

# ABDUCTIVE REASONING AND AN OMNIPOTENT GOD: A RESPONSE TO DANIEL CAME

ALEX YOUSIF  
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SAN BERNARDINO

Daniel Came<sup>1</sup> boldly argues that given certain assumptions, no omnipotent being can even in principle be the best explanation for some contingent state of affairs *S*.<sup>2</sup> In this paper, I argue that (i) even given Came's assumptions, his argument rests crucially on a non sequitur, that (ii) he just assumes that the prior probability of God's existence is very low, and that (iii) his conclusions entail propositions that are very probably false.

## §1. CAME'S ASSUMPTIONS

Came assumes the following (19–20):

- A1:** We should allow into our ontology only what figures in the best explanation of an event or fact.
- A2:** Explanation is contrastive by nature, in that the explanandum always consists in a contrast between a fact and a foil.
- A3:** To be God, a being must be omnipotent.
- A4:** For any proposition *p*, an omnipotent being has the power to make *p* true.
- A5:** Citing a cause is always explanatory.

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1 Daniel Came, "Theism and Contrastive Explanation." *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 9, no. 1 (2017): 19–26. doi:10.24204/ejpr.v9i1.1862.

2 Came speaks of God's making propositions true. In this paper, I prefer to speak of God's actualizing states of affairs; but this makes no difference to the argument's evaluation. Furthermore, I assume, along with Came, that the relevant states of affairs that God is said to bring about are contingent. I also assume that the relevant states of affairs are strongly actualizable (to use Plantinga terminology).

According to Came, to say that a state of affairs  $S1$  explains a state of affairs  $S2$  is to say that  $S1$  explains why  $S2$  obtains rather than why its complement  $S2^*$  obtains. But since Came argues that an omnipotent God can never explain why some  $S$  obtains rather than  $S^*$ , God cannot be the best explanation for  $S$ . So, by A1, we should not allow God into our ontology.

## §2. CAME'S NON SEQUITUR

Now, the crucial step in Came's argument is moving from A2–A5 to the bold conclusion that an omnipotent God cannot — even in principle — be the best explanation for some state of affairs  $S$ . But how does he make this move? Came explains this move in the following excerpt (23):

[God's] infinite power implies that differences in the effort required on God's part to bring about different states of affairs are negligible. It follows that for any true contingent proposition  $p$ , "God caused  $\sim p$ " (Or "God caused it to be the case that  $\sim p$ "). That is, for any true contingent proposition  $p$ , citing God is just as good a causal explanation of  $p$  as of  $\sim p$ .

However, this is just a non sequitur. From

- (1) A state of affairs  $S$  and its complement  $S^*$  are just as "easy" for God to actualize,

it does not follow that

- (2) The probability of  $S$ 's obtaining given God's existence is equal to the probability of  $S^*$ 's obtaining given God's existence.

God may have reasons to prefer actualizing  $S$  over  $S^*$  (or vice versa). Came is certainly aware of this "most obvious objection", (24) and since the success of his reply is crucial to the success of his argument, I quote him at length (24–25):

If one grants A1–A4, then the most obvious objection to the argument is that God may have *reasons* to cause  $p$  rather than  $\sim p$  and he brings about  $p$  and so some statements of the form "God explains  $p$  rather than  $\sim p$ " can be true after all. That is, although God *could* cause anything, it does not follow that He would. God may have good reasons for preferring the obtaining of  $p$  over the obtaining of  $\sim p$ , and act on those reasons. Another way of putting the point is this: If we are asked "Why  $p$  rather than  $\sim p$ ?", it seems perfectly proper to answer: "Because God had preferred  $p$  to  $\sim p$  and consequently chose to bring about  $p$ ." However, in the proposed explanations, the appeal

to God does no explanatory work. Instead, the appeal to the *reasons* attributed to God (and his choosing to act on them) does the explanatory work and that appeal just presupposes God's existence and so gives us no reason to introduce God into our ontology. In reply, it might be said that the reasons God has for preferring  $p$  to  $\sim p$  do not all by themselves cause  $p$  to be true rather than  $\sim p$ . So God's existence is surely an essential component of the causal explanation of why  $p$  is true rather than  $\sim p$ . The reasons God has for bringing about  $p$  rather than  $\sim p$  do not do any explanatory work on their own; they help explain something  $p$  only insofar as God *has* these reasons and brings about  $p$  for those reasons. God's existence is an essential constituent in this explanation. Insofar as God's *acting for reason R* is the result of an inference to the best explanation, this appeal does not seem so much to *presuppose* God's existence as to provide grounds for *positing* God's existence. However, we must distinguish between the "what" component of a causal explanation and the "why" component. In the explanation in question, God is the answer to the question "What caused  $p$ ?", while the reasons attributed to God (and his choosing to act on them) are the answer to the question "Why did God cause  $p$  rather than  $\sim p$ ?" So, since explanations are answers to why questions, it is the reasons (and God's acting on them) that do all the explanatory work. That is, what explains the fact that  $p$  rather than  $\sim p$  is the fact that God has the reasons He does (and chooses to act on them). But that explanation already presupposes that there *is* a God. What we are still missing is an explanatory context in which God might be introduced into our ontology in the first place. If we are asked "Why  $p$  rather than  $\sim p$ ?", it is no more acceptable to answer: "Because God preferred  $p$  to  $\sim p$  and consequently chose to bring about  $p$ " than it would be to identify Jane's husband as her murderer on the grounds that Jane's husband preferred Jane dead rather than alive and consequently chose to murder Jane *unless we already have an explanatory context in which Jane's husband is included in our ontology in the first place*. "Because Jane's husband preferred Jane dead and consequently chose to murder her" has no explanatory power in respect of Jane's death unless it is already justifiably believed that Jane has a husband.

Came adequately represents "the most obvious objection" to his argument. But his response seems to be confused. In the theist-atheist dialectic, the theist, in attempting to explain some  $S$  (e.g., the existence of many non-divine persons), is not *presupposing* God's existence by appealing to His reasons for preferring  $S$  over  $S^*$ . Rather, the theist is *inferring* the existence of a God with such and such a nature or reasons from the fact of  $S$ 's obtaining. The theist claims that  $S$ 's obtaining is a *reason* for postulating the existence of a God with such and such a nature or reasons. No questions are begged on the part of the theist.

Moreover, Came's bifurcation of causal explanations into "what" and "why" components, as if one is always independent of the other, is similarly confused. The existence of a God with such and such a nature or reasons is both an answer to what (ultimately) caused *S* and why *S* obtained. So Came has given us no good reason to believe that the inference from (1) to (2) is not simply a non sequitur.

### **§3. EXPLANATORY CONTEXT AND PRIOR PROBABILITY: A FURTHER OBJECTION**

On a related note, Came seems to crucially assume that the prior probability of God's existence is very low. After all, he seems to endorse the following principle in his discussion of the example from Jane's murder:

- (3) We are not justified in appealing to the reasons of a putative agent *A* in explaining a (contingent) state of affairs *S* unless we already have an explanatory context in which *A* is included in our ontology in the first place.

So Came ostensibly believes that because we have no explanatory context for postulating God's existence in the first place, we are not justified in appealing to the reasons of God in explaining some *S*. But the clause "unless we have an explanatory context in which *A* is included in our ontology in the first place" just sounds like a roundabout way of saying, "unless the prior probability of *A*'s existence is sufficiently high", where "sufficiently high" means high enough to meet some threshold *k* that is not very low.<sup>3</sup> But then (3) just seems to be equivalent to the following:

- (3') We are not justified in appealing to the reasons of a putative agent *A* in explaining a (contingent) state of affairs *S* unless the prior probability of *A*'s existence is  $\geq k$ .

Although (3') seems to be obviously true, it alone plays no significant role in Came's argument. Came needs to show that the prior probability of God's existence is not  $\geq k$  for (3') to even be relevant to his argument. But to do this Came will have to argue for why the prior probability of God's existence

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3 A prior probability of  $10^{-20}$  would not be sufficiently high to meet the *k*-threshold. But it seems that a probability of  $10^{-3}$  would be  $\geq k$ .

doesn't meet the  $k$ -threshold, and not simply assume it, as he has done in his article. Given Came's remarks, discussion of the prior probability of God's existence, and not a relatively trivial principle like (3'), should be at or near the center of his argument.

#### §4. CAME'S OVERLY BOLD CONCLUSIONS

Lastly, it's worth noting that Came's argument is overly bold, and its conclusions entail propositions that are very probably false.

If Came is correct, then not only is the probability that  $S$  obtains given that God exists equal to the probability that  $S^*$  obtains given that God exists, but *any* contingent  $S$  that God can actualize will be just as probable as any other  $S$  given God's existence! This is because God — *qua* omnipotent — can just as easily actualize any  $S$  (that is strongly actualizable). But surely this is false. The probability that the traditional God actualizes a world at which just rocks and non-minded animals exist is clearly not equal to the probability that He actualizes a world at which there are non-divine persons. Given his omnibenevolent nature, the probability that God would actualize the latter world is *enormously more probable* than that he would actualize the former.<sup>4</sup> Or, if one finds the above counterexample unconvincing, consider the following. The probability that God actualizes a world with  $n$  amount of free non-divine persons at which only a few people ultimately end up being unhappy is clearly not equal to, and is indeed much greater than, the probability that God actualizes a world with  $n$  amount of free non-divine persons, the vast majority of whom ultimately end up being terribly unhappy.

Furthermore, if Came is correct, then no one could — even in principle — arrive at God's existence through valid abductive reasoning. Suppose that doubting Thomas really did put his fingers in the side of the risen Jesus of Nazareth. On Came's view, Thomas would not and could not have been justified if he claimed that “there is an omnipotent God who raised Jesus from the dead” was the best explanation for his experiences! Moreover, suppose that I witnessed a vision where an angel told me that an omnipotent God created the universe, disclosed to me some future event that later took place exactly as foretold, and my cognitive faculties were functioning properly during the

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4 See Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., OUP, 2004, 123 for more details.

vision. On Came's view, I wouldn't be justified in believing that the best explanation for the universe is the existence of an omnipotent God! But surely any argument that implies this is flawed.

So either Came's assumptions (A1–A5) or his reasoning here has to be flawed. I claim that it's at least the latter (whether his assumptions are correct is not the subject of this paper).

In conclusion, Came's argument, which he boldly claims "neutralizes all a posteriori theistic arguments from the get-go", (26) simply (i) makes use of a non sequitur, (ii) assumes that the prior probability of God's existence is very low, and (iii) has conclusions that entail propositions that are very probably false. An a priori silver bullet against all a posteriori theistic arguments remains elusive.