suggestions with respect to the essential features of the $R$ relation (or relations $R_1 \ldots R_n$) posited by the Explanation Thesis. Before I take up these suggestions, though, I should say a few words about terminology. I contend that in the present context, using either "determination" or "determinative" to refer to the relevant relations would create needless confusion. And, unfortunately, "dependency" seems problematic as well, given that many philosophers seem to assume that "dependent" and "counterfactually dependent" are synonyms; as Audi explains, "Determination can occur without [counterfactual] dependence, as illustrated by cases of overdetermination. If each of us simultaneously drops an ice cube into the full glass, then its overflowing does not depend on either of our actions, though each counts as having brought it about" (2012b: 692). In order to avoid confusion, then, it seems best to introduce a term of art to refer to the relevant relations. In what follows, then, I will use the term *metaphysically generative relations* in roughly the same way that Kim, Ruben, and Audi use "dependency relations," "determination relations," and the like.

As far as the logical properties of metaphysically generative relations go, I contend that:

> For any metaphysically generative relation *R*, *R* is (i) *irreflexive\**, (ii) *antisymmetric*, (iii) *singular*, (iv) *factive, and* (v) *nonmonotonic*,

where:

> Relation *R* is *irreflexive\** =$_{df.}$ for any *x* such that *x* is a fact, $-xRx$,[19]
> Relation *R* is *antisymmetric* =$_{df.}$ for any *x* and for any *y* such that such that $xRy$, $-(yRx)$[20],
> and (iii)–(v) are defined as Audi defined them.

But listing the logically properties of metaphysically generative relations is obviously quite different from *defining* them. Moreover, I take it that neither Kim nor Ruben nor Audi meant to be offering a *definition* of the relevant relations when speaking of "structural" relations (which they characterized by way of causal language). Notably, Audi expresses "doubt that the notion of determination can be defined" and suggests that "it is a primitive notion (but one we intuitively understand quite well, particularly in cases of causation)" (2012b: 691). For his part, Ruben admits that he has presented "no general criterion for deciding which metaphysical relations could ground explanations" (215) and he closes the (second edition of) his monograph with these words: "Is it possible to provide an overarching theory of which metaphysical dependence relations ground explanations, including an account of why they and not other relations are able to do this? I do not yet have the answer to this question" (216).

I am inclined to agree with Audi that the relevant notion cannot be (reductively) defined, but I take the relevant notion to be the notion of "because." If "because" is treated as primitive, then, I contend, metaphysically generative relations can be given a definition *of sorts*:

> (G$_{M-Def}$) For any relation *R*, for any *x*, and for any *y* such that $xRy$, *R* is metaphysically generative,=$_{df.}$ (i) *y* exists (at least partially) *because of x* and (ii) it's because of the fact that $xRy$ that *y* exists (at least partially) because of *x*,[21]

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[19] A relation *R* is irreflexive (as opposed to irreflexive\*) if and only if it is impossible for *anything* (in *any* ontological category) to stand in the *R* relation to itself. Given that causation is a paradigmatic metaphysically generative relation, if metaphysically generative relations are irreflexive, it follows that God does not cause Godself. I have introduced the notion of irreflexivity\* in order to avoid this controversial result: since irreflexivity\* is defined in terms of relations between *facts*, and since God Godself is not a fact, there is no contradiction in saying both that God causes Godself and that the causal relation is irreflexive\*.

[20] Some philosophers seem to use "antisymmetric" and "asymmetric" interchangeably, whereas others use "asymmetric" to refer to relations that are both irreflexive and antisymmetric. Lest there be any confusion, I thought it best to speak in terms of antisymmetry rather than asymmetry.

[21] In the present context, I take it that the notion of "partially because of" is as clear as the notion of "wholly because of."

where this definition should be read as implying that metaphysically generative relations have logical properties (i)–(v).

Moreover, once we introduce the notion of metaphysically generative relations, we are in a position to explain what the Explanation Thesis amounts to without specifying precisely which relation(s) is (are) instantiated by God's willing what God wills, on the one hand, and every other contingent fact, on the other. First, given that metaphysically generative relations structure, or *order*, the inhabitants of the world, we should grant that for every metaphysically generative relation $R$, there is a corresponding species of ontological priority$_R$.[22] Then, we can introduce a schema for defining each of these species:

> $x$ is ontologically prior$_R$ to $y$ =$_{df.}$ for some relation $R$ such that $R$ is metaphysically generative, either (a) $xRy$ or (b) $x$ stands in the ancestral of $R$ to $y$.[23,24]

Moreover, by introducing this schema, we are able to define what I call *thorough ontological priority* without incurring any commitments about precisely which relations are metaphysically generative:

> $x$ is thoroughly ontologically prior to $y$ =$_{df}$ (i) for some metaphysically generative relation $R$, $x$ is ontologically prior$_R$ to $y$ and (ii) there is no metaphysically generative relation $R^*$ such that $y$ is ontologically prior$_{R*}$ to $x$.

Once we have the notion of thorough ontological priority, we can formulate the *Thorough Ontological Priority Thesis* according to which:

> *The Thorough Ontological Priority Thesis*: For any $x$ such that $x$ is a contingent fact and $x$ is not identical to the fact that God wills what God wills, the fact that God wills what God wills is thoroughly ontologically prior to $x$.

And this, I contend, is what the Explanation Thesis amounts to. That is, insofar as the Explanation Thesis is a thesis of metaphysics, it is identical to the Thorough Ontological Priority Thesis.

With this, the Explanation Thesis should be clear enough for present purposes – clear enough, that is, to present a plausibly sound argument for theological incompatibilism. It is to this task that I now – finally – turn.

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[22] As Schneider (2011) notes, the term "because" is often used to invoke an *ordering* relation.

[23] This schema is a simplified version of the schema defended by Bennett in her (2017); in the present context, the simpler version will do the work that it needs to do.

[24] The second clause, (b), ensures that all relations of ontological priority are *transitive*. Here is why this is helpful: I take it that the notion of *explanatory priority* familiar from medieval scholastics is roughly equivalent to the notion of ontologically priority as I define it here. If relations of explanatory priority (construed as ontological priority as I define it here) are transitive, then problematic explanatory loops are impossible. Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss this point at length.

### 8.4 An Argument for Theological Incompatibilism

Before presenting a formalization of my argument, I will say a few words on behalf of the principles on which my argument relies.

I begin with what I call the *Principle of the Thoroughly Ontologically Prior*, according to which:

> (TOP) Necessarily, for any fact $x$ such that $p_x$ is the (true) proposition that corresponds to $x$, for any agent $S$, and for any time $t$ such that $S$ exists at $t$, if $x$ is thoroughly ontologically prior to $S$'s existing at $t$, then it is not up to $S$ at $t$ whether $x$ is a fact.

Very loosely stated, the basic idea of the Principle of the Thoroughly Ontologically Prior is that if $S$ exists at $t$ because of $x$ but $x$ does not exist because of $S$ at $t$, then it's not up to $S$ at $t$ whether $x$ exists. I confess that I sometimes think the truth of this principle is so obvious that I ought not waste words defending it. At other times, though, I am convinced not only that the principle must be defended, but that a proper defense would be both lengthy and elaborate. At this particular moment, I am opting to split the difference by offering an abbreviated defense. First, I assert without argument that:

> Given what the expression "It is up to _ whether _" *means*, to say that it is up to $S$ at $t$ whether $p_x$ is at the very least, to (implicitly) say that if $p_x$ were true, $p_x$ would be true *because of S*.[25]

Second, I assert without argument that metaphysics follows language so that:

> Given *what it is* for it to be up to $S$ at $t$ whether $p_x$, it is necessarily true that it is up to $S$ at $t$ whether $p_x$ only if if $p_x$ were true, $p_x$ would be true *because of S*.[26]

Third, I go a step further and suggest that, as a matter of fact:

> Given *what it is* for it to be up to $S$ at $t$ whether $p_x$, it is necessarily true that it is up to $S$ at $t$ whether $p_x$ only if if $p_x$ were true and $x$ were the fact to which $p_x$ would correspond, then it would be the case that $SRx$ for some relation $R$ such that $R$ is metaphysically generative.

And now I can only hope that I have motivated the suggestion that there is a necessary connection between what is up to the agent and ontological

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[25] Equivalently: Given what the expression "It is up to _ whether _" *means*, to say that it is up to $S$ at $t$ whether $p_x$ is, at the very least, to (implicitly) say that if $p_x$ were true and if $x$ were the fact to which $p_x$ would correspond, then $x$ would exist (be a fact) *because of S*.

[26] Equivalently: Given *what it is* for it to be up to $S$ at $t$ whether $p_x$, it is necessarily true that it is up to $S$ at $t$ whether $p_x$ only if if $p_x$ were true and $x$ were the fact to which $p_x$ would correspond, then $x$ would exist (be a fact) *because of S*.

priority and that, in light of this connection, the Principle of the Fixity of the Thoroughly Ontologically Prior must be true.

From the Principle of the Fixity of the Thoroughly Ontologically Prior and the Explanation Thesis, it follows that:

> (GW): For any created agent $S$ and any time $t$, it is not up to $S$ at $t$ whether God wills what God wills.

After all, for any created agent $S$ and any time $t$, the fact that $S$ exists at $t$ is contingent: no created agent exists necessarily (and, hence, no created agent exists necessarily at any particular time). Since the Explanation Thesis entails that God's willing what God wills is thoroughly ontologically prior to every other contingent fact, the Explanation Thesis obviously entails that for any created agent $S$ and any time $t$, God's willing what God wills is thoroughly ontologically prior to $S$'s existing at $t$ (and, indeed, to $S$'s existing at all). It follows from the conjunction of the Explanation Thesis and the Principle of the Fixity of the Thoroughly Ontologically Prior, then, that (GW) is true.

My argument for theological incompatibilism also relies on what I call the *Principle of the Fixity of the (Broadly Logically) Necessary*, according to which,

> ($FN_{BL}$) Necessarily, for any true proposition $p$, for any created agent $S$, and for any time $t$, if $p$ is (broadly logically) necessarily true, then it is not up to $S$ at $t$ whether $p$ (is true).

I take it that this principle is a variation on van Inwagen's "rule $\alpha$" as presented in, for example, van Inwagen (1983: 94). The basic idea is this: if a proposition $p$ is (broadly logically) necessarily true, it is not and never has been up to anyone whether $p$ (is true). Rule $\alpha$ is widely regarded as valid given that it is, after all, difficult to see how it could be up to anyone whether a necessarily true proposition is, in fact, true. Even if someone were inclined to object to $\alpha$ by appealing to God's omnipotence, that objection obviously would not undermine ($FN_{BL}$), which is (merely) a thesis about created agents. As such, ($FN_{BL}$) seems obviously, undeniably true.

With this, we arrive at the final principle on which my argument relies:

> (Transfer) Necessarily, for any fact $x$ such that $p_x$ is the (true) proposition that corresponds to $x$, for any fact $y$ such that $p_y$ is the (true) proposition that corresponds to $y$, for any agent $S$, and for any time $t$, if (i) it is not up to $S$ at $t$ whether $p_x$ (is true), (ii) $x$ is thoroughly ontologically prior to $y$, and (iii) $\square (p_x \rightarrow p_y)$, then it is not up to $S$ at $t$ whether $p_y$ (is true).

Transfer resembles van Inwagen's $\beta$ insofar as it purports to "transfer" its not being up to $S$ at $t$ whether $p_x$ to its not being up to $S$ at $t$ whether $p_y$ by way of a conditional "connecting" $p_x$ and $p_y$. However, it is importantly

distinct from β insofar as it invokes the notion of thorough ontological priority. Unfortunately, a thorough discussion of Transfer, β, and other β-like principles is beyond the scope of this essay. I will simply note that philosophers seem to disagree wildly about such principles: some of us find them obviously true (or find β obviously valid) while others find no compelling reason to grant their truth (or validity). And, of course, plenty of us fall between these two extremes. Given the extent of the disagreement over β-like principles, Transfer seems to be the weak link in my argument for theological incompatibilism.

With respect to the argument itself, I begin with a few stipulations, lest there be any confusion:

> "$p_x$" designates some arbitrary true proposition $p_x$;
> "$G$" designates God's willing what God wills;
> "$P_G$" designates the proposition that corresponds to $G$;
> "$S$" designates some arbitrary created agent $S$; and
> "$t$" designates some arbitrary time $t$.

From here, the argument may be formalized as:

1. $P_G$, $p_x$, Theological Determinism (Assumptions)
2. $p_x$ is either necessarily true or contingently true. (Trivial truth)
3. If $p_x$ is necessarily true, it is not up to $S$ at $t$ whether $p_x$. (FN$_{BL}$)
4. $p_x$ is contingently true. (Assumption)
5. $\Box(P_G \rightarrow p_x)$. (1, 4, Necessitation Thesis)
6. $P_G$ and it is not up to $S$ at $t$ whether $P_G$. (1, 5, (GW))
7. $G$ is thoroughly ontologically prior to $x$. (1, 4, Explanation Thesis)
8. $N_{s,t} p_x$. (5, 6, 7, Transfer)

Since $S$ is an *arbitrary* created agent, $t$ is an *arbitrary* time, and $p_x$ is an *arbitrary* true proposition, if the preceding line of reasoning is sound, it follows from the truth of theological determinism that it is not up to *any* created agent at *any* time whether *any* true proposition is true (whether that proposition is true necessarily or contingently). Moreover, a similar line of reasoning could be used to establish that *for any possible world W* such that theological determinism is true at *W*, for any created agent *S* such that *S* exists at *W*, for any time *t* such that *t* exists (or occurs, or obtains) at *W*, and for any proposition *p*, it is not up to *S* at *t* whether *p*.

At this point, I have offered what I take to be a plausibly sound argument for theological incompatibilism. As I have already suggested, though, I do not assume that it is conclusive: to the extent that the argument relies on the β-like Transfer principle, it is vulnerable to objection.