THE PROBLEM OF DIVINE INEFFICIENCY

Gianluca Di Muzio

Gianluca Di Muzio develops a novel objection to theism.

In this paper, the word 'theism' will be used to refer to any doctrine asserting (1) that there is a God; and (2) that God is a supreme and perfect spiritual being who created the universe. Christianity, Islam, and other religions are examples of theism, although someone may embrace a form of philosophical theism without adopting any particular religion.

The paper's purpose is to highlight a difficulty for theism. I call it 'the problem of divine inefficiency'. To explain the difficulty, I shall begin by listing some basic theistic assumptions. Then I will show that these assumptions do not sit well with certain observable features of the universe. The paper's final part considers some theistic replies and the difficulties they involve.

Theistic assumptions about God include:

(a) God is omnipotent and supremely rational.
(b) By virtue of their intellectual and moral traits, human beings resemble their creator. God values these traits more than purely physical properties. (For example, a theist would say that God values the ability to solve complex mathematical problems or the disposition to act with compassion and generosity far more than merely physical characteristics like the acidity of lemon juice or the capacity of metals to conduce heat. Similarly, theists would assert, God values human beings more than beings capable only of exemplifying physical properties, such as rocks, blades of grass, and atoms of beryllium.)
(c) Because of (b), the creation of human beings is at the centre of God's plan for the universe.

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(d) With its magnificent order, the universe points to the existence of a supremely intelligent creator.

In what follows, I shall refer to the moral and intellectual traits mentioned in (b) as 'IGI traits'. 'IGI' stands for 'In God's Image'.

The problem of divine inefficiency is that (a) and (b) seem inconsistent with the fact that IGI traits (and human beings, who exemplify them) have appeared on the scene of the universe vastly later than physical objects and properties. If God is omnipotent and supremely rational, then He must perform any task He sets for Himself in the most direct and efficient way. In addition, God values IGI traits far more than merely physical properties. So, why did it take so long for IGI traits to appear? Why wasn't God more efficient in bringing them about?

The human race has only been in existence for a very short time in comparison with the physical universe and non–human life forms. According to the most generally accepted scientific estimates, *Homo sapiens* evolved approximately 150,000 years ago, but the universe has existed for 20 billion years, and the first primitive life forms on Earth date back to 3.5 billion years ago. More complex, but still non–human life forms, such as fish, reptiles, and small mammals developed between 500 and 200 million years ago. However, from a theistic perspective, it does not seem plausible to regard any of these species, surviving or extinct, as exemplifying IGI traits. For theists, only human beings are made in God's image and are worthy of partaking in immortality. So, theists would have to deal with the fact that the physical universe and countless non–human life forms existed for millions and millions of years before even a single IGI trait appeared in God's creation.

The philosophical problem that arises from this fact is similar to – but more serious than – the so–called problem of evil, which also proceeds from an apparent inconsistency. The problem of evil derives from the difficulty of bringing the

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enormous amount of suffering that exists in the world into alignment with two central ideas of theism: the supreme goodness of God and His omnipotence. A perfectly good God, it would seem, would not allow so many of His creatures to suffer so much, especially if He was able to accomplish anything He wanted. But war, disease, natural calamities, human cruelty, and a host of other negative realities are undeniably present in the world. God does not prevent them. So, there seem to be only two options left: deny that God is perfectly good or accept that He is not omnipotent. It is the unattractiveness of these two options that makes the problem of evil so burning for theists.

Similarly, the problem of divine inefficiency derives from the inconsistency between the late emergence of IGI traits in the universe and the theistic conception of God as a supremely rational omnipotent being who values those traits very highly. The idea of divine rationality involves thinking of God as pursuing His aims with perfect efficiency and without delay (given, also, that nothing could stand in the way of divine omnipotence). But, if God values IGI traits so highly, why did they emerge only billions of years after the universe came into existence? Why didn't God design the universe so that it contained IGI traits from the beginning? The billions of years it took for an intelligent species to evolve suggest that the appearance of IGI traits was a fortuitous occurrence, not the work of a divine creator. Like the problem of evil, the problem of divine inefficiency highlights features of the world that make it difficult to believe in the existence of God. Both problems strike at the heart of (d) above.

The problem of divine inefficiency is more serious, however. For it is relatively easy to imagine reasons behind God's choice to allow His most intelligent creatures to suffer. Suffering often leads to very significant personal growth. It is an essential ingredient in the development of those moral dispositions which, according to theists, God wishes to promote in human beings (compassion, solidarity, fortitude, etc.). Evil can always be thought of as a means to some higher good

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or as the by–product of the use of something good, such as free will, which theists regard as God's most precious gift to humankind.

But, under the assumption that God exists, the inefficiency with which IGI traits emerge seems nothing short of inexplicable. It is hard to imagine any reasons behind it because, unlike suffering, inefficiency does not make any contribution, direct or indirect, to the realization of God's plan for the world. It simply delays the plan by billions and billions of years.

Given the seriousness of this issue, one may think it surprising that theists have not been as keen on addressing it as they have been with the problem of evil. The reason, however, is fairly easy to identify. Any theist can see that the conception of God as omnipotent and supremely good clashes with the staggering amount of evil that exists in the world. But theists have traditionally believed that God *was extremely efficient* in facilitating the emergence of IGI traits. The biblical Book of Genesis and other religious texts represent God as creating the universe quickly, so that he can almost immediately place human beings in it. If one thinks about it, there is a profound philosophical reason behind the fact that, in the Bible, the story of creation depicts God as completing the task in less than a week. The reason is that, taken together, the idea that God is supremely rational in pursuing His aims and the idea that He highly values IGI traits demand that He create beings capable of exemplifying such traits as quickly as possible. So, any theist giving an account of divine creation would tend to represent God as speedily and efficiently proceeding towards the creation of humankind.

Contemporary theists, however, must face a challenge the philosophers and theologians of the past did not have to deal with: the discovery that the Bible and other holy books contain a vastly accelerated chronology. Modern science has determined that billions of years passed between the beginning of the universe and the evolution of human beings on the Earth. It is against this background that the problem of divine inefficiency arises.

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How might a theist respond? Here are some possible lines of reply, together with the difficulties they entail.

A theist may certainly reject the chronology of evolution and affirm that the Earth and the human race came into existence when the Bible, or some other holy book, says they did. For the Bible, the calculations of scholars fix this date at approximately 6,000 years ago. Some theists adopt this solution, but in doing so face an obvious difficulty: the existence of a large body of fossil evidence documenting the evolution of life on Earth. A theist may reply that God created the Earth with fossils already embedded in it and structured so that human scientific methods would erroneously date them back to millions of years ago. If asked to explain why God would do this, theists would say that God wishes to keep Himself and his creative interventions hidden from human beings, so that sincere faith, and not compelling evidence, draws them to Him. Thus, to solve the problem of divine inefficiency, the rejection of the chronology of evolution must team up with the thesis that God takes measures to remain hidden. Unfortunately, this thesis is highly problematic. But before I explain why, let me consider another possible solution to the problem of divine inefficiency.

One may deny that God is supremely rational or assert that divine rationality is different from human rationality. This would ease the tension from which the problem of divine inefficiency arises, for it is the notion of divine rationality that demands that God pursue His aims speedily and efficiently. If, however, rationality cannot properly be regarded as a divine attribute, or if God's rationality operates differently from human rationality, then one need not expect that He should create the universe in accordance with principles consistent with the human notions of rationality and efficiency.

The difficulty with this solution is that the first alternative – denying that God is rational – requires an overhaul of the traditional theistic conception of God. How many theists would be willing to admit that they worship an irrational God, one who wanted to create human beings and yet postponed the task

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by billions of years? Isn't it blasphemous to suggest that God simply procrastinated? And if God were irrational, what would happen to the idea of divine providence and to the notion of a binding covenant between God and human beings?

The second alternative – distinguishing between divine and human rationality – is problematic because it is *ad hoc*. That is, the only reason one might have to introduce the distinction is the embarrassment caused by the problem of divine inefficiency. No independent grounds seem to exist for disengaging God's rationality from the efficient promotion of ends. Furthermore, theists typically insist that the universe is intelligently designed and, to prove this, draw attention to the simplicity and good organization of its structure and laws. This argument demands a conception of divine rationality that includes the efficient promotion of ends on the creator's part. On pain of inconsistency, theists may not first invoke a certain conception of divine rationality and then retract it when attempting to deal with the problem of divine inefficiency.

Let us now return to the idea that God wishes to remain hidden. If this is true, then there seems to be a viable solution to the problem of divine inefficiency. One may suggest that the staggering amount of time separating the beginning of the universe from the emergence of an intelligent species on Earth is like a curtain behind which God has chosen to hide. A theist would explain this choice in the following way. If God's existence were a datum of immediate experience, people would be so certain of His punishments that they would embrace religion and the moral life simply to avoid the consequences of not doing so. But God wants a different kind of relationship with human beings. To make sure that they seek Him because of love and not for mere reasons of opportunity, God avoids making His existence obvious to all His human creatures. The apparent inefficiency with which IGI traits have emerged could thus be explained as one of God's diversion tactics, as an obstacle for sincere faith to overcome.

This solution to the problem of divine inefficiency faces the following difficulty. A sincere desire to have a relationship with God and observe His commandments is perfectly consistent

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with having the certainty of His existence. The above argument presupposes that, if God's existence were manifest, people would stay on the straight-and-narrow only for self-interested reasons. This, however, overlooks the fact that, on theism, God's commandments are not arbitrary and bizarre, but are good for human beings, and hence people could be independently motivated to observe them. Being certain that he would be punished if he deserted his children does not make a man insincere if he takes care of them. For the man may take care of his children because he believes that this *is the right thing to do*, not merely because he is afraid of being punished if he deserts them. Similarly, if God's Law is good, one may wish to follow it simply because it is the best law for a human being to follow, quite apart from the threat – or even the certainty – of divine punishment.

A theist may reply that, while some would undoubtedly observe God's Law for its own sake, the majority of people are prone to a variety of human weaknesses and would thus significantly alter their behaviour if God's existence became manifest. So, if God showed Himself, the world would for the most part become a moral puppet show, where virtually everybody would behave well, but very few would do so spontaneously. (The image of the puppet show is in Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, Part 1, Book 2, Chapter 2, Section 9).

This reply, however, is unconvincing because of the theistic commitment to the idea that God has infallible insight into the heart of human beings. Even if He were manifest, God could still differentiate between those who embrace His Law sincerely and those who do so for mere reasons of opportunity. Thus there is no reason to fear that, in a world in which God were manifest, the precious distinction between virtue and vice would be lost because vice would no longer exist. Vicious character dispositions would still exist, and so would free will. It is only overt human behaviour that would change, since those who have vicious dispositions would have an additional source of motivation for choosing not to act on them. But both in a world where He is manifest and in a world where

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He is hidden, God can distinguish infallibly between sincere and insincere compliance with His Law. The only difference is that, in a hypothetical world of the former kind, there would be more overt compliance, and thus significantly fewer people would suffer and die at the hands (or because of the indifference) of their fellow human beings. All things considered, a world in which God's existence were manifest would actually be preferable to a world where God remains hidden. Thus we should reject the suggestion that inefficiency is a curtain behind which God hides.

The last theistic response I would like to consider in this essay revolves around the temporal aspect of inefficiency. The problem of divine inefficiency stems from a concern with the passage of time: the time separating the beginning of the universe from the emergence of IGI traits on the Earth. But someone may argue that the passage of time is nothing to God. If, as many theists contend, God is outside of time, then nothing God does can be late or inefficient. For the temporal gap that gives rise to the problem is merely *internal* to the universe; it strikes *us* as in need of an explanation, but it does not affect the eternal God.

This solution may sound promising, but it overlooks an important fact. Whether a product is efficiently designed depends more on the product itself than on the producer. If someone designs a product that is inefficient *in the context where it is intended to operate*, then the act of production is defective even if the producer does not operate in the same context (or in the same way) as the product.

Suppose I am designing a track for an ant to reach some breadcrumbs. If my primary goal is that the ant should reach the breadcrumbs, and I am rational, then I should place the breadcrumbs within easy reach of the ant, unless I have a justifiable reason to have the ant work hard to reach the breadcrumbs. If I design the track so that the food is five miles away from the ant, and the only reason behind my decision is that *I* have no problem walking five miles, then I am designing the track inefficiently. What counts in evaluating the efficiency of my production is *the ant's* relation to space, not my own.

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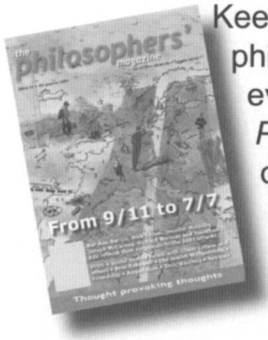
Thus, even if five miles are nothing to me, or somehow I am 'outside of space' altogether, I cannot claim I worked rationally and efficiently if I cannot also supply a convincing reason for my choice to place the food so far away from the ant.

Similarly, if there is a God and He created a temporal universe, then His rationality demands one of two things. Either He should have designed the universe so that IGI properties emerged efficiently in relation to the time that passes in it or He should have had good reasons for delaying their emergence. It is the difficulty of articulating these reasons that raises the problem of divine inefficiency in the first place. The question that motivated our whole discussion was: If there is a God, what might have been His reasons for designing the universe so that, within its created temporal framework, IGI properties emerge so late and seemingly fortuitously? By itself, the suggestion that God is outside of time does not provide these reasons and hence does not solve the problem of divine inefficiency.

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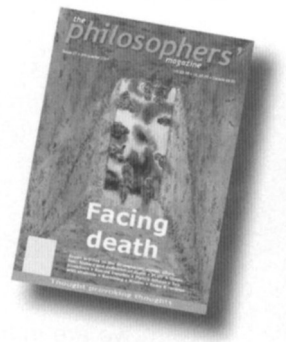
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