

Faulty Reasoning About Default Principles in Cosmological Arguments

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Robert Koons finds fault with my criticisms of his “new” cosmological argument; perhaps no less surprisingly, I find his replies unsatisfactory.¹ There seems to be little prospect that our views about the merits of the argument will converge; and that might be taken to be a reason for me to hold my counsel. However, there are various ways in which Koons rather egregiously misrepresents what I said previously; some good may come from getting clearer about where we genuinely disagree. So here goes.

1.

Suppose that we are arguing about the colour of some object. You think that the object is yellow; I’m not convinced. You offer me the following argument on behalf of your view: “You do not dispute that the object *looks* yellow. And anything which looks yellow is yellow. So surely you cannot dispute the claim that the object is yellow.” I am not convinced. The truth of the matter is that we are in circumstances in which we disagree about whether the colour things appear to have is the colour they actually have. So I say that it seems to me that the circumstances may be special: based on my prior experience, etc.—my overall view of the world—I am inclined to think that these may be circumstances in which one ought not to conclude from the fact that this thing appears to be yellow that it really is yellow.

Following the lead of Robert Koons, you then say: “I have a lovely new argument which should convince you that this thing which appears to be yellow really is yellow. You agree, do you not, that it is a default reasoning principle that things which appear to be yellow really are yellow? That is, in the absence of reason to think otherwise, if things appear to you to be yellow, then they really are yellow. But mark the consequence: in the present circumstance, you agree that this thing appears to be yellow; *ergo*, absent reasons which you have not yet given, you ought to believe that this thing is yellow. What do you say?”

Well, I say exactly what you should expect me to say. I have already told you that I am inclined to think that these may be circumstances in which one ought not to conclude from the fact that this thing appears to be yellow that it really is yellow. You have given me exactly no reason to revise that opinion; your lovely new argument is completely worthless. Of course, I might not be entitled to my inclination to think that these are circumstances in which one ought not to conclude from the fact that this thing appears to be yellow that it really is yellow. But this argument of yours does absolutely nothing at all towards showing that I do not have that entitlement. Since you are the one who is putting forward the argument—you are the one who is claiming that my beliefs are irrational, or inconsistent, or whatever—there is no doubt that your argument is a worthless failure.

¹ See Koons (1997) for the “new” argument; Oppy (1999) for my criticisms of that argument; and Koons (2001) for Koons’ response to those criticisms.

(The point here is not to deny that I have an obligation to form reasonable—and perhaps even warranted—beliefs. On the contrary, I accept that we all have a permanent—though perhaps defeasible—obligation to conform our beliefs to the canons of rational belief formation and rational belief revision. Rather, the point is that, since you are the one who is denying that I am reasonable—or perhaps warranted—in some aspect of my believing, it is up to you to make the case. The mere fact that we disagree on some matters does not give me a reason to revise my beliefs, any more than it gives you a reason to revise yours.)

2.

My imagined interlocutor in the previous section really does follow the lead of Robert Koons. The core idea behind his “new” cosmological argument is that, if one replaces the generalisation *every wholly contingent event has a cause* with the defeasible generalisation *normally a wholly contingent event has a cause*, then one converts a question-begging argument into one which is rationally compelling.

Our experience warrants adopting the causal principle as a default or defeasible rule. This is, however, all that is needed for the cosmological argument to be rationally compelling. ... The burden of proof is shifted to the agnostic, who must garner evidence of a positive sort for the proposition that the cosmos really is an exception to the rule. Merely pointing out the defeasible nature of the inference ... does not constitute a cogent rebuttal.²

I think that Koons is here mixing up considerations to do with winning debates and considerations to do with reasonable belief revision. (Note, on the one hand, his talk about arguments being “rationally compelling”; note, on the other hand, his talk about “cogent rebuttal”.) However, once we separate out these two separate kinds of considerations, it is clear that Koons doesn’t have a successful case to make with respect to either.

On the one hand, there is nothing in Koons’ adjustment to cosmological arguments which gives non-theists any more reason to revise their beliefs than was given by the original cosmological arguments. Since Koons talks about his argument being “rationally compelling”, it is natural to suppose that he thinks that, on the contrary, his adjustment to cosmological arguments does suddenly present non-theists with some extra reason to revise their beliefs. But that is plainly absurd. The concession that, in its original form, the argument is question-begging, is, I take it, tantamount to the concession that, since non-theists simply don’t accept the claim that the universe has a cause—and hence don’t accept the claim that every wholly contingent event has a cause—it is pointless to insist that an argument which starts from that assumption is rationally compelling. But, of course, starting with the assumption that, normally, wholly contingent events have causes, doesn’t change the fact that non-theists don’t accept the claim that the universe has a cause; consequently, we all know in advance that they think that they have “positive reason” for supposing that the universe as a whole may be an exception to the general rule. Hence, it is no less pointless to insist that an argument which starts with the revised assumption is rationally compelling.

² Koons (2001:195)

On the other hand, if we imagine that a debate is taking place, concerning the proposition that the universe has a cause, then it is a consideration which requires a response to claim that, normally, a wholly contingent event has a cause. If nothing is said in reply, then—by the standard rules of debate—that marks an advantage for the defenders of the claim that the universe has a cause. But, of course, exactly the same point would apply if, instead, the claim was advanced that every wholly contingent event has a cause. If nothing were said in response to that claim then—by the standard rules of debate—that too would mark an advantage to the defenders of the claim that the universe has a cause. So, once again, there is no substance to the claim that matters have been in any way advanced by the move from generalisation to defeasible generalisation.

An important general point to note here is that, where two parties disagree about a given subject matter—say, about the proposition that p —it is just a mistake for the members of one party to infer, from the observation that those on the other side have not been able to furnish them with a reason to change their minds, the conclusion that those on the other side are not rational in their beliefs. Non-theists almost universally do not believe that the universe has a cause; a successful argument for the conclusion that the universe has a cause must furnish them with a reason to change their minds about this matter—i.e., it must provide non-theists with something which, by their lights, they will recognise as a sufficient reason to change their minds. (Of course, the relevant non-theists must be reasonable, reflective, and sufficiently well-informed; but there is no doubt at all that there are such non-theists.³ And there is no reason for claiming that an argument is successful against those who are not reasonable, reflective and well-informed when it is not successful against those who are reasonable, reflective and well-informed: for there is no better evidence to be had about how those people would respond to the argument were they reasonable, reflective and well-informed than to go by the responses of non-theists who are reasonable, reflective and well-informed.)⁴

3

Suppose, again, that we are arguing about the colour of some object: say, a swan which is housed in the next room, and which neither of us has seen. You have lived all your life in the northern hemisphere, where all the swans which you have encountered have been white. While you have heard reports of observations in the southern hemisphere of black swans, you judge that these reports have absolutely no credence. Of course, you do not rule out *a priori* the possibility that there might be swans of some other colour; you have no reason to think that there is any logical necessity about the colour of swans, though you at least toy with the idea that there is some kind of natural necessity in virtue of which swans are white. I, on the other hand, have reacted differently to the reports of observations of black swans in the

³ If one holds that there can be no non-theists who are reasonable, reflective and sufficiently well-informed (at least with respect to their non-theism), then it seems to me that it is just a sham to claim that there are arguments which ought to persuade non-theists to give up their non-theism. If someone who holds a particular view is *ipso facto* not reasonable in holding that view, then there is no question that an argument could provide them with reasons to give up the view.

⁴ For a much fuller development of the line of thought introduced here, see Oppy (forthcoming).

southern hemisphere; I judge that these reports are reliable, and that there is very good reason to suppose that some swans are black.

You claim that the swan in the next room is white. In defence of this claim, you offer an argument which turns on the defeasible generalisation that all swans are white. Given your assessment of the evidence, there seems little reason to dispute that you have reason to accept this defeasible generalisation: you need to be given some reason to think that there are swans which have some colour other than white; so, in particular, you need to be given some reason to think that the given swan has some colour other than white. But, of course, I see things differently. The defeasible generalisation which you accept is not acceptable to me, because I believe that some swans are black. Indeed, in my view, there is no more reason to think that the swan in the next room is white than there is to think that it is black; so, of course, I can hardly accept the default generalisation that all swans are white. Your argument fails to persuade me because, with good reason, I do not accept the defeasible generalisation upon which the argument relies. I would, no doubt, be prepared to accept the defeasible generalisation that all swans are either white or black—that is a defeasible generalisation which is warranted by my evidence (and the other things which I believe)—but that generalisation won't allow you to draw the conclusion which you want to draw.⁵

This story parallels the other important part of my previous dispute with Koons. While a non-theist will not accept the defeasible generalisation that every event has a cause, a non-theist could accept the defeasible generalisation that every non-first event has a cause. (A first event is an event to which no event is temporally prior. The entire history of the universe up to the present is a first event; so too are any parts of this history which have the specified property.) The reasons which Koons takes to make the defeasible generalisation that every event has a cause plausible may be supposed to carry over to reasons which non-theists can take to make the defeasible generalisation that every non-first event has a cause plausible; but, of course, since the non-theist supposes that first events do not have causes, the non-theist cannot accept the defeasible generalisation which Koons proposes.⁶

It is perhaps also worth noting here that it would be plainly silly to insist that the greater simplicity of Koons' generalisation is a decisive argument in its favour, just as it would be silly to insist that the greater simplicity of the generalisation that all swans are white is a decisive argument in favour of that claim. Which generalisation one

⁵ In case it isn't completely obvious that I can't accept the default generalisation that all swans are white, consider the following. Why shouldn't I accept, as a default generalisation, the claim that all human beings are men? True enough, there are known exceptions—women and children—but, given that I recognise these exceptions, why should that matter? Answer: because I ought not to assume that someone who might, for all I know, be a woman or a child, is a man. To make assumptions in that way will certainly lead to unfortunate and embarrassing consequences.

⁶ It should be noted that it is far from obvious that one can say that the relevant difference between the case of the default generalisation about human beings discussed in an earlier footnote, and the default generalisation which Koons would have non-theists accept, is that the class of men is small in the class of human beings, whereas the class of non-first events is enormous in the class of events. After all, it is plausible to suppose that there will be infinitely many first events, and that there will also be infinitely many events—and it is no easy matter to determine whether these two infinities will be of different sizes. (I suspect that a souped-up version of the Schroeder-Bernstein theorem can be used to show that the two cardinalities are indeed identical; however, I am not at all certain that I am right about this.)

ought to accept has to be decided in the light of everything else which one accepts, including all of the relevant evidence which one possesses. And, as I insisted in my previous paper, simplicity is not the only consideration which matters; such things as empirical adequacy, explanatory power, fit with other well-established theories, and so forth, must also be taken into account.

4

I have said in various places that there can be reasonable non-theists who reasonably do not accept the claim that the universe has a cause. While nothing which I have said so far in my criticism of Koons strictly depends upon this claim⁷, it might be worthwhile saying something about the kinds of reasons which non-theists might have for believing as they do. The aim here is not to persuade non-theists of the truth of the non-theist position; rather, the aim is to try to promote understanding of how things may look from a non-theistic standpoint. I shall mention three kinds of considerations; it should not be supposed that these are the only kinds of considerations which might be mentioned here.

(1.) There is a well-known argument that there must be brute contingency if there is contingency at all. This argument can be adapted to the framework of Koons' proof as follows. Consider the event which is the sum of all wholly contingent events. Suppose that that event has a cause. That cause must be a necessary event, since it is wholly distinct from the sum of all wholly contingent events. But now consider the causal relation which holds between this necessary event and the sum of all wholly contingent events. If that relation is necessary, then—since the cause is necessary—it follows, *per impossible*, that the sum of all wholly contingent events is necessary. On the other hand, if that relation is contingent, then, again *per impossible*, there is an event—the “coming about” of the sum of all wholly contingent events—which is contingent, and which has the sum of all wholly contingent events as a proper part. This kind of argument is utterly familiar in the literature on causal principles and principles of sufficient reason; and there seems to be quite good excuse to find in it a reason for doubting that the universe—i.e. the sum of all wholly contingent events—has a cause.⁸

(2.) Suppose that Koons is right in thinking that no seriously controversial assumptions are required in order to move from the claim that the sum of all

⁷ Look back to the last paragraph in Section 2 if you need more argument in support of this claim.

⁸ This kind of argument can be framed equally well in terms of “situations” (Koons' favoured terminology). Consider the situation of the Cosmos' arising contingently. That situation involves nothing more than the Cosmos (which, by hypothesis, is wholly contingent) and the property of arising contingently—and so is itself wholly contingent. However—in consequence—that situation properly contains the Cosmos. And this contradicts the assumption that the Cosmos is the sum of all wholly contingent beings. So there is no situation of the Cosmos' arising contingently. The only alternative, given that the Cosmos has a cause, is that it arises necessarily from something which is necessarily existent. But anything which arises necessarily from something which is necessarily existent is itself necessary—and that contradicts the assumption that the Cosmos is wholly contingent. So it cannot be that the Cosmos arises: it cannot be that the sum of all contingent situations is caused by anything. By the standards of argument which Koons sets for himself in his most recent paper, surely this argument points to considerations which are sufficient to justify non-theists in refraining from believing that the universe has a cause.

contingent events has a cause to the conclusion that there is an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good God. Then, since there are all kinds of reasons for being sceptical about the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good God, it will follow that there are all kinds of reasons for being sceptical about the claim that the universe has a cause (and, hence, about the argument which goes by way of the default generalisation that normally, a wholly contingent event has a cause). For instance—and this is just one point among many—there are the considerations adduced in logical arguments from evil: many non-theists find it utterly incredible to suppose that the amounts and kinds of evils which are to be found in the world—e.g. the excruciating suffering of animals and young children—are compatible with the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good God.⁹ If we suppose—as Koons no doubt does—that there are no further seriously controversial assumptions which are needed in order to move from the claim that an omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good God exists to the conclusion that the God of the Christian Bible exists, then the contradictions and absurdities of scripture and orthodox theology provide a whole swag of further reasons for being sceptical about the claim that the universe has a cause. (The general point to be made here—and it is one which I made in my original paper—is that axiomatic developments of theories often encourage the vice of failure to comply with the principle that one must always take into account one's total relevant evidence when assessing a given claim. Koons' default generalisation is no exception to the general rule: if there are independent reasons for thinking that a cause of the universe must be the Christian God, and there are independent reasons for thinking that there is no such being, then there are independent reasons for thinking that the universe does not have a cause.)

(3) It is a familiar point that non-theists often appeal to Ockham's Razor in order to justify their rejection of theism. In the present case, we may assume that there is no disagreement between theists and non-theists about the existence of the sum of all wholly contingent events. (In fact, there is some disagreement about the nature of parts of this sum; but this point will not affect the argument which is under development.) So, one way of framing the dispute between theists and non-theists is in terms of the question whether the extra ontological and theoretical costs involved in the postulation of a cause for the sum of all wholly contingent events is worth the gains in explanatory power, and so forth. If non-theists can reasonably suppose that the costs are not worth the gains, then this is yet another way in which rejection of the claim that the universe has a cause—and hence rejection of the default generalisation that wholly contingent events have cause—can be justified. And, of course, arguments for the conclusion that the costs are not worth the gains are not hard to come by. For instance, if the argument in (1.) above is correct, then there must be brute contingency in the world (if there is any contingency at all); so the extra costs in the theistic picture cannot be justified on the grounds that they remove brute contingency from the picture.

⁹ Of course, even more non-theists also find it natural to suppose that, given the amounts and kinds of evils which are to be found in the world, it is very unlikely indeed that there is an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good God. However, one should not make the mistake of supposing that there is no mileage left in logical—as opposed to evidential—arguments from evil. If one supposes—as many non-theists do—that the notion of libertarian freedom is simply unintelligible, then the considerations raised in logical arguments from evil are apt to seem pretty formidable.

It should be noted that I do not suppose that the kinds of considerations which I have mentioned in (1.)-(3.) can easily be developed into arguments which ought to persuade theists to give up their theism. Rather, the point is—as I insisted in my earlier piece—that it is well-known that non-theists, by their own lights, have many reasons for rejecting the claim that the universe has a cause. (1.)-(3.) are merely intended as an *aide de memoire* for those who suppose—as it seems that Koons does—that non-theists just blankly refuse to accept that the universe has a cause, without having any reasons for thus refusing.¹⁰

5

I began by complaining that Koons rather egregiously misrepresents what I said in Oppy (1999). In conclusion, I shall round out my discussion by providing justification for this claim. Along the way, I shall also point out some places where it seems to me that Koons' own counterarguments are more than a little shaky. Most of my attention shall be focussed on the section "From Oppy's Critique to the Best Rebuttal of the Argument"¹¹; I shall also have something to say about "Oppy's Critique of my Corollaries"¹².

1. Koons says¹³:

In his response to my argument, Oppy seems confused about the nature of defeasible argumentation. To rebut a defeasible argument, it is not sufficient merely to point out that one or more of the principles involved admit of exceptions. ... To think that this truism constitutes a rebuttal is to be guilty of which is classically known as the "fallacy of Accident". For example, if I know that smokers generally develop health problems, and that Smith is a smoker, it is reasonable for me to conclude that Smith will develop health problems. Merely pointing out that some smokers live long without developing such problems is entirely irrelevant to the rational cogency of the original argument. Similarly, merely to point out, as Oppy does, that the Cosmos might be, for all we know, an exception to Axiom 8 is, as a rebuttal, a non-starter. We need some special reason for thinking that the Cosmos in particular is exceptional in this respect. The burden of proof is squarely on Oppy's shoulders, and merely complaining about my supposed 'question-begging' and 'foot-stomping' improprieties does nothing to discharge this responsibility.

¹⁰ Here's a sketch for another argument, this time for the conclusion that no theist ought to accept the claim that every wholly contingent event has a cause. This argument relies on the assumption that theists must buy into the free will defence against arguments from evil. (That assumption, in turn, can be underwritten by Mackie's famous argument: if free will is compatible with determinism, then God could—and hence should—have made a world in which everyone always freely chooses the good.) The free will defence relies on the assumption that people have libertarian freedom, i.e. it relies on the assumption that, when people make free choices, there is nothing in the world which determines or causes those choices. So, consider an occasion on which a person X freely chooses A rather than B. Plainly, the event of X's freely choosing A rather than B is a wholly contingent event—but, as a result of doctrinal commitments elsewhere, the theist is required to deny that there is a cause of X's freely choosing A rather than B. So, by the theist's own lights, it simply isn't true that every wholly contingent event has a cause. Given that theists have good reason to reject the claim that every wholly contingent event has a cause, they are hardly well placed to insist that non-theists ought to accept it.

¹¹ Koons (2001:195-8)

¹² Koons (2001:200-2)

¹³ Koons (2001:195-6)

In my opinion, it simply is not true that all I did in my previous critique was to “point out that the Cosmos might be, for all we know, an exception to Axiom 8”. Consider the following:

It is also these kinds of premises which non-theists typically and most vehemently dispute: it just isn't so that the universe has a cause, or a complete explanation, or a sufficient reason—so, of course, the universal generalisation in question cannot be true. ... But, at least by the lights of non-theists, there are good reasons for thinking otherwise in certain cases, including the case of the universe as a whole. ... Because the universe has no cause, first events require special treatment when it comes to framing certain causal principles ... One final observation. I have claimed that non-theists have good reasons for supposing that the universe does not have a cause, or a sufficient reason, or a complete explanation, or I do not mean to be taken to be saying that there are reasons which should lead theists to give up their theistic beliefs. There are many, many factors which can be taken into account in judging whether or not God exists ...¹⁴

This—and similar passages—make it perfectly clear that I insisted that non-theists have reasons to reject the claim that the universe has a cause, i.e. they have reasons for thinking that the Cosmos is special. Since these reasons are hardly state secrets—cf. the discussion in section 4 above—I assumed that saying this much would be enough to make it clear why Koons' “new” argument is, indeed, both question-begging and worthless. (Perhaps it is worth noting in passing that Koons is wrong about the Smith case. As even my first year students could point out, just because I know that smokers generally develop smoking related health problems and that Smith is a smoker, it does NOT follow that it is reasonable for me to conclude that Smith will develop smoking related health problems. Suppose, for instance, that I know that Smith is going to the electric chair tomorrow; one day is too short a period of time in which to develop smoking related health problems. The crucial point is that Koons has left out a further premise to the effect that the stated evidence is all of the relevant evidence which I have. And, as I pointed out above, exactly the same kind of difficulty arises in connection with his “new” cosmological argument.)

2. Koons says:

Oppy argues that we could replace Axiom 8* with the principle that every non-first event has a cause (call this Axiom 8NF). Oppy contends that all the evidence that can be adduced in support of Axiom 8* can also be adduced in support of 8NF, so there is no compelling reason for the sceptic to prefer the first to the second.¹⁵

While it is true that I do say that “all of the evidence which supports Koons' favoured version of the causal principle supports [8NF] equally well”, it is simply not true that I rely upon—or endorse—the argument from this claim to the conclusion that there is no compelling reason for the sceptic to prefer 8* to 8NF.¹⁶ Whether we should accept

¹⁴ Oppy (1999:380-1)

¹⁵ Koons (2001:196)

¹⁶ The reference which Koons gives is plainly to the passage where I make the claim about equal support; there is no evidence of the suspect inference anywhere in this paragraph (or elsewhere in my article). Indeed, only a few sentences later, I make the point that it is precisely because the non-theist

8* or 8NF is not decided by determination of the best inductive inference to make on the basis of—and on the basis alone of—our observations of causal relations between wholly contingent events in the here and now—in context, this is what is meant by “the evidence”—but rather must also take into account all other relevant theoretical and evidential considerations. Given that 8* might have a slight advantage in terms of simplicity, what matters is whether—as I said—non-theists have reasons for thinking that the universe is a special case.

3. Koons says:

Oppy admits that his principle might seem to be “slightly less natural” than Axiom 8*. I would argue that Oppy’s principle is in fact “slightly less natural” than 8* in exactly the same way that all emeralds are grue is “slightly less natural” than all emeralds are green. When drawing inductive generalisations, any loss of naturalness, however slight, can be critical. In fact, Oppy’s restriction of the universality of causation to non-first events is a classic case of special pleading, until and unless he can provide some principled ground for thinking that the absence of temporally prior situations is relevant to the presence or absence of a cause.¹⁷

In support of the claim about my alleged admission, Koons cites a footnote in my paper in which I write:

Another approach which non-theists might take is to concede that the collection of events which are not first events is slightly less natural than the collection of events simpliciter, but hold that, overall, non-theistic theories score best on the appropriate weighting of theoretical desiderata: naturalness, simplicity, explanatory scope, explanatory power, and so on.¹⁸

Given the way that this footnote begins—“another approach which non-theists might take”—ought to suggest that there is a different view which is presented in the main text, and indeed there is:

Perhaps Koons might complain that the collection of events which are not first events is “an unnatural and gerrymandered kind”—but I see no reason at all to agree with him. Because the universe has no cause, first events require special treatment when it comes to framing certain causal principles—the natural collection of events from framing certain causal principles is just the collection of events which are not first events.¹⁹

I don’t see how this could be clearer. I insisted that 8NF is not less natural than 8*; and—as is indicated in the cited text—I was prompted to do so by Koons’ own insistence, at p.197 in his original paper, that the category of wholly contingent facts is not “an unnatural and gerrymandered kind”. Perhaps there is a kind of “admission” here—albeit one of a rather qualified kind—that 8NF might seem to be less natural

thinks that the universe has no cause that the non-theists is bound to prefer 8NF to 8*; the inference to which Koons adverts is thus completely irrelevant.

¹⁷ Koons (2001:196)

¹⁸ Oppy (1999:388n5)

¹⁹ Oppy (1999:381)

than 8*, but it is highly misleading for Koons to fail to note that (a) I insist that 8NF is no less natural than 8*; and (b) I give reasons, which Koons provides no justification for discounting, why this insistence on my part is justified. (Of course, as I noted above, I don't agree with Koons that 8NF is arrived at as an inductive generalisation from our observations of the class of wholly contingent events; and nor do I agree with him that non-theists who have not provided him (Koons) with principled grounds for preferring 8NF to 8* cannot have principled grounds for this preference.)

4. Koons says:

Oppy is confusing defeasible or non-monotonic reasoning with deductive reasoning. It is certainly logically consistent to maintain the universality of causation with the exception of first events, but Oppy has not shown that it is reasonable to maintain such an exception. If Oppy's only reason for excepting first events from the scope of Axiom 8 is his distaste for the conclusion which would otherwise be drawn ... then his position is consistent but unreasonable. ... Oppy's restriction is unreasonable, in the absence of any reason to think that an event's relative temporal location is relevant to its having or lacking a cause.²⁰

First, I can't find any evidence in my paper that I confused defeasible reasoning with non-monotonic reasoning (and nothing which Koons says supports this allegation). *Second*, while it may be true that I did not show—i.e. prove to Koons—that it is reasonable to maintain an exception in the case of first events when framing causal principles, it isn't true that I failed to make it clear why this is precisely what reasonable non-theists will do. *Third*, there is nothing in my paper which suggest that my only reason for supporting 8NF is my distaste for the conclusion which can be drawn from 8*. I made it clear that I was taking it for granted that there are perfectly well-known reasons why non-theists hold that the universe does not have a cause; perhaps the modest sample which I provided in section 4 of the present paper will help to jog Koons' memory.

5. Koons says:

I argued for six corollaries of my principal theorem. Oppy objects to the first five of these, primarily on the grounds that they do not follow deductively from *a priori* premises. Again, Oppy misinterprets my intent. I claim that there are defeasible arguments for each of the corollaries, providing *prima facie* cases for some tentative conjectures about the first cause. I never claimed that the arguments are *a priori*; in many cases, they rely upon inductive generalisations from scientific experience. A cogent rebuttal of these arguments would require introducing some kind of contrary evidence or counter-argument. I am confident that the inferences sketched in this section represent a natural and proper tendency of the human mind. The Rubicon is crossed when one accepts the existence of a necessary first cause. I know of no one, living or dead, who accepted the argument for a first cause who did not go on to embrace the existence of an infinite and immaterial being. Oppy is no exception.²¹

²⁰ Koons (2001:196)

²¹ Koons (2001:200)

Where to begin?

First, all that Koons says in introducing the relevant part of his original paper is that he will “lay out what I take to be plausible corollaries” of the result that the sum of all wholly contingent events has a necessary cause. Since corollaries are immediate entailments from things already proven, it should not be surprising that I took Koons to be claiming that he will quickly deduce further claims which he takes to be independently plausible. This interpretation is supported by the formal structure and method of the paper, and by the fact that Koons does claim that the main argument is a proof in a particular kind of formal system. True enough, the use of non-monotonic reasoning means that the proof is defeasible; but everything else in the proof is meant to be absolutely logically watertight. There is no indication whatsoever that the standards which are meant to apply in the case of the “corollaries” are any lower than those which are meant to apply in the case of the main proof. Given all of this, it should not be surprising that the stated aim of my critique is to show that the argumentation in the “corollaries” is “quite sloppy”, and that it “does not suffice to quieten the familiar suspicion that there is no decent argument from First Cause to God”.

Second, I can’t see how Koons could justify the claim that my main ground for objecting to his corollaries is that they do not follow deductively from *a priori* premises. Rather, my grounds are just the ones which you would expect; even the most casual reading of what I actually wrote will make it clear that I argued that: (a) there are places where the claims which Koons makes are unclear; (b) there are places where the inferences which he makes seem invalid; and (c) there are places where the additional assumptions which he makes are not obviously true. How Koons thinks that the considerations which I advance fail to be (at least putative) contrary evidence and counter-argument is extremely hard to understand.

Third, I don’t see much reason to believe that Koons did intend the arguments in question to be treated as defeasible inferences. At any rate, on a careful re-reading, I found it implausible to suppose that he intended any of the premises to be treated in the way in which he treats the causal principle in his main argument. At the very least, it seems that Koons ought to have indicated more clearly which of the premises in the arguments are the “defeasible” ones; and he ought also to have indicated how they get to have this status (on analogy with the justification which he provides for giving this status to his causal principle).²²

²² Consider: “Corollary 5: God has only immeasurable attributes. Any attribute that is measurable participates in the structure of the more and the less. The more and the less constitute a continuous spectrum. Consequently, it seems reasonable to assume [that all measurable properties are continuous and all continuous properties are contingent]. Therefore, no measurable attribute can be had by necessity.” (Koons (1997:200)) About this, Koons now says: “Oppy insists on reading my argument as a deductive syllogism assuming that all measurable properties are continuous, and that all continuous properties are contingent. In fact, I claimed only that there is a strong presumption in favour of contingency in such cases, and Oppy has offered no reason to override that presumption in the case at hand.” (Koons (2001:200)) But just look at what Koons actually wrote. The argument is set out as a syllogism, with the added comment that a certain assumption—viz., roughly, that all continuous properties are contingent— “seems reasonable”. This added comment does not undermine the claim that the argument is intended as a ‘syllogism’; it certainly does not bring it about that all that is claimed is that there is a “strong presumption” that all continuous properties are contingent. Moreover, it is worth noting that one of the criticisms which I make—namely, that quantum mechanical considerations favour the claim that many measurable properties are discrete—is met with the reply that “acceptance

Fourth, while Koons may be right that no one who accepts the existence of a necessary cause fails to go on to accept the “corollaries”, the argument given earlier in this paper suggests a good reason why we should not be too quick to suppose that this lends support to the hypothesis that the arguments from that claim to those corollaries is a good one, or even that it is a natural tendency of the human mind. The most obvious point to note is that what warrants Koons’ belief in the various claims which go into his argument and corollaries is his prior belief in the existence of God (and in the various doctrinal commitments which typically go along with that belief).²³ Religious experience, religious tradition and scripture are the true foundations of Koons’ belief in God—the true source of whatever warrant they have—as indeed they are for all religious believers.²⁴ So, while it is not in the least bit surprising that those who accept the conclusion of Koons’ main argument also accept the major claims given in the corollaries, it would be extremely hasty to suppose that this shows that the arguments which Koons advances are either natural tendencies of the human mind or possessed of other argumentative virtues.

Fifth, it is particularly silly to end with the observation that “Oppy is no exception”. Of course not! The claim in question is a generalisation about those who accept the argument for a first cause—and I am not one of them. Moreover, despite what Koons says, it seems to me that there have been people who have accepted the argument for a first cause who did not go on to embrace the existence of an infinite and immaterial being. In particular, all those theists who deny that there is any potentiality in God, and who also deny that there are actual infinities, must, on pain of contradiction, deny that the necessary first cause whose existence they embrace is infinite. For, on the one hand, it cannot be actually infinite, since there are no actual infinities; and, on the other hand, it cannot be potentially infinite, since there are no potentialities in God. The only remaining option is that God is finite.

6

While there is much more I could say about Koons (2001), it would require a great many words to do so.²⁵ I suspect that Koons really had no interest in responding to my criticisms of his argument (and hence did not bother to pay much attention to what I actually said.) Instead, his real interest was in finding somewhere to expound his new—albeit strange—hypothesis about the degrees of necessity of causal relations. However, if this is right, then I think that it is a pity—for, as I have tried to argue further here, there are reasons to take what I said in my previous paper seriously.

of the hypothesis of quantisation in physics required considerable positive evidence to overcome the strong rational presumption in favour of the possibility of small increases and decreases”. How this is meant to constitute a reply—and how it is supposed to comport with the claim that the arguments should be taken to rely upon “inductive generalisations from scientific experience”—is nowhere explained.

²³ A further doctrinal commitment, which I am sure must play some role in his enthusiasm for his argument, is that the fundamental truths of revealed religion can be known by reason alone.

²⁴ I’m prepared to treat this as a defeasible generalisation if challenged!

²⁵ This is particularly true of his revised discussion of the “corollaries”. I should note, too, that Koons throwaway remarks about our previous comments on design arguments are also highly contestable.

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