

Epistemic Deism Revisited

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ABSTRACT In 2013 I wrote a paper entitled “A Deistic Discussion of Murphy and Tracy’s Accounts of God’s Limited Activity in the Natural World,” in which I criticized the views of Nancey Murphy and Thomas Tracy, labeling their views as something that I called “epistemic deism.” Since the publication of that paper another, similar, view by Bradley Monton was brought to my attention, one called “noninterventionist special divine action theory.” I take this paper as an opportunity to accomplish several goals. First, I take it as an opportunity to clarify and correct some of my previous claims. Secondly, I present and analyze Monton’s view. And, finally, I discuss the similarities that Monton’s view holds with those of Murphy’s and Tracy’s and discuss how they all can be reduced to being part of the same family of ontological views which are, ultimately, implausible.

KEYWORDS deism; divine; epistemic; intervention; metaphysics; miracle

INTRODUCTION

Several years ago I wrote an essay, entitled “A Deistic Discussion of Murphy and Tracy’s Accounts of God’s Limited Activity in the Natural World,”¹ in which I criticized some particular views of Nancey Murphy and Thomas Tracy. I argued that the views that they put forth, which I will describe in more detail shortly, were unfeasible ontological views that ultimately needed to be rejected, for a variety of reasons. Since that paper was written I have had the opportunity to benefit from feedback and suggestions from a variety of people and places. In light of all of the comments, suggestions, and criticisms that I have received over the past several years, as well as

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some further research on the area that has been brought to my attention, specifically the work of Bradley Monton, I felt it necessary to write this paper to both provide some clarification on some of my previous claims, and to discuss some new research that was brought to my attention.

Before moving any further I would like to clarify some details that I have been questioned about since writing my previous paper. The first point of clarification that I would like to make is that, in my previous paper, I argued that the positions forwarded by Murphy and Tracy are both, essentially, poor forms of deism. I went on to present reasons as to why these two views were unsatisfactory as deistic viewpoints, since they seemed to work with faulty notions of what deism entails, and how they were ultimately unsatisfactory as ontological views altogether. It is important to point out, however, that this deistic interpretation of Murphy and Tracy is one made by me, and nowhere in their works do Murphy or Tracy refer to their views as deistic in nature, in any sense. It is simply my construal of their views as deistic in nature that allows me to go on and dismiss their views as both unsuitable as deistic, unsuitable as classically theistic, and unsuitable as ontological views altogether. The main problem that I was trying to draw attention to, through that objection, was that it is obvious that the views presented by Murphy and Tracy, while they show some similarities to it, are not classically theistic and that, while they show some similarities to it, are also not deistic. This left both views in some sort of undesirable limbo position. The second point of clarification that I will make here is that, in my previous paper, I differentiated between metaphysical deism and epistemic deism, ultimately going on to argue for the inadequacy of epistemic deism and subsequently deeming the views of Murphy and Tracy to fall under the classification of epistemic deism. This terminology, however, may have been slightly misleading since both of these versions of deism that I discussed are metaphysical views. The difference between the two can be found in what is emphasized in each view, since the latter places a large emphasis on the epistemic status of the metaphysical state, whereas the former does not. The third thing that I will mention is that, in my previous paper, I chose not to undertake a deep investigation of the scientific aspects of the essays of either Murphy or Tracy and some saw this as a weak point in my arguments. I did not undertake such research because I wanted to simply use the scientific evidence pre-

1. Leland R. Harper, "A Deistic Discussion of Murphy and Tracy's Accounts of God's Limited Activity in the Natural World," *Forum Philosophicum* 18, no. 1 (2013), 93–107, doi: 10.5840/forumphil20131816.

sented by Murphy and Tracy to show that, whether the science that they present is accurate or not, their views are still ultimately unsatisfactory. My goal was not to provide an in-depth assessment of the scientific theories discussed by Murphy and Tracy, rather, my goal was to show that regardless of the scientific views that Murphy and Tracy present their ontological views are implausible. And, fourthly, I would also like to clarify that I am not now, nor was I previously, in the business of presenting a positive alternative ontological view to the ones that I ultimately dismiss in this paper and in my previous one. Both of my papers are meant to serve solely as exegetical and critical and I will not present a complete ontological view as an alternative to the ones that I criticize.

One final point that I will make in this introductory section is that, since writing my previous paper, I have come to learn that the kinds of views presented by Murphy and Tracy can be classified as being part of a larger group of views called noninterventionist special divine action, a family of views which allow for God to intervene only at the subatomic levels of nature. It is still not clear that this is a very influential viewpoint, or if it is growing in popularity, but it is certainly proving to be a more substantial family of arguments than I previously thought, which is what has triggered this revisit to the topic.² Moving forward in this paper I use “noninterventionist special divine action” and “epistemic deism” interchangeably, but I prefer to use the latter. This change in terminology is for two reasons. The first is that noninterventionist special divine action generally tends to maintain the appearance of traditional or *metaphysical* deism, *for all we know*, even though that is only because of our epistemic limitations. Thus, given our epistemic limitations, noninterventionist special divine action appears deistic in nature. That is, it is an account of divine causation that relies largely on our epistemic limitations, and I think that this reliance should be reflected in the terminology. The second reason is that there seems to be some incompatibility between the terms “noninterventionist” and “action” as they appear in the overall name of the account. It is not clear in my mind how the two can plausibly coexist, since to act seems to entail intervention, whereas I do not think that the same problem is present in the term “epistemic deism.”

Moving through this discussion, this paper will first begin with a brief revisit of the views presented by Murphy and Tracy. The exposition of

2. Much discussion on the topic of divine action can be attributed to the Divine Action Project in which the Vatican Observatory and the Center for Theology and Natural Sciences sponsored a series of conferences, in the late 1980's and early 1990's, on divine action.

their two views will be kept brief since a more detailed discussion of them can be found in my previous paper. I will then discuss the work of Bradley Monton, and his paper “God Acts in the Quantum World,”³ and how it relates to the works of Murphy and Tracy and, ultimately, to epistemic deism as a whole. Finally, I will discuss how, even though Monton’s view is preferential to those of Murphy and Tracy, it can still be categorized as epistemic deism and, thus, cannot be considered a plausible ontological viewpoint.

REVISITING MURPHY AND TRACY

Without going into too much detail to outline the views of Nancey Murphy and Thomas Tracy let us briefly revisit their views and the similarities and differences between them. In writing her paper, the goal that Nancey Murphy set out to accomplish was to “provide an alternative account of causation and divine action that is both theologically adequate (consistent with Christian doctrine and adequate Christian experience), and consistent with contemporary science.”⁴ The overall thesis that she argued for was that

In addition to creation and sustenance, God has two modes of action within the created order: one at the quantum level (or whatever turns out to be the most basic level of reality) and the other through human intelligence and action. The apparently random events at the quantum level all involve (but are not exhausted by) specific, intentional act of God. God’s action at this level is limited by two factors. First, God respects the integrity of the entities with which he cooperates—there are some things that God can do with an electron, for instance, and many other things that he cannot (e.g., make it have the rest-mass of a proton, or a positive charge). Second, within the wider range of effects allowed by God’s action in and through sub-atomic entities, God restricts his action in order to produce a world that *for all we can tell* is orderly and law-like in its operation.⁵

3. Bradley Monton, “God Acts in the Quantum World,” in *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 5, ed. Jonathan L. Kvanvig (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2012), 167–84, doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198704768.003.0007. Hereafter cited in text as *GQW*.

4. Nancey Murphy, “Divine Action in the Natural Order: Buridan’s Ass and Schrödinger’s Cat,” in *Chaos and Complexity: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action*, eds. Robert John Russell et al. (Notre Dame: The Notre Dame University Press, 1995), 326.

5. *Ibid.*, 339.

Essentially, Murphy puts forth a bottom-up account of events in the natural world, claiming that God acts only at the subatomic level, and that the actions at the subatomic level translate into events at the macro level. Because of the apparent randomness that is seen in most subatomic events, we are left with two possible options to explain them, explains Murphy. They are either completely random or they are determined by God. Murphy argues that, based on the Principle of Sufficient Reason, the idea that these events are random ought to be rejected, thus leaving only the option that they are determined by God.⁶ This brings us to the conclusion that, since there are no natural laws in operation at the subatomic level,⁷ God is able to act at that level in order to influence and/or determine events at the macro level, without the events being deemed miraculous or “counting against” the causal closure of the natural world.

Tracy, much like Murphy, focuses his attention on subatomic processes as a place to insert God’s activity. He argues that there are explanatory gaps that surround certain subatomic processes, and that these explanatory gaps are likely places where God may choose to act. What Tracy means by “explanatory gaps” are situations where we must admit that we do not have any suitable explanations to questions raised by scientific inquiry, or when particular theories entail that we will fundamentally be unable to give sufficient explanations for some events that should be covered by that particular theory.⁸ Tracy argues against “God of the gaps” theories, as he believes that God is not to be found in what we *don’t* know, rather God is to be found in what we *do* know. In most “God of the gaps” theories the progress of science entails an inverse relation on the defined role of God in the world and the kinds of actions that He can perform, which Tracy feels is not an adequate account of God and His actions. While this may be the case, Tracy believes that there are still some aspects of nature that will, in principle, be unknowable by human minds or scientific advancements. This case of having certain things be fundamentally beyond our epistemic grasp allows a spot to insert God as a causal agent without the risk of having the progression of science or

6. Ibid., 341.

7. The kinds of laws of nature that Murphy here (and, Monton and, to some degree, Tracy) seem to be primarily concerned with are deterministic laws of nature, rather than probabilistic laws of nature. While there is no specific mention of the kinds of laws of nature are being referred to, I will move forward with the note that, when discussing laws of nature, we are discussing deterministic laws.

8. Thomas Tracy, “Particular Providence and God of the Gaps,” in Russell et al., *Chaos and Complexity*, 290. Hereafter cited in text as *PPG*.

human knowledge force Him out of that position. Tracy claims that some quantum processes

are so extraordinarily sensitive to their initial conditions that arbitrarily close starting points for these processes can produce dramatically divergent outcomes. The results will be unpredictable in principle, since it will not be epistemically possible either (a) to specify the initial conditions with full accuracy or (b) to predict their result by considering the operation of the system under similar, yet slightly different, initial conditions. (*PPG*, 312)

Tracy is aware that, often, when trying to provide an account of divine intervention, concessions will have to be made on either the scientific aspects of the account to account for the theological aspects of the account, or on the theological aspects of the account in order to account for the scientific aspects of the account. With this in mind, however, he goes on to argue that if it turns out that the unpredictability of indeterministic chance at the quantum level and the chaotic unpredictability in the system that conveys the quantum effect are both confirmed “then it is open to us to propose that one way in which God may act in history is by determining at least some events at the quantum level” (*PPG*, 318). That is not to say however, that God determines the outcome of each and every quantum event, or that He randomly chooses what outcome will result from each subatomic process, “[r]ather, God will realize only one of the several potentials in the quantum system, which is defined as a probability distribution” (*PPG*, 318). What this means is that the initial starting point of the subatomic process is one that can potentially lead to multiple equally possible and equally realizable outcomes, and the sole role played by God is that He determines which of these equally realizable outcomes is actually realized in each particular case, according to Tracy.⁹

The key aspects in which Murphy’s and Tracy’s view differ from each other is that, for Tracy, only *certain* quantum processes and events are intervened in by God whereas, on Murphy’s account, it seems that God’s action is required for any subatomic process to be carried out. Secondly, while it seems that, on Murphy’s account, God has no limits in determining the outcomes of each quantum process, the same cannot be said on Tracy’s view. For Tracy, God’s ability is limited to a finite (and potentially small) number of potentialities that are dictated by the starting point of

9. This is where we see that Tracy, as opposed to Murphy (and, later, Monton), is concerned with probabilistic laws of nature rather than deterministic laws of nature.

the subatomic process. From each starting point, God is able to realize only one outcome out of the numerous pre-determined potentialities.

Without going into substantial detail of my objections towards the views of Murphy and Tracy, since I have already done that in my previous paper,¹⁰ I would like to briefly revisit some of these objections. I will begin with my objections to Murphy's view. There are two objections that I previously raised against Murphy's paper, both of which I still maintain. The first is that she needs to refine her explanation of how it is possible that God intervene in the natural world without breaking any natural laws, and how this intervention without breaking natural laws renders the action non-miraculous. This still just seems odd to me, since it places an inverse relation between our knowledge of the world and God's ability to act, which does not seem like something that either theists or atheists would be eager to accept. I would also like to amend one of my previous objections, in which I argued that Murphy was working with a flawed definition of deism, thus allowing her to slip in her method of divine intervention while still maintaining a deistic label. As noted above, the deistic interpretation was solely made by myself, and nowhere does Murphy claim that her view is deistic in nature, but the construal still seems to fit here. Were she to make that claim then my previous objection would stand but, as it is right now, my objection is purely against my construal of her view. A construal that she may not have intended or desired, so my objection may not be as strong as an objection as I previously thought. The second objection is that she needs to do more work in describing just how events at the micro level translate into events at the macro level. Whether they do or do not translate, Murphy is faced with a problem nonetheless. Either she must explain why God would choose to act at a level that provides no translation to events at a level that we will ever see, or she must explain why God would choose to limit Himself to acting at the subatomic level, and further explain how her view is any different than classical theism save for the one added limitation of relegating God to subatomic actions. In either case, there is still a good amount of additional explanatory work that she must do in order to make her view more complete and potentially plausible but, without having done that work, the view remains incomplete.

Moving on to my objections towards Tracy's view, I argued that there are three notable defects in his overall argument as well. The first is that, at the outset of his paper, Tracy argues against "God of the gaps" kinds of

10. Harper, "A Deistic Discussion of Murphy and Tracy's Accounts."

theories but, in the end, he does little to show any ways in which his theory cannot be categorized as such, inserting the causal and explanatory role of God only in the areas of the world that are epistemically inaccessible to us. This leaves Tracy's own view open to many of the objections that he raised against "'God of the gaps' theories" (*PPG*, 301). The second objection that I raised is that Tracy needs to find an adequate way to account for the apparent limitations that his theory places on God's active ability. On his account, God is limited not only to acting at the subatomic level, but He is also limited to actualizing one of a number of pre-determined equally-realizable potential outcomes for each quantum starting point. This, at least on the surface, seems to create some tension between his account and typical accounts of omnipotence, so this is something that Tracy needs to address. And finally, Tracy proposes only that God needs to act in some quantum processes, but not others, yet he provides no explanation or reasoning for this differentiation. That is, Tracy needs to elaborate on what makes the subatomic processes that require God's intervention any different from the subatomic processes that do not. Without an adequate explanation for this differentiation, it seems that God is arbitrarily choosing which subatomic processes to act on and which subatomic processes to leave alone.

MONTON'S VIEW

A paper written by Bradley Monton is one that was brought to my attention by several colleagues within the past year. The main goal that Monton sets out to accomplish in his paper "God Acts in the Quantum World" (*GQW*) is to argue that despite the nature of noninterventionist special divine action theories confining God's active ability to the subatomic world, this does not mean that what God can accomplish through His actions is limited in any sense. Monton aims to show that, even by acting only on subatomic particles, God is still able to accomplish great things such as parting the Red Sea or turning water into wine (*GQW*, 133).

Monton's overall account relies on the GRW theory, which he describes as follows:

[T]he GRW theory [named after its proponents, Ghirardi, Rimini, and Weber] is an indeterministic version of quantum mechanics that allows for indeterministic "GRW hits" to happen on the wave function of a particle, thus localizing the wave function. This means that a majority of the mass density of the particle is in a small region of space, but the wave function has tails

that go to infinity, so the mass of the particle is also spread out throughout this infinite region of space. The GRW hit can happen anywhere that the wave function is non-zero, so the GRW hit can happen most anywhere in space, concentrating most of the mass density for the particle in that region where the GRW hit happened.¹¹

Given Monton's acceptance of the indeterministic nature of subatomic processes, God's activity can be inserted into this level without the risk of violating any particular laws of nature. Because of the nature of the indeterminacy of the GRW theory, Monton goes on to argue that, for those who want to maintain the existence of an active God,

[w]ithin the constraints of the laws of the GRW theory, God can make a GRW hit happen anywhere, on any particle, or collection of particles. This gives God the power to move particles around, anywhere in the universe. And moreover, God can do so arbitrarily quickly, just by making the GRW hits happen in an arbitrarily small amount of time. (*GQW*, 137)

So unlike Murphy and Tracy, Monton does not argue that it is necessary that God intervene in order to facilitate all or some subatomic processes, rather, he only aims to show that God acting in a particular way at the subatomic level is compatible with the GRW theory, of which he is a proponent. Monton has also attempted to provide an account of how God's actions at the subatomic level can lead to grand outcomes at the macro level, ultimately making God's active abilities quite expansive.

While Monton's account seems to be more complete than those presented by Murphy and Tracy, in that it provides more detail in how exactly God acts in the natural world, it still falls within the general framework of epistemic deism. This is because Monton outlines a way in which it is possible for God to interact with the natural world at the subatomic level that is beyond our epistemic grasp and, one would assume, will always be beyond our epistemic grasp. It is possible that God may have independent reasons for wanting His work to remain "hidden" from us but, for this to happen, there still needs to be some relationship between God's actions and our epistemic abilities. In the view presented by Monton, God's way of hiding His action from us just happens to be at the subatomic level—

11. *GQW*, 137. Surely, there are those who will not accept Monton's account of the GRW theory, and those who do not accept it will find no reason to accept the remainder of what he goes on to argue and can add that to the list of objections that I ultimately present against his view. For our purposes here, I accept Monton's account of the GRW theory.

a level that is beyond our epistemic grasp. With all of that said, I think that Monton provides a far more complete account than either Murphy or Tracy do, in that it is both more detailed while also less ambitious in its aims. While both Murphy and Tracy argue that it is necessary that God act at the subatomic level to actualize some or all subatomic processes, Monton makes no such claim. He simply aims to show that God's action at the subatomic level is compatible with GRW theory and that despite God's action being limited to the subatomic level the outcomes that arise from it are not as limited as one may think.

Despite some of the strengths of Monton's argument, it is still not altogether clear what would motivate God to act in such a system, limiting Himself to acting in such a way. While this may not have been a specific question that Monton aims to explicate in his paper, it is still a question that arises. It seems as if, with the natural laws already in existence within the GRW theory, there is simply no need to invoke the activity, or even existence of God. Granted, this theory can be viewed with the caveat that it is intended for those who want to maintain the existence of God, but unlike the views of Murphy and Tracy where God's action seems necessary to facilitate particular subatomic processes, the same cannot be said for Monton's account. So one thing that Monton needs to explain is why his view needs an active God, or even a God at all.

Another aspect in which Monton's account can use further explanation is that, while he provides a substantial explanation of how God's action at the subatomic level translates into visible outcomes at the macro level, he says nothing about why God's actions need to be limited to the subatomic level. Other than the fact that it seems to be a prerequisite of noninterventionist special divine action theory nothing is said about why God's active ability is either confined to the micro level or why He chooses to keep His actions to the micro level. So again, it seems that the only motivation for having an account that relegates God's active ability to this level is for reasons related to making them undetectable by us, which is the prime component of epistemic deism. While Monton's GRW account makes substantial improvements on the views of Murphy and Tracy by (1) providing a substantial explanation of the theory of physics with which he aims to demonstrate the compatibility of God's actions, (2) clearly demonstrating how God's actions at the micro level translate into meaningful events at the macro level, and (3) being far less ambitious in his overall argument by trying to show only that God's action at the subatomic level is compatible with rather than required by a particular account of physics, there are still questions that remain to be answered.

While Monton's view is markedly different in terms of approach and scope from those of Murphy and Tracy I have noted some of the improvements that Monton's view has made over the views of Murphy and Tracy. That said, however, his view shares many core similarities with the views of Murphy and Tracy, and it can still ultimately be reduced to being one that falls within the epistemic deism family. The overall qualifying factor is that Monton's view still relies on God solely acting at levels that are epistemically inaccessible to us, leaving God's active ability and the epistemic abilities of humans bound in an inverse relation, and this puts his view in the same category as those as Murphy and Tracy, and leaves him to answer many of the same questions that Murphy and Tracy still need to.

The introduction of Monton's view to the discussion, while interesting, has done little to change my outlook on the plausibility epistemic deism. I still maintain that any ontological view categorized as epistemic deism or as noninterventionist special divine action theory places too many restrictions on God's active ability, and restrictions that are inversely related to the epistemic capabilities of humans, without adequate explanation or reasoning behind them. This seems fundamentally wrong, adding multiple unnecessary levels of complexity, restrictions, and exceptions, and this is what makes epistemic deism implausible as an ontological view.

CONCLUSION

Through the discussion of all three views that have been put forth by Murphy, Tracy, and Monton we have seen that they are each in line with aspects of epistemic deism, in that they all generally argue for God's intervention in the universe, but that these interventions can and do only happen at levels and in ways that are epistemically inaccessible to us. The discussion has also gone to show a variety of problems that are present within these types of theories, namely that there is an enormous amount of explanation that must go into each and every detail within the theory. This is because any theory that can be reduced to a version of epistemic deism is, essentially, a theory that is based on justifying varying numbers and degrees of exceptions within itself.

The term deism typically connotes, among other things, the causal closure of a system, but epistemic deistic theories try to posit and justify ways in which divine intervention can be permitted yet maintain aspects of that causal closure. In the case of epistemic deism theories the claim is often that divine interaction occurs at levels that are unknowable to us, therefore leaving the world (as far as we can and will ever know) as causally

closed. This simply does not seem right since it would entail that God's actions are limited by and dependent on the intellect of humans, in that He only chooses to do actions that we cannot know about. With our knowledge of science and physics constantly advancing this would seem to result in God's active abilities becoming more and more limited as our knowledge progresses. Furthermore, it seems that we could also say that epistemic deism makes God's intervention substantially undermined, if not altogether pointless since, on it, we would never know how or when God is acting on or in the natural world. This lack of knowledge of when and how God is acting seems to undermine at least one of the points of divine intervention, which is the knowledge that the intervention is coming from God. Of course, these are just some possible objections to the overall account of epistemic deism, and the epistemic deist could respond by arguing that there is some sort of upper threshold to the limits of human knowledge, but it still goes to show that all epistemic deists face an uphill battle in trying to justify how they aim to maintain a deistic undertone in their theories that is based on the human capacities for knowledge while at the same time allowing God to act but still placing limitations on His acting abilities. Furthermore, causal closure is something that either does or does not obtain, regardless of whether or not there is some conscious knowledge of it. It seems that epistemic deists are arguing that our ignorance of the fact that there is no causal closure in the natural world entails that there is causal closure in the natural world, which does not seem right. It simply does not appear that the epistemic deist will ever be able to satisfactorily and completely create a substantial account of how and why certain limitations are able to be placed on God, and how or why certain actions that He does do not count against the requirement for causal closure of the universe that any theory labeled as deistic should entail.

Furthermore, the epistemic deist will need to answer the question of what exactly makes his theory deistic, in the traditional sense of the term. Again, since deism generally tends to entail causal closure, which is an aspect that epistemic deistic theories lack, it is not entirely clear just how these theories can be, or even whether they should be, labeled as deistic. To take it one step further, the epistemic deist will also need to answer the question of how his view ought to be distinguished from classical theism. While it appears that the interventions that God makes in the world under the epistemic deism framework would generally tend to be very subtle and, by definition, unknowable to us, it is not clear that this kind of action would be inconsistent with a version of classical theism. Some versions of classical theism could, in theory, argue that God is active only in ways

that are unseen by us, so the epistemic deist would have to provide some amount of explanation to differentiate his view from such a version of classical theism.

Finally, as alluded to earlier, for any account of epistemic deism there is a need to describe what kinds of limitations are placed on God and His activity within the universe. The common thread, as noted, that will be present is the epistemic boundary of God's actions. The epistemic deist will have to detail exactly what kinds of limitations, if they are to be more complex than the simple "unknowability" of them, are placed on God and His creative ability, since epistemic deism entails limitations on God's creative ability be it in scope or method. The epistemic deist will also have to detail why exactly these particular limitations are relevant and necessary for his particular account, as well as detail how these limitations are able to coexist with the absolute nature of most of the divine attributes.

With all of the problems mentioned above and those discussed in my previous paper, both specific to Murphy's, Tracy's, and Monton's views and those addressed to epistemic deism in general, it is almost as if each claim made within an epistemic deistic theory simply raises more questions than it answers. Of course, each individual theory may be able to deal with some, or even most of these problems, but I am not convinced that any version of epistemic deism will be able to adequately address all of the questions raised. Each adequate answer to one question will simply result in pushing off some contradiction, counter-intuitive thought, or highly debated claim to the end of the line, where eventually it will show itself to weaken, if not destroy, the plausibility of the overall account.

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