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God, evil, and occasionalism

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Abstract: **In a recent paper, Alvin Plantinga defends occasionalism against an important moral objection: if God is the sole direct cause of all the suffering that results from immoral human choices, this causal role is difficult to reconcile with God's perfect goodness. Plantinga argues that this problem is no worse for occasionalism than for any of the competing views of divine causality; in particular, there is no morally relevant difference between God directly causing suffering and God indirectly causing it. First, we examine Plantinga's moral parity argument in detail and offer a critical evaluation of it. Then we provide a positive argument, based on the doctrine of doing and allowing, to show why there is a morally relevant difference between God's direct and indirect causation of suffering.**

In 'Law, cause, and occasionalism', Alvin Plantinga examines 'the most promising ways to think of laws of nature from a Christian perspective' (Plantinga (2016), 126), focusing in particular on the question of how such laws relate to God. He argues for a version of occasionalism, according to which the laws are either divine decrees or counterfactuals of divine freedom, because God is the only cause of law-governed events (*ibid.*, 127, 133, 135–136).[1] As part of his case, Plantinga considers the worry that occasionalism makes God the cause of all sorts of horrors. He responds that God's responsibility for suffering is no more problematic on occasionalism than on any of the relevant competing views. Because there is moral parity between all the main theistic accounts of causation, Plantinga argues, God's causal involvement in suffering is not a mark against occasionalism.

In this article, we take issue with Plantinga's moral parity argument. After briefly explaining the occasionalist view that Plantinga defends and the broad outlines of his argument for it, we examine his argument for moral parity in detail, explaining

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why we do not find it convincing. We then present a positive argument for why occasionalism is worse off than its competitors with respect to God's causal responsibility for suffering, and conclude by replying to some objections.

Plantinga's view and his overall argument for it

In the history of Western Christian theology, there are three main positions on the nature of God's causal activity in the world[2] and its relation to the causal activity of creatures or 'secondary causes'.[3] The most popular view, and the one affirmed by classical theism, is *concurrentism*, which recognizes both divine and creaturely causation. On this picture, God as creator causes everything in creation, including the effects of created causes. So, for example, when I decide to raise my arm, the rising of my arm is caused *both* by me (a secondary cause acting on a pre-existing patient) and by God (the primary cause making the rising exist from nothing and supplying me with my power to cause it). God's causal involvement goes beyond merely sustaining secondary causes in being. Both God and secondary agents are *immediate* causes of every creature's effect, albeit in different ways.[4]

According to the second view of divine causation, *mere conservationism*, God is not the immediate cause of everything in creation. With respect to the effects of creatures, God plays a more remote and indirect role. God merely conserves secondary causes and their causal powers in being at every moment of their existence; the creatures themselves cause their natural effects without further divine action. On this view, my decision to raise my arm causes my arm to go up. God's only role is to keep me in existence long enough for my decision to exercise its natural causal power.

The third position, *occasionalism*, affirms (like concurrentism) the universality of immediate divine causation, but denies the reality of creaturely causation. As Nicolas Malebranche famously puts it: 'There is only one true cause because there is only one true God; all natural causes are not true causes but only occasional causes' (Malebranche (1997), 448), occasions on which God has chosen to exercise God's causality in a consistent, orderly manner.[5] Plantinga advances a version of occasionalism.

Plantinga distinguishes between 'strong' and 'weak' versions of occasionalism. According to *strong occasionalism*, 'all causation is divine causation' (Plantinga (2016), 138): God alone causes *absolutely every* substance and event in the world, including mental events such as thoughts, volitions, undertakings, and decisions. On this view, when I choose to raise my hand, it is God (not me) who causes my hand to go up. Furthermore, it is God (not me) who causes my *decision* to raise my hand.

Plantinga rejects strong occasionalism as incompatible with human agency, freedom, and moral responsibility. This view robs human beings of their status as agents: if God causes every one of our thoughts, volitions, decisions, and actions, then we cannot be said to exercise any meaningful sense of agency; the

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only real agent is God.[6] Thus, human beings would not be proper subjects of moral evaluation. It would be inappropriate to praise or blame, reward or punish, command or commend anyone in any genuine sense.

More importantly, Plantinga rejects strong occasionalism as inconsistent with God's perfect goodness. If God alone is the cause of absolutely everything that happens, including every human choice and action, then God will be the cause of every evil and the author of sin. This consequence, Plantinga contends, is not compatible with God's perfectly good and loving nature (*ibid.*, 139–40).

Plantinga endorses *weak occasionalism*, according to which God alone causes everything in the world *except for* the internal mental events (thoughts, volitions, undertakings, decisions, etc.) for which free agents are responsible. On weak occasionalism, Plantinga clarifies,

> the only creaturely causation is of the sort involved in my causing my decisions, volitions, and undertakings (if indeed that relation is one of causation). According to weak occasionalism, I am the cause, in that peculiar sense, of my decisions and undertakings, but when I will to do something – raise my hand, for example – it is God who causes my hand to rise. (*ibid.*, 141)

On weak occasionalism (unlike strong), free creatures sometimes do real causal work by making decisions.[7] But what we ordinarily call the 'effects' of non-free creatures are in reality the effects of God alone.

Because both concurrentism and mere conservationism consider all secondary causes to be true causes, Plantinga lumps them together under the label 'secondary causalism', arguing that both are theoretically inferior to weak occasionalism.[8] Plantinga makes his argument by asking, in effect, two questions about secondary causalism and weak occasionalism, respectively. First, how clear or understandable is the view? Second, what are its theological implications? He suggests that weak occasionalism is much clearer (or less obscure) than secondary causalism. It thus has a comparative advantage.

However, on the surface weak occasionalism appears to have the same unsavoury moral implication as strong occasionalism:

> [On weak occasionalism] God causes whatever evil effects in the world are associated with my decisions and volitions. I decided to rob a bank; in the course of the robbery I shot someone. God does not cause me to decide to rob the bank or to shoot the guard, but he does cause all of the motions of my limbs, including my shooting the guard, and he also causes the guard's injury or death. Does this not make God the cause of evil? (*ibid.*)

This is the moral objection to occasionalism to which Plantinga responds. If he can fully neutralize this objection, then occasionalism will be left with its initial comparative advantage over secondary causalism.

In order to understand this objection and Plantinga's response to it, it is important to distinguish between two kinds of evil. One is *moral evil* or *sin*, which applies to voluntary actions and states of will. Another is *suffering*: the bad effects of immoral actions on human beings and other sentient creatures. The moral objection to occasionalism targets the evil of suffering, or what Plantinga calls 'the bad'

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(*ibid.*, 142). Weak occasionalists like Plantinga hold that human beings are the cause of sin,[9] but they claim that God *alone* is an immediate cause of suffering. Although I am the cause of my thoughts, volitions, and decisions, God is the *only* cause of *all* of the bad effects associated with my decisions, all of the non-mental events that are necessary in order for evil human volitions to be efficacious. And this raises a serious worry that God is too intimately involved in the bad effects of human choices. On occasionalism, God's causal responsibility for suffering seems to make God morally responsible for suffering in a way that is problematic for God's perfect goodness.[10]

An example will help bring this unsettling picture into focus. Suppose I decide to murder Jones by stabbing him in the chest. According to occasionalism, it is true that God does not cause me to will to murder Jones and that I alone am responsible for my decision to do so. But after I have formed this volition, I myself am powerless to perform the action of stabbing Jones. What must happen is that, subsequent to my decision, God causes the associated neurological events, causes my body to move toward Jones and my arm to rise, moves my arm and the knife I am holding in a downward stabbing motion, causes a gaping wound in Jones's chest, produces all the excruciating pain that Jones experiences, causes Jones's internal organs to be fatally damaged, and, finally, produces all the biological effects sufficient for his death. A similar causal story can be told for every example of human suffering.

While it remains the case that God does not cause me to will to murder Jones, and that I am morally responsible for Jones's death, this account still seems to make God too intimately involved in suffering. It is one thing to argue that God has a morally sufficient reason for *permitting* horrible suffering; it is another thing to attempt to justify God's *directly and unilaterally causing* it. This is the moral difficulty facing occasionalism, and surely it has some intuitive force. As Plantinga puts it: 'God is not the cause of evil, but he is the cause of the bad, and is that not bad enough?' (*ibid.*).[11]

Plantinga defends occasionalism against this objection by offering a moral parity argument. He maintains, in effect, that while 'the bad' may pose a problem for occasionalism, it poses *just as serious a problem* for secondary causalism. Here is the conclusion of his argument:

> On occasionalism, God directly causes the events subsequent to my undertaking, including the stabbing; on secondary causalism, God indirectly causes these events, including the stabbing . . . As I have argued, however, it is hard to see how God is more responsible for causing the bad if he causes it directly than if he causes it indirectly. It is hard to see how it could be that his causing the bad *directly* is incompatible with his being wholly good, while his causing the bad *indirectly* is not. Still, I have to admit that there remains a sort of intuitive pull toward the thought that God's directly causing the bad involves him more intimately with the bad than does his indirectly causing it. (*ibid.*, 143)

With his last line, Plantinga suggests that he himself is less than totally convinced by his moral parity argument. Nevertheless, he finds the argument compelling

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enough to tilt the scales in favour of occasionalism. In light of the parity argument, the moral and theological implications of occasionalism are at most only *slightly* more problematic than those of secondary causalism; therefore the moral problem for occasionalism is relatively small. But, Plantinga insists, 'we have no clear conception of causation as accomplished by creatures' (*ibid.*), while we do understand what it means for God to cause something. With respect to clarity, then, occasionalism has a relatively *large* advantage over secondary causalism. The relative pros of occasionalism outweigh its cons, Plantinga judges.

In what follows, we will examine Plantinga's moral parity argument in more detail and show why we do not find it convincing. To be clear, we are not here attempting to take issue with his overall argument for occasionalism. We have nothing to say about his claims regarding clarity, and it could be that the clarity problem for secondary causalism is *so great* that it would outweigh even a *massive* moral problem for occasionalism. Rather, our goal is to show that Plantinga's moral parity argument fails, that the moral problem facing occasionalism is worse than Plantinga realizes, and that at least one competing view of divine causality enjoys a significant moral advantage over occasionalism with respect to God's causal responsibility for suffering.

Plantinga's moral parity argument and its problems

Plantinga's argument for moral parity rests on the thought that there is no morally relevant difference between direct and indirect divine causation of suffering (or 'the bad'). But what exactly does Plantinga mean by 'direct' and 'indirect' causation? Pressing these questions will reveal that Plantinga's argument is guilty of the fallacy of equivocation.

Plantinga unfolds his argument in two stages over four paragraphs. First, he compares what secondary causalism and occasionalism imply about a scenario involving only God and material objects. Then (in the next three paragraphs) he continues the comparison by considering a scenario that adds free intelligent creatures into the mix. It is at the first, simpler stage that Plantinga comes closest to explicitly defining 'direct' and 'indirect' causation, so it is important to look carefully at what he says there.

Concerning 'the [secondary causalist] case of material objects acting as they do by virtue of their being caused to cause whatever they do', Plantinga says the following:

> Take any particular event E: it could be that there is an unbroken chain of causality ending in E and going all the way back to creation. If so, God's relation to E would be as follows: God created the initial set of these objects, with those causal powers, sustained them and their successors in existence, *knowing that E would eventually occur* as a result of his creation and sustenance. God indirectly causes E, *i.e., sets in motion and sustains a train of events that issues in E.* Suppose E is a bad event: on occasionalism, God *directly* causes E, but in the current scenario, he does so *indirectly*. Is there any reason to think that in the first case God bears more responsibility for the bad than in the second case? I do not think so. (*ibid.*, 142 (our emphasis))

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On this 'indirect causation' (secondary causalist) scenario, Plantinga judges, God is no less responsible for the badness of E than on an occasionalist picture.[12]

The second italicized line above suggests that for Plantinga, to 'indirectly cause' some event E is to set in motion and sustain a train of events (in the limiting case, a single event) that issues in E; God can originate a causal chain in this sense by creating and sustaining substances imbued with certain definite causal powers. 'Direct' causation seems to involve the same kind of origination, but without intermediaries between the initial cause and ultimate effect. Notice that being a cause in this sense, whether direct or indirect, involves being the truthmaker for an indicative sentence about what is actually the case. In Plantinga's example, God makes it true to say that a causal chain terminating in E exists.

The first italicized line above drives the plausibility of Plantinga's judgement about the case he discusses. On the face of it, if God knows that E will result from God's actions, then God seems equally responsible for E whether God's actions involve just making E, or first creating some other events that generate E. This point about knowledge will be important below.

Having set his readers' understanding of direct and indirect causation and their relation to knowledge and responsibility, Plantinga turns next to the more complex case involving not only God and material objects, but also free intelligent agents. Concerning this case, he says:

> [S]uppose that a created personal agent freely causes some event in the causal ancestry of E – for example, suppose I undertake to stab someone . . .
>
> On both occasionalism and secondary causalism, God permits me to undertake something bad. On the occasionalist reading, God then directly causes the events that are posterior to my undertaking, and that culminate in the stabbing; on the secondary causalism reading, my willing causes the events in my brain, and *God establishes the causal relations that hold between the brain event and the subsequent members of the chain culminating in the stabbing, thereby indirectly causing those events*, including the stabbing . . .
>
> But this difference does not seem relevant to the question whether God causes the bad in a way incompatible with his being wholly good. On occasionalism, God directly causes . . . the stabbing; on secondary causalism, God indirectly causes . . . the stabbing. *As I have argued*, however, it is hard to see how God is more responsible for causing the bad if he causes it directly than if he causes it indirectly. (*ibid.*, 142–143 (our emphasis))

Perceptive readers will note that here Plantinga does not say anything explicit about God's knowledge, as he did in the first case.

While that will turn out to be important, for now it is more important to notice something else: at the opening of the last quoted sentence, Plantinga refers back to a prior argument for the moral equivalence of direct and indirect causation. No such argument is to be found anywhere up to this point in the three paragraphs dealing with the case of free agents.[13] Therefore, in the opening of the last quoted sentence, Plantinga must be referring back to the reasoning he gave in the first case (about material objects).

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Plantinga's full argument, then, draws on his discussions of *both* cases. He establishes in the first (material object) case the thesis that

> (NRD) There is no morally relevant difference between directly and indirectly causing the bad.[14]

Then, in the second (free agent) case he shows that

> (GIC) On secondary causalism, God is indirectly causing the bad.

Together, NRD and GIC entail that on secondary causalism, God's responsibility for the bad is no more or less problematic for God's perfect goodness than it would be on occasionalism (where God directly causes the bad).

However, this argument works only if the meaning of 'indirectly causing' remains fixed across both cases, and hence in both NRD and GIC. But this meaning does not remain fixed: it changes when Plantinga discusses the second case. In the first case, 'indirectly causing' something involved setting in motion or originating a chain of causes. But in the second case, God is not the original source of the relevant causal chain; instead, a creature sets the chain in motion. It is the free creature, and not God, who makes it true that a certain chain, terminating in the stabbing, actually exists. So in the second case, God is thus not an 'indirect cause' in the sense Plantinga originally articulated (in discussing the first case). But in what sense, then, *is* God an indirect cause?

Plantinga thinks that God is still implicated in the bad because God '*establishes the causal relations* that hold between the brain event and the subsequent members of the chain culminating in the stabbing' (our emphasis). What does it mean to 'establish causal relations' between two created things A and B? Presumably, it means to make it true that A-type things cause B-type things. It is to set up the laws of nature in a certain way, or to imbue creatures with certain definite causal powers (e.g. to give A the power to cause B). God is responsible for the laws that connect the unfortunate brain event to the stabbing; had God set up the laws differently, that brain event might not have led to such a bad result.

While this seems to be a legitimate sense in which God still bears some kind of responsibility for the bad, it remains a very different sense from the first one Plantinga articulated in arguing for NRD. Being an 'indirect cause' in this new sense involves being the truthmaker for subjunctive conditional claims, not indicative ones. When God establishes that As cause Bs, God makes it true that *if an A were to exist, a B would follow*. God does not thereby establish the actual existence of anything or set anything in motion.

Because the key term 'indirectly causes' does not mean the same thing in NRD as it does in GIC, these two claims are unrelated and do not entail Plantinga's conclusion. If the notion of indirect causation has changed, then it is no longer safe to assume that in the second case (as in the first one), there is no morally relevant difference between direct and indirect causation. NRD and GIC only appear to fit together because the same word is used. In other words, Plantinga's argument is guilty of an equivocation.

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To repair his argument, Plantinga needs to establish more clearly the meaning of 'indirectly causes' as he is using it in the second case, and he needs to offer some considerations to motivate the thought that this new type of indirect causation is just as morally problematic as direct causation. Let us consider, then, what Plantinga can most charitably be understood as meaning by 'indirect causation' in the second case.

Suppose that indirect causation involves the following: God (1) creates and conserves everything that exists; and (2) establishes the laws of nature and the normal patterns of cause and effect. In this way God indirectly causes everything that happens as a result of these causal regularities. God has set up the whole system so that secondary causes operate with their own causal powers in orderly, predictable ways. For example, God has set up the laws in such a way that when a normally functioning adult human chooses to initiate a stabbing (in the right sort of circumstances), various bad events will follow. It is in virtue of the fact that God conserves in being creatures and their causal powers, originally decided which natural laws will govern the world, and now maintains the normal causal framework, that God is said to be the indirect cause of every effect produced by creatures. With this definition of indirect causation in mind, now we will formulate several versions of Plantinga's moral parity argument to see if any of them are convincing.

One way to interpret Plantinga's argument is that all views of divine causality face a similar problem involving *counterfactual* causation. If we understand causation as counterfactual dependence, then every theistic account faces a problem of evil in the sense that if God had not created and conserved agents and all of their effects (or had not created anything at all), then suffering never would have occurred. It is true that this kind of difficulty afflicts all theistic views equally: all of them have to say that God is counterfactually responsible for suffering. But we do not think this is how we should interpret Plantinga's argument. The issue in question is not counterfactual dependence but *efficient causation*: God's production of the bad in being.[15] It is this kind of causal role for God that occasionalism affirms, and this is the claim that is targeted by the moral objection. Even though all theists will have to give some defence of God's counterfactual relation to bad events in the world, the more threatening problem that we are focusing on is God's efficient causal contribution to suffering, which is a stronger, more intimate kind of involvement than counterfactual dependence.[16] Hence, establishing the moral parity of occasionalism and secondary causalism with respect to God's counterfactual causation is beside the point and does nothing to show their moral equivalence with respect to the central issue in question.

Another way to formulate Plantinga's argument, which we think reflects his actual line of reasoning and is the most promising, is in terms of God's knowledge. Given the standard and widely held theistic assumption that God knows what free agents will choose to do,[17] both occasionalism and secondary causalism affirm that God knows what suffering will occur as a result of immoral human choices. And, according to this version of the argument, for the purposes of morally

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evaluating God's causal involvement in suffering, God's knowledge plays a decisive role. If God – presumably with good reason – permits me to freely choose to kill Jones, and God knows about all of the suffering that will result from my choice, then it does not really matter how this suffering is brought about; the fact that God's knowledge is identical on the occasionalist and secondary causalist pictures is enough to show that these views are on a moral par. NRD rests on the thought that the divine *epistemological* equivalence of the direct causation and indirect causation models implies their *moral* equivalence as well.[18] This version of the moral parity argument can be formulated as follows:

(1) The Principle of Known Consequences (KC): If you act (or refrain from acting) knowing in advance that a certain consequence will result from your action (or inaction), then you are responsible for that consequence.

(2) Whether directly or indirectly causing the bad, God knows in advance that the bad will result from God's action.
So God is responsible for the bad whether God causes it directly or indirectly.

There are two problems with this version of the argument. First, it assumes a crucial implicit premise, namely that as long as God's knowledge of suffering is the same on both views, then it makes no moral difference what kind of causal contribution God makes to the production of suffering. In other words, God's knowledge of suffering justifies any kind of causal involvement in that suffering. More precisely, the implicit premise might be something like this: God is responsible for a situation S if and only if S results from God's activity (or inactivity) X, and when engaging in X, God knew that S would result. This principle implies that any two situations with the same divine knowledge and the same result will yield the same divine responsibility, whether the connection between X and S is direct or indirect. It does not matter whether God's activity is a direct causing of S or a causing of something else that will in turn cause S. The problem is that this implicit premise is precisely what needs to be proved in order to show that there is moral parity between occasionalism and secondary causalism, since God's role as an efficient cause of suffering is an important point of difference between them and is the focus of the moral objection.[19]

Second, this version of the argument creates an insuperable dilemma for Plantinga's position. On the one hand, if we assume a Molinist account of divine foreknowledge (as Plantinga does), then (2) is true but (1) generates an internal inconsistency in Plantinga's position. On the other hand, if we assume a non-Molinist account of foreknowledge, then (2) is false. Either way, the argument is unsound.

First, let us assume that Molinism is true, since this is Plantinga's own view. The key premise is (1) – KC – the idea that if one knows in advance what consequences will result from one's action or inaction, then one is responsible for those

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consequences. On the basis of this assumption, Plantinga argues that there is no special moral problem for weak occasionalism. However, a strong occasionalist can adopt the same argument to show that there is no special moral problem for strong occasionalism, either.

Assuming the truth of Molinism, God's knowledge is identical on strong occasionalism, weak occasionalism, and secondary causalism, and therefore all three views are on a moral par. Molinists, including Plantinga, hold that God knows what any possible free creature would choose in whatever situation it might be placed. This means that God has providential foreknowledge of moral evil, the evil volitions that human beings will form if created. If a certain creature would choose to do evil in situation S, and God creates the creature in S, then KC implies that God is responsible for the creature's evil volition in exactly the same way that God is responsible for the bad in Plantinga's stabbing scenario.

As we have seen, Plantinga rejects strong occasionalism because it makes God the direct cause of moral evil or sin, and he thinks that this is incompatible with God's perfect goodness. He then argues that weak occasionalism is not morally problematic because it holds that God foreknows but does not directly cause evil human volitions. But if the argument in the previous paragraph – based on Plantinga's assumptions about knowledge and responsibility (i.e. KC) – is correct, then strong and weak occasionalism are in the same boat.

The same line of reasoning that Plantinga uses to defend the weak occasionalist's claim that God directly causes suffering without moral compromise can be used to justify the strong occasionalist's claim that God directly causes evil human volitions without moral compromise. Or, conversely, the same reasons that Plantinga gives for thinking that God's direct production of moral evil is incompatible with God's perfect goodness will also show that God's direct production of suffering is incompatible with God's perfect goodness. Hence, the knowledge-based version of the moral parity argument creates a tension within Plantinga's position that can be overcome only by either embracing strong occasionalism – a view that most theists, including Plantinga, find totally unacceptable – or by admitting that the moral objection to weak occasionalism is sound. So if Molinism is true, then this version of the moral parity argument fails.

If we assume that Molinism is false, then we run into the other horn of the dilemma. In order for (2) to be true, it must be the case that on both the direct causation model (occasionalism) and the indirect causation model (secondary causalism), God knows in advance what suffering will result from God's action. But given a non-Molinist account of divine foreknowledge, on the indirect causation model God does not possess this knowledge. God does not know that if I were created (in certain circumstances) I would choose to stab my victim, and so God could not know – prior to creating me – that doing so would result in the victim's suffering and death.[20] Therefore, premise 2 of the moral parity argument is false.

To this, Plantinga could well object as follows. On a secondary causalist, non-Molinist picture, *once I have formed the volition* to stab Jones and caused the

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relevant brain event, God *does know* that sustaining the normal causal laws from that point on will result in my stabbing Jones, so God does know about the suffering in advance. However, it seems plausible that (miracles aside, which involve special divine revelatory motives) God's decision about what laws of nature to sustain is a 'once and for all' initial decision about creation. God asks, 'What kind of laws will govern my world in every case of such-and-such brain events and stabbing events (miracles aside)?' The nature of this question, together with divine self-consistency, seems to force that God hold to the established order after I have willed to stab Jones. But on a non-Molinist view, God's initial-creation decision does not involve knowledge of all the specific consequences of the causal laws. God knows that the world is such that certain brain events would lead to stabbings, but God does not know in advance of creating me that I would choose to cause that certain brain event. So, on a non-Molinist view, on the indirect causation model God does not know in advance about the suffering that will result from God's action because God's action is simply the creating and sustaining of me and the laws of nature; and God does not know what I would choose and what suffering would result from my choice. The most God can know is that suffering *might* result from God's action *if* creatures choose in certain ways. By contrast, on a non-Molinist *direct* causation model, God does know in advance about the suffering that will result from God's action because God's action *just is* the direct causation of suffering. Since God's knowledge is not the same according to secondary causalism and occasionalism, (2) is false.

To sum up, the knowledge-based formulation of the moral parity argument faces a crippling dilemma. If Molinism is true, then Plantinga should hold that (1) is false on pain of inconsistency. If Molinism is false, then (2) is false. Either way, the argument does not succeed.

In this section we have argued that Plantinga's moral parity argument fails. We have raised a concern that Plantinga is unclear about the meaning of indirect causation and that this leads to a fallacy of equivocation. We have also tried to reconstruct his argument in the most faithful and compelling way we can, but in the end we are unable to come up with any persuasive argument for the claim that there is no morally relevant difference between occasionalism and secondary causalism. In other words, Plantinga does not provide a good reason to think that NRD is true. In the next section, we will present a positive argument for the claim that there *is* a significant moral difference between occasionalism and secondary causalism, i.e. a reason to think that NRD is false.

Occasionalism, mere conservationism, and the doctrine of doing and allowing

Although earlier in his paper Plantinga recognizes the distinction between two different varieties of secondary causalism (mere conservationism and

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concurrentism),[21] this distinction is absent from his discussion of the moral objection and the moral parity argument. He lumps these two doctrines together under the heading of 'secondary causalism'. Since Plantinga's indirect causation model corresponds most closely to mere conservationism,[22] we will focus on this view when arguing against Plantinga's claim that occasionalism and secondary causalism are on a moral par. We leave aside concurrentism because establishing that there is a morally relevant difference between occasionalism and mere conservationism is all that is needed to show that NRD is false.

Our argument for the moral *dis*parity of occasionalism and mere conservationism is based on the familiar doing versus allowing distinction, which we employ to argue that there is a significant difference between these two views when it comes to God's causal responsibility for suffering. The Doctrine of Doing and Allowing (DDA)[23] centres on the moral difference between acts and omissions. A simple, rough formulation of the doctrine can be put in terms of action and inaction: with respect to the moral evaluation of harm, it matters whether the harm comes from action or from inaction. For example, it seems plausible to say that there is a morally relevant difference between killing a terminally ill patient who wishes to die versus letting such a patient die from natural causes, all other things being equal. As Warren Quinn puts it, 'the DDA discriminates between two kinds of agency in which harm comes to somebody' (Quinn (1989), 291). It discriminates in favour of negative agency (usually what an agent does not do), and against positive agency (usually what an agent does).[24] As Quinn points out, the DDA, if true, should be compatible with any plausible analysis of causation and so is not tied to one conception of causation in particular. Various theoretical accounts have been offered to clarify and explain the acts/omissions distinction, and various arguments have been offered in its favour, but we will not examine these specific attempts here.[25] The general idea of the DDA is clear enough for our purposes, and the important point is that its central claim – that there is a morally relevant, intrinsic difference between doing and allowing evil – is both intuitive in its own right and consonant with Christian ethics.

The DDA has an important implication for Plantinga's account. On occasionalism, since God is the sole direct cause of all the suffering in the world, it is impossible to say that God *allows* any of these events to occur; instead, God is always *doing* the bad.[26] The occasionalist is unable to claim that God truly *permits* suffering for morally sufficient reasons, which is the standard theistic response to the argument from evil. Instead, God immediately *produces* suffering, a position that is much harder to reconcile with God's perfect goodness. Michael Murray and Michael Rea explain the problem as follows:

> [A]ll varieties of theism must confront the problem of evil. But most theists are insistent . . . that God does not cause evil but rather merely (justifiably) permits it. Seeing God as merely permitting evil provides a moral buffer that would be unavailable if God were the full and direct cause of evil as is the case on occasionalism. (Murray & Rea (2008), 25–26)

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On mere conservationism, we can say that God truly permits suffering because God does not directly cause it, but rather allows us to cause it. This opens up the possibility that God has a morally sufficient reason to allow these events to occur. But if God directly produces suffering, as on occasionalism, then it seems unavoidable to conclude that God is the 'author of evil', a claim that virtually all theists, Plantinga included, want to deny.[27] In light of this difference between mere conservationism and occasionalism, we maintain that the two views are not on a moral par. God's indirect causation *qua* permission of suffering is much easier to reconcile with divine goodness than is God's unilateral, direct production of suffering. Due to this important disparity, it is plausible to conclude that NRD is false.

Objections to the doing-allowing argument

There are two options for responding to our argument. The first is to reject the DDA. This would be a difficult task for any philosopher because the DDA is plausible in its own right and denying it can lead to very counterintuitive implications.[28] But rejecting the DDA would be especially difficult for any Christian philosopher such as Plantinga. Because the DDA is so deeply entrenched in the Christian moral and theological tradition (especially in discussions about evil), rejecting it involves a degree of revisionism that should itself be considered a high cost of embracing weak occasionalism.[29]

The second option is to deny that the DDA can be applied to the case of God. Although Plantinga does not discuss this response in his paper,[30] the occasionalist can argue that there is a crucial disanalogy between God and human beings which blocks the straightforward application of the DDA to the situation involving God and suffering. Our intuitions about human cases of acts and omissions do not transfer to God because God's causal involvement in worldly events is significantly different from our own. When humans allow suffering, they make no positive causal contribution to the chain of events, and they also have limited knowledge of the circumstances and consequences involved. But according to all four views of divine causality – strong occasionalism, weak occasionalism, mere conservationism, and concurrentism – God is *always* causally involved in *some* way in everything that happens in the world,[31] and God's knowledge of the consequences (or possible consequences) of God's actions far outstrips our own. Although the four doctrines of divine causality will spell out the nature of God's involvement in different ways, all are agreed that God is always, strictly speaking, *doing* something, and that God is more intimately involved in the causal chains leading to suffering than are the human beings who merely permit it. Someone might think that because of this difference between the human and divine cases, we should be sceptical about transferring our moral intuitions from the one to the other.[32]

We do not believe that these differences between God and creatures are sufficient to show that occasionalism and mere conservationism are on a moral

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par. For one thing, denying that the DDA applies to God might lead us to think of God as a consequentialist, a description that most theists will not want to endorse.[33] More importantly, the DDA does not claim that the morally significant difference is between causing something directly versus having no causal involvement whatsoever (i.e. doing absolutely nothing with respect to the chain of events that terminates in suffering), even though the doctrine is couched in terms of inaction or omission. Instead, it is meant to highlight the difference between alternative *kinds* of causal participation. Even in a case where I allow suffering to befall another person, I am still doing something, namely, making a choice to allow the suffering to occur and refraining from intervening directly in the chain of events that will produce it, despite my having the power to prevent it. This distinction between different kinds of causal participation surely can be applied to God, since God's input in such events is very different on the competing views of divine causality – specifically, the difference between conservation/indirect causation on the one hand and direct production on the other.

Although there is something unsettling about God knowing ahead of time about all the suffering that will occur (if we assume the truth of Molinism),[34] creating and sustaining the causal regularities needed to produce it, and choosing to allow it to happen, this problem does not seem nearly as bad as God directly and unilaterally producing all of the suffering himself. It is true that given divine foreknowledge, God's initial act of creation amounts to a willing, in some sense, of all the subsequent evils that occur in the world. But even if this initial act of will is the same for all four views of divine causality, what God does after this is not: although God is doing something on every view, *what* God is doing is very different. And with respect to mere conservationism and weak occasionalism, in particular, there is a moral gulf separating conservation/indirect causation from direct production.

Plantinga admits at the end of his paper that there is something unsettling about God's causal contribution to the horrific effects of human choices on an occasionalist picture. He says, 'I have to admit that there remains a sort of intuitive pull toward the thought that God's directly causing the bad involves him more intimately with the bad than does his indirectly causing it' (Plantinga (2016), 143). As he appears to recognize, there *is* a significant moral difference between God directly producing all the suffering in the world and God indirectly causing it via conservation. Although the acts/omissions distinction is not exactly parallel in the case of God and human beings, it is applicable enough to pose a problem for occasionalism, which is unable to hold that God truly permits suffering (as opposed to directly producing it). We conclude that there is a significant disparity between God's causal role in suffering according to occasionalism and mere conservationism, one that is illuminated by the doctrine of doing and allowing. Thus, NRD is false. What is more, in light of the DDA, the moral problem for occasionalism becomes more acute because the occasionalist must say that God produces rather than permits suffering, and this position is much harder to reconcile with God's perfect goodness.

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Conclusion

We have examined Plantinga's case for occasionalism, focusing on his defensive response to a serious moral objection based on God's causal responsibility for suffering. First, we attempted to reconstruct Plantinga's moral parity argument in its strongest form, but in the end concluded that Plantinga does not provide a good reason to accept the thesis that there is no morally relevant difference between God's direct and indirect causation of the bad. Second, we presented a reason to reject NRD based on the doctrine of doing and allowing, and argued that there is a significant disparity between occasionalism and mere conservationism with respect to God's causal role in suffering. We think that these considerations also strengthen the moral objection to occasionalism by showing that the occasionalist cannot avoid taking the position that God directly causes suffering, which is much harder to reconcile with God's goodness than a view on which God permits suffering.

In our view, secondary causalism enjoys a significant moral advantage over occasionalism. This does not mean that it is a superior theory of divine causation all things considered, since there might be other serious drawbacks to it and compelling reasons to favour occasionalism, as Plantinga maintains. But the moral issue we have discussed should be an important consideration in the debate. The greatest benefit of Plantinga's argument is that it alerts us to an important question that has not received much attention in recent philosophy of religion but must be considered when attempting to understand divine causation in the world: God's causal role with respect to suffering.[35] We hope that our discussion will provide an impetus to explore this question in more detail.

In this article, we have compared occasionalism with only one version of secondary causalism – mere conservationism – leaving aside a discussion of the third major doctrine of divine causality: concurrentism. From what has been said so far, it is an open question whether or not Plantinga's moral parity argument succeeds against a concurrentist, and also whether or not our DDA argument implies that concurrentism also succumbs to the kind of moral difficulty facing occasionalism. A comparison of occasionalism and concurrentism is beyond the scope of this article, but since concurrentism rather than mere conservationism historically is the most popular theistic view, we think that these questions are important ones that need answering.[36]

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Notes

1. Plantinga sometimes describes occasionalism as the view that 'all causal activity is divine causal activity' (Plantinga (2016), 127) or 'all causal activity and all causal power is divine' (*ibid.*, 136), but he goes on to endorse a 'weak' form of occasionalism according to which free creatures cause their own volitions. Since he does not take volitions to be governed by natural laws, we take Plantinga's considered position to be that God is the only cause of *events governed by natural laws*.
2. The type of causation in question here and throughout this article is *efficient* causation, the production of natural effects in being; this involves the exercise of active causal power, and is different from causation understood as counterfactual dependence or regularity.
3. We borrow the labels for these three views from Freddoso (1994), 132–135. We omit deism, according to which God's causal activity extends only so far as the initial creation of the world and thereafter plays no causal role in nature, neither conserving things in being nor participating in the system of worldly causes.
4. The classical expression of this view is found in Aquinas. See, for example, Aquinas (1955–1957), *Summa contra Gentiles* III.65–70, 77 and Aquinas (1952), *De Potentia Dei* 3.7. On Aquinas's account, God and secondary agents operate at different levels of causality and are responsible for different features of an effect. God is the primary cause that supplies all created agents with their causal power and is responsible for everything that has being or ontological status. Creatures are secondary causes that depend upon God for their derivative causal power and channel God's power in specific ways to produce determinate effects. For a detailed examination of Aquinas's concurrentist account and its relationship to the moral problem that is the focus of this article, see Shea (unpublished). We are grateful to an anonymous referee for helping to make our discussion of this threefold taxonomy clearer and more precise, and for encouraging us to discuss the classical theist position in more detail.
5. What is meant by secondary causes being only 'occasional' causes of God's causal activity? According to Malebranche, an occasional cause is 'one that determines the Author of nature to act in such and such a manner in such and such a situation' (Malebranche (1997), 213). God has certain general volitions that are expressed in the laws of nature and that explain the regular correlations between natural events. For

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example, God might choose to create a law of nature so that a brain event of type B is always followed by a mental event of type M. God forms a general volition that Bs will always be followed by Ms and adopts this as a general policy for when to exercise God's causal power. This general volition 'determines' God to cause M whenever B occurs, so we can say that B is an occasional cause of M. God has chosen to exercise God's causality in regular, orderly, and predictable ways so that the natural world is intelligible and science is possible.

6. It is important to recognize that Plantinga assumes an incompatibilist conception of freedom. For him, genuine freedom and moral responsibility is incompatible with God's necessitating or determining all human thoughts, volitions, and actions. It is interesting to note that strong occasionalism does not just fail to meet incompatibilist standards for freedom, but also many weaker compatibilist standards. Compatibilists often hold that an action must be caused *in the right way*, for example, by the agent's beliefs, character, or desires, or by a reasons-responsive mechanism. Since strong occasionalism says that God is the only cause of every mental event, the causal chain does not run through the human agent in a way that satisfies most compatibilist requirements for freedom.
7. This creaturely causal work could be understood as being unilateral (as on mere conservationism) or as involving divine concurrence. Plantinga does not explicitly compare these two options, but does say that 'we cannot sensibly say that [my decisions and undertakings] are caused by God' and 'God does not cause any [evil] acts of will or undertakings' (Plantinga (2016), 141). These remarks strongly suggest that he has a mere conservationist perspective on the origin of volitions.
8. *Secondary causalism*, then, might be defined as the claim that creatures in general – not just free creatures – have genuine causal power. Concurrentism (which Plantinga refers to as such (*ibid.*, 134)) insists that secondary causation requires divine aid, while mere conservationism (which Plantinga calls 'strong secondary causalism' (*ibid.*, 134)) denies the need for such aid. To avoid potential confusion related to terminology, it is worth noting that Plantinga's sense of a primary cause, secondary cause, and secondary causation is different from that of classical theists like Aquinas, which we described above when explaining concurrentism. Unless otherwise noted, we assume Plantinga's sense of 'secondary causalism' throughout this article, and we consider only versions of all three main views (mere conservationism, concurrentism, and occasionalism) on which free agents are the cause of volitions, undertakings, etc. So from this point forward, unless otherwise noted, 'occasionalism' and 'occasionalist' will refer to the weak rather than the strong version.
9. With this distinction in hand, the occasionalist can say that although God is the cause of *the bad*, he is not the cause of *evil*, since evil is restricted to wrongful acts of will. Hence God is not the author of sin or the cause of moral evil in any strict sense. In order to avoid confusion, we use 'suffering' or 'the bad' to refer to the evil of suffering, in contrast to moral evil or sin.
10. This worry is not the same as the one addressed by theodicy: we are not focusing on the reasons that might explain or justify the coexistence of God and evil. Likewise, our primary focus is not on the purely metaphysical question of how to understand the nature of God's causal activity. Instead, our focus is on the moral problem raised by God's role as an efficient cause in producing the effects of secondary causes, in particular the suffering that results from immoral human choices. Someone might think that if God has a morally sufficient reason to allow suffering, this reason will also absolve God of any moral flaw no matter what kind of causal responsibility God bears for suffering. But we reject this claim. God's having a morally sufficient reason to permit suffering does not justify just *any* kind of causal involvement in the production of suffering, as we will argue in detail below.
11. Someone might think that with respect to God's causal role in suffering, the classical theist-concurrentist position is identical to occasionalism, which would mean that God's hands are equally dirty on both views. But this is not the case. According to concurrentists in the classical theist tradition, it is true that God is a primary case of every effect in the world, including states of affairs involving suffering. But God is only responsible for imparting being and causal power to secondary agents and their actions, and for the features of the causal chain that involve positive being. Secondary agents alone are responsible for the defective features of the effect that involve moral evil or suffering. Occasionalism, by contrast, makes God responsible for *all* the features of the effect, including suffering, which is a stronger kind of causal involvement. For more on the differences between concurrentism and occasionalism with respect to God's causal involvement in suffering, see Shea (unpublished). We are grateful to an anonymous referee for raising this point.

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12. To avoid potential confusion, it is worth pointing out that Plantinga's sense of 'direct' and 'indirect' causation is different from that of classical theism. Although he attributes his kind of indirect causation model to 'secondary causalism', which is supposed to include both concurrentism and mere conservationism, a classical concurrentist like Aquinas denies that God is merely an indirect cause in Plantinga's sense; instead, God is a direct or immediate cause of every effect.
13. Though Plantinga *asserts* the moral equivalence in the topic sentence of the third paragraph, he does not *argue* for it there, and the rest of the relevant stretch of text focuses on two other tasks: describing what occasionalism and secondary causalism say about the stabbing case, and arguing that on secondary causalism God indirectly causes the stabbing.
14. Relevant, that is, to the question of whether God causes the bad in a way incompatible with perfect goodness.
15. It is important to remember that all of the theories of divine causality that are discussed in this article are theories of God's role as an *efficient* cause of natural effects, not some other type of cause. This is the issue under debate between occasionalists, mere conservationists, and concurrentists.
16. One reason for thinking so is that in the case of God and suffering, efficient causation entails counterfactual dependence but not vice versa. One could hold a deistic view on which God is counterfactually responsible for the suffering in the world in light of God's creation, but God has no additional causal involvement after this initial act of creation. Efficient causality is something additional to and stronger than counterfactual dependence, and this stronger kind of causal involvement in suffering seems to us to be a morally relevant difference.
17. This version of the argument does not depend upon any particular account of God's foreknowledge. But since Plantinga is a Molinist who affirms that God knows what agents would freely choose in various circumstances, it is easiest to construe the argument along Molinist lines, which we do here. Below we also consider how the argument fares on a non-Molinist view.
18. Our reason for thinking that this is Plantinga's line of reasoning is the role that God's knowledge plays in one of his definitions of indirect causation in the first passage discussed above, which we think is the only clearly discernible argument that he gives for NRD.
19. In the next section, we present an argument for thinking that this implicit premise is false.
20. To be clear: even if Molinism is false, God's knowledge of the bad results might be *temporally* prior to those results. For example, God may take in all of history at once from an eternal perspective, so that in a sense God knows today what free choices will occur tomorrow. But *why* does God know this? On any non-Molinist view, it must be because God somehow *sees* the future events, which are (from the perspective of eternity) 'already' actual. God knows the future only because it is already determinate, only because God has already created the world. This 'simple foreknowledge' of actual events differs markedly from Molinism's advance knowledge of subjunctive conditionals about free decisions prior to creation (see Freddoso (1988), 1–9, 23). Only the latter can make God's knowledge of free actions *logically* prior to the actions themselves. And it is this logical priority of knowledge, rather than mere temporal priority of knowledge, that is relevant to the question of moral responsibility at hand: was God, prior to creating anything at all, in a position to know that creating a world with me in it, in a certain situation, would entail creating a world containing a decision to stab?
21. Plantinga (2016), 133–134. See the discussion of this point in the first section of this article.
22. According to mere conservationism, God is only a remote or mediate cause of the effects produced by secondary agents. Concurrentism, by contrast, affirms that God is a direct or immediate cause of these effects. For this reason, Plantinga's indirect causation model accurately describes the mere conservationist picture but not the concurrentist picture.
23. This name was coined by Warren Quinn in Quinn (1989), but the doctrine itself has a long history in Catholic moral theology. It is to be distinguished from another centuries-old Catholic doctrine, the Doctrine of Double Effect, which centres on the intention versus foresight distinction.
24. Here is another way of expressing the same general point:

> According to this doctrine, one may not cause death, for that would be a killing, a 'doing;' but one may fail to prevent death, allow (in the narrow sense) death to occur, enable another to cause death, redirect a life-threatening item from many to one, or accelerate a death about to happen anyway, if good enough consequences are in the offing. (Alexander & Moore (2012)).

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25. We are aware that there is considerable controversy over the best formulation of the DDA as well as its truth, but we do not have space to provide a detailed formulation and defence of the doctrine here, or to address the criticisms that have been raised against it. For a thorough discussion of these issues, see Howard-Snyder (2011).
26. For a similar line of criticism of Plantinga's position, see Ekstrom (unpublished).
27. The evil in question is the evil of suffering, not sin, because weak occasionalists like Plantinga hold that God is not a cause of moral evil; but to claim that God directly produces the evil of suffering is still very problematic. Another problem with occasionalism, which is connected to the moral objection but not identical to it, is that it exacerbates the problem of evil by making the standard theistic defences or theodicies either unworkable or much harder to defend, because it seems to collapse the distinction between God causing versus permitting evil.
28. For arguments supporting this claim, see Foot (1967), Quinn (1989), Oderberg (2000), and Howard-Snyder (2011).
29. Rejection of the DDA is usually coupled with a commitment to consequentialism. While it is possible to be a Christian consequentialist, consequentialism is usually a fault-line that separates defenders of traditional Judaeo-Christian morality from its secular opponents. For an illuminating discussion of this issue, see Oderberg (2000).
30. This is the route that Plantinga in fact takes. While it does not appear in his published paper, he articulated this type of response in person at the conference on Faith and Reason: Themes From Swinburne at Purdue University, West Lafayette IN (25–27 September 2014), where he first delivered his paper, during his spoken reply to Laura Ekstrom's critique. Videos of the presentations from this conference, including those of Plantinga and Ekstrom, can be found at <http://www.swinburneconference.wordpress.com>.
31. Even on mere conservationism, under which God is not a direct cause of a creature's effect, the effect still depends on God in the (more indirect) sense that it can exist only if God continues to conserve the world in existence.
32. A different way of arguing that the DDA does not apply to God comes from William Mann. He contends that:

> In the case of God . . . there is no plausible moral difference between his actively bringing about a situation that is evil and his passively allowing a situation that is evil to be brought about. We sometimes excuse human agents for not intervening when they might have because we think that the cost of intervening to them would have been inordinately high. We sometimes loathe and sometimes pity those who fail to intervene because of their stupidity, cowardice, venality, callousness, or other sorts of character flaws. But we do not suppose that God has or could have any of those human liabilities. And so God's passively allowing a situation that is evil to be brought about is on a par, morally speaking, with his actively bringing about that situation. (Mann (1988), 206–207)

   We think that this argument contains a non-sequitur: from the fact that such human liabilities do not apply to God, it does not follow that there is no morally relevant difference between God's actively bringing about evil and God's passively allowing evil. The moral difference might arise for a different reason, and we argue that this reason is the difference between kinds of causal involvement. Mann's use of 'actively bringing about' and 'passively allowing' is ambiguous. If these statements are read along the lines of efficient causality, our argument is a challenge to Mann's position that his response does not address.
33. For an interesting discussion of God and consequentialism, as well as reasons against viewing God through a consequentialist lens, see McNaughton (2002).
34. Here we use 'Molinism' in a rather thin contemporary sense to mean simply the claim that, prior to creation, God knows subjunctive conditional statements (so-called 'counterfactuals of freedom') regarding what possible free creatures would choose under various conditions. This claim is prima facie compatible with any of the models of divine causality we have been considering (occasionalism, mere conservationism, and concurrentism). Molina himself embraced concurrentism.
35. The question of God's causal role with respect to moral evil or sin, by contrast, has received much more attention. As we explained above, this is a different issue than the one we discuss in this article.
36. We are grateful to the members of the Fall 2014 Locke and Hume seminar at Saint Louis University for beneficial discussions about our topic. We are also grateful to an anonymous referee for helpful comments on an earlier version of this article. Finally, thanks to Alvin Plantinga for kindly allowing us to use an unpublished version of his paper for our initial draft, and to Laura Ekstrom for sending us her unpublished remarks.

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