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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The good watchmaker

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Abstract

Theists believe in a transcendent personal creator that is maximally perfect and intervenes in the creation. Deists believe in a transcendent personal creator that is maximally perfect and does not intervene in the creation. One alleged problem for deism is that its God cannot be maximally perfect. A God that intentionally and knowingly creates a world replete with suffering and anguish yet fails to intervene to ameliorate it is not morally perfect. Thus, theism is better off than deism. I argue that the God of theism is in just as much trouble vis-à-vis omnibenevolence as the God of deism. More specifically, theistic responses to why God answers some but not all petitionary prayers either (i) show theism's God is less than morally perfect in the same way deism's God is alleged to be, or (ii) are likewise open to deists.

Keywords: deism; theism; omnibenevolence; divine intervention; petitionary prayer

'And just because, he doesn't answer, doesn't mean he don't care
Some of God's greatest gifts, are unanswered prayers'
– Garth Brooks

Introduction

Timmy has a rare illness, and all established and experimental treatments have proven ineffective. Timmy's friend Angie prays to God, asking for Timmy's health to be restored. A God that hears and answers Angie's prayer and miraculously heals Timmy seems, prima facie, more loving than a God that hears but does not answer Angie's prayer.

A God that is willing to answer Angie's prayer is the God of traditional theism: a transcendent personal source of the world that is maximally perfect and at least sometimes intervenes in the world. Deists, on the other hand, believe in the existence of a transcendent personal source of the world that is maximally perfect but will not intervene in the creation.[1] Deism was once a prominent view but is now neglected.[2] In fact, deism seems to be a non-starter for many: a theoretical option to acknowledge and then politely set aside (see, e.g., Koperski 2019, 3). Daniel Rubio (2021, 145) likens deism to Scylla, a monstrous and extreme view to navigate around, and Simon Kittle (2022, 260, n. 1) notes that in some circles 'deism' is hurled as a 'term of abuse'.[3] Alister McGrath (2015, 19) sees a non-interventionist God as 'reduced' and 'deficient', and David Ciocchi (2002) suggests it

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is religiously inadequate. For many, it seems, a deistic God from which creatures may reap no interventionist benefit is just as bad as there being no God at all.

Whatever the merits of these complaints, deism enjoys some clear theoretical benefits over traditional interventionist theism. Chief among them is that, in disavowing intervention, the deist has no need to proffer a scientifically and philosophically adequate account of special divine action or otherwise admit that God violates the causal closure of the world and its natural laws when intervening.[4] While I do not believe that providing such an account is an insurmountable task, a view that avoids controversial theoretical tasks is better, all things considered, than views that cannot. So, where deism apparently lacks in the moral perfection of its God, it gains in theoretical tidiness.[5]

My aim here is to begin to resuscitate the non-interventionist God of deism by showing this trade-off between moral perfection and theoretical simplicity to be merely apparent. I argue that a deistic God who does not answer Angie's prayer or intervene in the world at all is not morally objectionable. More specifically, I argue that theistic responses to the question of why God only answers some petitionary prayers either (i) mar God's perfect goodness in the same way that a deistic God's perfect goodness is allegedly marred by his lack of intervention, or (ii) are open to the deist as well. In other words, I show that there is a parity problem: if deism's God is not morally perfect because of his lack of intervention, then, so too and for the same reason, theism's God is not morally perfect.[6]

After some preliminary remarks on divine action and the Gods of theism and deism, I present the challenge to a deistic God's omnibenevolence in more detail. Next, I show that the interventionist God of theism is in just as much trouble as the God of deism is allegedly because of problems concerning unanswered petitionary prayers. I then consider whether soteriological interventions give the God of theism an edge over the God of deism and conclude that they do not. In all, I hope to show just that God needn't inject himself into the world post-creation, whether to answer prayers, perform miracles, or shepherd creatures through exclusive methods of salvation, to be all-good. In other words, the miraculous and the fantastic are non-essential to a traditional, omni-conception of God.

Theistic and deistic divine actions

Both theism and deism take God to be a necessarily existent, personal, and maximally perfect source of being. Both have it that God intentionally created the world, and so has some plan for it and its denizens. Moreover, both theism and deism are committed to God's continual sustaining of the world. For, if creatures cannot cause, ground, or explain their being from within at any one time, then they cannot do so through time. So, even the God of deism is active in creation insofar as he keeps it in existence.[7]

What marks deism off from theism is that the former denies that God will intervene in the world through some special acts, actions that would be outside the normal goings-on of the natural order. Special divine actions include, beyond answering petitionary prayers, God revealing himself to creatures directly, guiding them with miraculous signs, and punishing and forgiving their earthly transgressions.

Beyond this distinction between creative and special divine actions, we can distinguish between direct and indirect divine acts (Draper 2009). Direct divine actions are those actions in the creation that completely lack any creaturely causal input. Since God is causally involved in everything, insofar as he keeps everything in being, God is involved in all goings-on, such as my shovelling food into my mouth, in a way. But no creatures or creaturely powers are involved in God's creative act in the first place. Indirect divine actions, in contrast, are those that involve creaturely powers in some way, but were intended by God. If

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God intended from eternity for Ernie the eagle to catch Willie the weasel tomorrow, his creating Ernie and Willie such that the former catches the latter tomorrow is an indirect divine action. Ernie and Willie contribute to the causal nexus, and not just God, but God keeps both Ernie and Willie in existence such that they may mingle, exercise their capacities and causal powers, so.

The deist needn't deny indirect divine acts. If a deistic God intentionally created, then he did so with the plan and knowledge that Ernie catches Willie tomorrow. What the deist denies is that God acts *directly* to bring about certain effects in the natural order *beyond* his initial creative act and continued sustaining activity. It isn't that the deistic God *cannot* so act, as this would conflict with his omnipotence (and perhaps omniscience). It is that, for whatever reason, the deistic God *does not* so intervene in the world.[8] Robert Larmer summarises this deistic position well:

> On the deistic view, although created things depend on God constantly sustaining their very existence, they possess genuine casual capacities such that it makes sense to talk of the operation of secondary causes, which is to say of causal interactions between them. Indeed, for the deist, all that occurs in nature is the result of such interactions. God is the author and sustainer of nature, but He never directly acts within nature. Divine purposes in creation are pursued solely through the indirect instrumentality of secondary causes and never involve direct primary causation in the form of miraculous intervention into the course of nature. For the deist, God's operation in the natural world is exclusively confined to the creation and conservation of secondary causes [i.e., genuinely empowered creatures.] (2018, 416; see also 425–427)

So, the God of deism does not hear Angie's prayer and then respond directly by miraculously healing Timmy. God does not send signs to the lost and weary to lead them back to him, nor does he miraculously turn water into wine. For the deist, the *only* direct divine actions are creative.[9]

The moral paucity of a deistic God

The non-interventionist God of deism can seem cold and aloof to some and downright cruel to others, however. T. Ryan Byerly (2024, 19) worries that a deistic God's love for creatures may be called into question insofar as intervention seems crucial to a personal relationship with God. And Jonathan Kvanvig and Hugh McCann (1988, 22) recount a similar worry from the debate on God's relation to time: 'One argument has it that it must be possible for God to change, for otherwise He could not intervene in the affairs of men. The God of the Judeo-Christina tradition is not the hands-off God of the deist; rather, His love for mankind prompts Him to intervene in our own history.' In general, non-interventionism seems morally problematic: a God that cared, let alone cared maximally, for his creation would be the kind of God that would be willing to 'do something'.

Christos Kyriacou (2022, 94–98) articulates a version of the problem of evil that allegedly afflicts deism uniquely, one that puts a point on this general complaint. In brief: according to the deist, God intentionally and knowingly created a world with Timmy's suffering and anguish. Plausibly, such suffering and anguish is evil. God is a moral agent and so is responsible for the world and suffering and anguish it contains. Further, a deistic God *can* act directly in the world to ease the suffering and anguish of creatures but *does not*. Failing to ease the suffering and anguish one intentionally and knowingly brought about is morally irresponsible. Moral irresponsibility is incompatible with omnibenevolence, and so the God of deism is not omnibenevolent.[10]

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Chad Meister (2019) advances a similar argument, what he dubs the 'argument from neglect', that, while aimed at theism, applies to deism more aptly:

> One reason for the disinclination by some to embrace a personalistic view of theism is the apparent absence of divine action in the world with regard to pain and suffering. If God is omnibenevolent, omniscient, exceedingly powerful, and akin to a person in having intentions, feelings, purposes, goals and desires, then why does God permit the ongoing widespread suffering in the world? The actions that one would expect to occur if there were such a God are those that would eradicate the most appalling cases of evil... (Meister 2019, 126)

The basic point these authors are getting at is easy to appreciate. Imagine Joe asks his young son Freddie to take Bingo, the family dog, for a walk. As Freddie walks out of the front door, Bingo is distracted by a squirrel. Freddie is dragged down the street by Bingo. Joe watches all this from inside. Further, he saw the squirrel before Freddie walked out and knew that it would distract Bingo. Joe can either call Bingo back and stop him from dragging Freddie around, or he can sit back and watch the disaster unfold until Bingo gets tired and returns home.

Whether or not one has children of their own, and so can imagine being in Joe's shoes, it seems quite clear that it would be better for Joe to call back Bingo than sit back and watch the show. In general, it seems good for an agent to intervene so as to prevent, combat, or otherwise ameliorate the effects of evil, especially if said agent is directly responsible for, or otherwise knew about, the evil. Drawing an analogy to the divine, then: if God has special obligations to creatures as parents do to their children, then a God that intervenes in the creation is morally superior to a God that does not, just as a father that stops his son from being dragged around is morally superior to one that does not.

No good Gods

The theistic God looks better than the deistic God because there is a non-zero chance he intervenes to ease the suffering and anguish that he is morally responsible for. Now, the theistic God can intervene to ease suffering and anguish some of the time or all the time. He obviously does not intervene all the time: there are plenty of unanswered petitionary prayers. So, a theistic God decides to intervene to ease the suffering and anguish of creatures only sometimes.

But why? Wouldn't a God that intervened all of the time be better than a God that intervened only some of the time? Imagine that Joe calls Bingo back and stops Freddie from being dragged up and down the street. Now imagine that Joe has another child, Annie, who he also asks to walk Bingo. Again, there is a squirrel in the yard, and Joe knows that it will distract Bingo. Bingo begins to drag Annie around. Even if Joe intervened once already to ease the suffering and anguish of Freddie, wouldn't it be good – wouldn't Joe be better – to intervene again and ease the suffering and anguish of Annie? Isn't a father that intervenes twice better than a father that intervenes once? If we adopt the principle that seems implicit in the argument against deism – that more intervention is better than less – then it seems that a theistic God that intervenes only some of the time cannot be omnibenevolent, as a God that always intervened would be better.[11]

Of course, there might be reasons justifying why a theistic God answers petitionary prayers only some of the time. Most plausibly, these reasons would have to do with the creature petitioning God and would be merit-based or not. Merit-based reasons might include the creature's need, character, and reason for petitioning God. Non-merit-based reasons

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might include the temporal and spatial location of the creature praying to God, the colour of the creature's hair, or whether the creature has any siblings.

If God intervenes some but not all the time for non-merit-based reasons, his omnibenevolence is challenged: due to no fault of their own, certain creatures experience suffering and anguish even when God could intervene to stop it. So, if theism is to fare any better than deism, its God must have some good merit-based reasons for failing to intervene.

So, perhaps God miraculously cures Timmy because of his upright character or because of Angie's deep and genuine concern for him. This explains why God intervenes in this case, but such merit-based reasons do not do all the explanatory work that theists need done. This is for the simple reason that there are plenty of creatures who merit God's help but whose prayers go unanswered.

Perhaps a religious theist can appeal to some other property of the creatures God decides to intervene on behalf of? Perhaps only those who, say, accept Christ as saviour have their prayers answered? The same problem remains, however: the prayers of plenty of devoted Christians are not answered. And as should be clear, conjoining merit-based reasons with such religious attitudes will not solve the problem: our world is one with countless worthy but unanswered prayers.

At this point, theists could claim that the reasons for God's intervening only sometimes are mysterious, or they could otherwise take a sceptical stance, for instance, that God has good reason for intervening only sometimes but that such reasons are inscrutable (Howard-Snyder and Howard-Snyder 2010). The former move is just to abandon the question of why God intervenes only some of the time and is open to the deist too. The latter sceptical move, while in my eyes similarly unsatisfying, is open to the deist as well. The deist can admit that God's will is inscrutable, far beyond our intellectual capacities, and so, we simply cannot hope to understand why he does not intervene in the world at all.

Other plausible responses open to the theist are likewise open to the deist. Perhaps God only intervenes some (or none) of the time to help us build our character, soul, or faith. Perhaps God only intervenes some (or none) of the time to provide contrast between good and evil. Perhaps God only intervenes some (or none) of the time so that we can earn or otherwise prepare ourselves for eternal union with him. Perhaps God only intervenes some (or none) of the time to give creation highly valuable freedom, or the room to 'be itself'. Overall, it seems that either (i) the perfect goodness of the God of theism is marred because of his non-maximal intervention, just as the perfect goodness of the God of deism is allegedly marred by his total non-intervention, or (ii) the responses available to the theist in justifying non-maximal intervention are likewise open to the deist. In other words, if lack of intervention impugns the moral perfection of the God of deism, then so too and in the same way does non-maximal intervention impugn the moral perfection of the God of theism.

A theist might object that a God that intervenes, *even just once*, is better than a God that doesn't intervene at all. Even if the theist's God only answers Angie's prayer and no others, he is better than the deist's God who answers no prayers whatsoever. So, even if all of the above is on track, it looks like a theistic God, while perhaps not omnibenevolent, is at least closer to omnibenevolence than a deistic God.

A few points in response. First, this admission would be *significant*: if a theistic God is not omnibenevolent, then it is unclear just how much weight to put on the argument against a deistic God's moral perfection. For, if omnibenevolence is out the window, it is unclear if a theistic God's minimal moral edge over a deistic God's is all that important. Second, and more directly, it is unclear that a minimally interventionist God comes cost-free. The deist can admit that a minimally interventionist God is better than a non-interventionist God insofar as it quells *some* suffering and anguish. But the minimal intervention seems arbitrary, unmotivated, and inegalitarian. *The deistic God is at least principled*. In other words,

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non-intervention seems to come with moral goods that minimal non-intervention does not, and these may plausibly outweigh the good of minimal intervention (cf. Overall 1985).

A theist might also object that intervention, however minimal, is *itself* good or brings about some good besides the quelling of suffering and anguish. Perhaps there is some good achieved by God's answering only some but not all prayers, and that beyond justifying non-maximal intervention, such good is not one the deist can secure. The upshot, of course, being that the theist has responses to non-intervention that the deist does not.

For instance, one might think that God answering only some prayers fosters unity among creatures that is morally significant (Murray and Meyers 1994). If Billy prays for and receives from God a financial windfall, but only when he is on the brink, he will share this trying experience with others and they may be more willing to share their concerns, helping to build community. Or perhaps God leaving some prayers unanswered leaves room for creatures to love one another in a way that they wouldn't if God were to intervene too often (Choi 2016). If Billy's prayer is not answered, maybe others will chip in to help him get out of debt. Or one might think that God answering only some prayers encourages creatures to enter a *partnership* with God, and such partnership is good (Smith and Yip 2010). If Billy always got what he prayed for, he would suffer himself, becoming spoiled. He would also come to see God as nothing but a supernatural agent to carry out his bidding and so would fail to achieve a meaningful relationship with God.[12]

The problem with these responses is that the goods they secure can be achieved by a deistic God too. If God does not answer any prayers but Billy believes *falsely* that God answered his prayer and the prayers of others, then the goods of unity and partnership with God are achieved without any special action on God's part. And, if God doesn't answer any prayers, then interpersonal love grows too.[13]

Perhaps a more promising approach would focus not on the *creaturely consequences* of God's selective inaction so much as it would focus on the *intrinsic value* of God's intervention in the world. For example, Charles Taliaferro (2007) argues that God answering a prayer, *mediating* some good, may itself be a good in certain cases. Imagine two worlds: one where Billy invents an incredibly valuable widget and escapes financial trouble with God's help and one where Billy invents the widget and escapes financial trouble without God's help. Some might think that, while the earthly goods are equal, God's *mediation* of the earthly good in the former world is itself valuable: it is part of a 'greater good of friendship or respectful love'. If so, mediating intervention itself may be a good, and one the deist cannot secure.

A few points in response. First, insofar as mediation itself can be seen as a good, a lack of mediation can be seen as a good too. Letting Billy figure things out on his own seems like a good: a lack of mediation is itself an expression of the value of freedom and allows for a kind of self-ownership that is plausibly good in itself. Relatedly, as Taliaferro himself notes, mediation is not always good: the over-involvement of a helicopter-parent is stifling and intrusive, not an expression of friendship or love.

Second, I think the relevant issue is not whether the theist has open to them responses that the deist does not – as I will grant for argument's sake in this (highly dubious) case – but instead whether the theist has responses open to them that are clearly better than responses *open to the deist*. That is, while the good of mediation may be a good that the deist cannot secure, we must see if the deist can secure *other* goods that are equally good. And the answer is obviously yes. The deist can appeal to more intense soul-making, creaturely perseverance, unity-in-struggle, and other goods to justify total non-intervention. The point is not that a theistic God of non-maximal intervention cannot secure these goods, but rather that these are goods open to the deist to appeal to. Intervention may be or bring about goods that are not available to the deist, but non-intervention may be or bring about

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goods, or levels of such goods, not available to the theist. So, while not every response to non-maximal intervention the theist makes is one likewise open to the deist, the deist has their own equally good responses to total non-intervention that the theist may not make.

Soteriological interventions

So far, I've been concerned with petitionary prayer. But there are other special divine actions that carry moral weight and so may impact a deistic God's goodness. Consider a theistic God's revealing himself to creatures to express his love of them directly and to lead them to salvation. Should an afterlife await us, a God that calls out to us and makes his instructions for entry clear and conspicuous seems better than a God that does not.

Imagine Joe wants to give Freddie and Annie an allowance, but he wants them to complete some chores around the house first. Joe could either let them know about the allowance or not, and he could give them a list of chores or not. If Joe was truly a loving father, he would announce to Freddie and Annie that he wants to give them an allowance, and he would let them know what chores to complete to earn it. If he didn't mention the allowance and, further, failed to provide a list of chores to complete to earn it, he would seem unloving or at least not particularly interested in the well-being of Freddie and Annie. Likewise, a God that intervenes to express his love and provide the guidance necessary for the salvation of his creatures is morally better than one that does not.[14]

Here, appeal to the history of deism is helpful. Many early deists were not so much against special divine actions – many of them in fact believed God would intervene in the world – so much as they were critical of organised, revealed religion (Waligore 2023). For them, God's direct expression to creatures of his love and alleged soteriological interventions, such as the Incarnation, were unnecessary. These deists thought general revelation – the creation itself – was pregnant with messages of God's love and instructions for salvation. Human beings need only use their minds and reason to discover that their very existence and capacity for reflection was a gift of love. And, in living with others, human beings could discover a pious way of life required of us by God. In other words, God's love and the instructions for salvation were built into the world itself and so required no special revelation to be made clear and perspicuous.

So, a deistic God needn't be seen as a father who hides his love of his children and fails to guide them to success. Instead, a deistic God can be seen as a father who has engraved his love for his children in everything around them, and one who has given them the tools necessary to figure out what chores need to get done. But *why* would God not hinge salvation on supposed soteriological interventions like the Incarnation? Overall, general revelation is more readily available to a wider swath of creatures than special revelation is; the motivations of many deists were egalitarian. The interventions that led to and constitute special revelation were located in time and space, not readily available to all. The bible and the interventions it attests to were conveyed in particular languages not readily open to all. Thomas Paine summarises several considerations:

> It is only in the Creation that all our ideas and conceptions of a word of God can unite. The Creation speaketh an universal language, independently of human speech or human language, multiplied and various as they be. It is an ever existing original, which every man can read. It cannot be forged; it cannot be counterfeited; it cannot be lost; it cannot be altered; it cannot be suppressed. It does not depend upon the will of man whether it shall be published or not; it publishes itself from one end of the earth to the other. It preaches to all nations and to all worlds; and this word of God reveals to man all that is necessary for man to know of God. (*Age of Reason*, ch. 9)

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None of this shows that an intervening God is not omnibenevolent, or that a non-interventionist God is just as good as, or better than, an interventionist God. But it does show that important moral considerations could reasonably underlie a deistic God's non-intervention regarding the salvation of his creatures.

Conclusion

If a deistic God is not omnibenevolent because of his lack of intervention, then so too and for the same reason, a theistic God is not omnibenevolent because of his *non-maximal* intervention. Of course, to be clear, I do not think that a theistic God *is* morally imperfect. All I hope to have shown is that, minimally, a non-interventionist watchmaker God needn't be seen as any more cold, aloof, or cruel than the interventionist God of theism.

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Notes

1. My sympathies regarding the nature and attributes of God are fairly classical, but here I assume nothing more robust than a traditional theistic conception of the divine. For discussion of the nature and attributes of a deistic God, see Byrne (1989, 53–61), Harper (2020, ch. 4), and Waligore (2023, chs. 3–4).
2. To be clear, and as recent work has been at pains to show, e.g., Waligore (2023), the deism that was widespread during the Enlightenment – better known as *natural religion* – did not emphasise God's lack of intervention in the creation. Instead, it emphasised the soteriological sufficiency of natural reason. For discussion of this flavour of deism in Europe and America, see Byrne (1989) and Walters (2011), respectively. While currently unpopular, natural religion has seen a handful of contemporary defenders, e.g., Conway (2000), Flew and Varghese (2007), and Renz and Bell (forthcoming). Harper (2020) is a contemporary defender of non-interventionist deism, although his core argument rests on a fairly idiosyncratic interpretation of quantum theory.
3. See also Larmer (2015, 76–79) and the discussion in his 2018 work for examples of the 'charge of deism'.
4. For discussion of special divine action (and its problems), see Göcke (2015, and other entries in the same issue), Koperski (2019, chs. 1–2), and Saunders (2002). A sympathetic treatment and account can be found in Larmer (2013). For arguments that God cannot act, see Buckareff (2016) and Kapitan (1991).
5. There are other important theoretical benefits of deism. Lataster (2018) argues that deism is more plausible than traditional theism on purely probabilistic grounds, and Mulgan (2015) argues that positing a broadly deistic God is the most balanced and rational response to our current evidence for and against the existence of a traditional theistic God.
6. Cf. the strategy of McPherson (2007) in arguing that there is nothing distinctively wrong about terrorism when compared to conventional war, or that conventional war is just as impermissible as terrorism.
7. Some take it that deism is committed to a self-sustaining universe, e.g., Kvanvig and McCann (1988, 14) and Koperski (2019, 3–5), but this depends on one's reasons for countenancing a divine being. An Aristotelian God that simply moves the world needn't stay involved so as to keep it in being, but a God that explains the reality of contingent beings must.
8. For historical discussion of why a deistic God does not intervene, see Lucci and Wigelsworth (2015).
9. To be clear, then, the deist denies even so-called non-interventionist accounts of special divine action: beyond sustaining creatures in being, *there are no post-creative divine acts*.
10. As Kyriacou notes, the deist could abandon omniscience or omnipotence instead. But this just shuffles the issue around. If one is to handle the problem of evil this way, dialectically, it seems better just to endorse a finite

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God instead; see, e.g., Dilly (2000). Since I find that the best arguments for the existence of God suggest that God is both a person and maximally perfect, I find such an admission unsatisfactory.

11. To be clear, this is not the general problem of petitionary prayer, the problem that God cannot be omnibenevolent if he requires prayers from us to bring about good events. I have no issue with, and the current argument does not hang on, the moral legitimacy of God's requiring prayer to bring about some good event. My concern, rather, has to do with the domain of answered prayers. For further discussion of the general problem, see Davison (2017, ch. 1).

12. Cf. certain panentheistic responses to the problem of evil, e.g., in Oord and Schwartz (2020).

13. My discussion here draws on Davison (2017, ch. 6).

14. Comparison to the problem of hiddenness here is apt, and my strategy remains the same: if hiddenness makes trouble for deism, it makes similar trouble for theists, and, in general, deists can respond to the hiddenness of God in the same ways theists can.

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