EPISTEMIC DEISM AND PROBABILISTIC THEISM

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Abstract. The aim of my paper is to clarify the conceptions of epistemic deism and probabilistic theism and to demonstrate that the two doctrines do not finally collapse into one. I would like also to point some reasons for the acceptance of a certain version of probabilistic theism which I will call in the last part of the article "open probabilistic theism". Open probabilistic theism is not a version of the view called "open theism". The reasons for the openness of open probabilistic theism are quite different from the reasons supporting open theism.

I. MODELS FOR DIVINE ACTION

What is epistemic deism? The very label "epistemic deism" was coined by Leland Harper in 2013 and it was meant to capture the view defended mainly by Nancey Murphy, Thomas Tracy and Robert Russell which they themselves called the doctrine of "noninterventionist special divine action" (called sometimes NOIDA). The doctrine of NOIDA consists in the claim that God acts in the world without breaking or suspending the laws of nature which He created for the universe. One should also keep in mind that the term "special divine action" does not refer to divine creation *ex nihilo* and continuous creation (*creatio continua*). Continuous creation is simply identified as divine sustaining or conservation of everything which has been created *ex nihilo* by God. In other words, continuous creation of an object *x* means bringing about that an object *x* exists after its creation *ex nihilo*. Thus, special divine action does not consist in creation and conservation.

Now, epistemic deism is the view that there exists special divine action and this action does not entail breaking or suspending the laws of nature and it is epistemically inaccessible to us. According to epistemic deism, miracles are to be effects or manifestations of special divine actions. The Resurrection

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of Jesus of Nazareth, changing water into wine, feeding five thousand people with a few loaves of bread and a few fish or parting the waters of the Red See — all these events are miracles performed by God (His special divine actions)[1]. One should stress one crucial point, namely, that miracles are regarded by epistemic deism as divine actions which do not entail breaking the laws of nature. This is a position contrary to the common-sense or the traditional view on miracles (supported by D. Hume) claiming that miracles are events resulting from breaking the laws of nature by God, or, that God is able to deal in two different manners with his creation.

Thus, we can simply say that epistemic deism is a view that miracles are consistent with the laws of nature and the traditional or classical view says that miracles are inconsistent with the laws of nature. In order to better understand epistemic deism, which is not a typical view in our religious tradition, let us place it among other conceptions concerning divine action in the world. I think we have to consider at least four such views:

1. Traditional interventionism
2. Noninterventionism resulting from the project of the demythologisation of the Bible
3. Epistemic deism (noninterventionist special divine action)
4. Probabilistic theism

As already mentioned, traditional interventionism is the view that God intervened in the world by breaking or suspending the laws of nature, and by performing miracles. The very existence of miracles is based on the Biblical testimony. We believe that changing water into wine happened because the Bible tells us about this event and the Bible states it because someone witnessed that event and told to someone else who wrote about it in the text of the Bible. This particular event was not deduced from any general concept of divine action or from any metaphysical system. The same is true in the case of the Resurrection of Jesus and other Biblical miracles.

1 I have some reservations about the terminology proposed by Harper because as I think all divine actions (i.e., not only "special divine action" but any other action as well) are in principle epistemically inaccessible to us because only God can know what the divine action is like. What we can know or believe in are only effects of divine actions and not divine actions themselves.

The noninterventionism view resulting from the idea of demythologisation of the Bible has its roots in the Spinozan project. Accordingly, the Bible does not include true propositions which assert facts or obtaining states of affairs, but it is a set of moral stories and prescriptions whose meaning is rather existential but not cognitive or logical. In other words, the content of the Bible has no factual sense. Another important premise of noninterventionism is methodological naturalism typical of modern science, whose main claim is that all events and facts have a natural explanation, which is or will be provided by the contemporary or future science. Rudolf Bultmann, one of the main proponents of this view, says:

> it is impossible to use electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles.[2]

If that school of theology is right, then the world is a causally closed system and all events in this system can be accounted for by other events or causes belonging to it. If, in turn, this is a true proposition, then there was no changing of water into wine and Jesus was not truly raised from the dead. But then, Saint Paul's saying that if Jesus was not raised from the dead, then the Christian faith is futile, is worth reconsidering or reinterpreting.

Epistemic deism is a view that appeared in the end of the twentieth century and was proposed by some (minority) of the participants of the project called the Divine Action Project (DAP). Nancey Murphy, Thomas Tracey and Robert Russell, whom I mentioned above, belonged to the eminent members of this group. The group was active from 1988 to 2002. However, for example, Bradley Monton (the philosopher of physics and atheist) has recently started to continue the main idea of this group and the program was also supported by Alvin Plantinga[3].

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2 Rudolf Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology and other Basic Writings*, ed. Schubert M. Ogden, Twentieth century religious thought (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984), 4.

3 Cf. Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism* (OUP, 2011). It is worthy of note that the very idea of epistemic deism was put forth for the first time by a the theologian and physicist William Pollard in William G. Pollard, *Chance And Providence: Gods Action In A World Governed By Scientific Law* (Faber & Faber, 1958). his book from 1958 *Chance and Providence: God's action in the world Governed by Scientific Laws*. The main premise of Pollard's conception of divine action was that there is a level of the physical world — the quantum or subatomic level — where God can act in the physical universe without breaking (violating) any law of nature. The claim that God should not break the laws of nature

I would like to make at this moment three remarks concerning this view. The first is of a historical nature. It was Muslim theologians and philosophers who were the first to suggest that God can act upon atoms or at the atomic level of the physical world. According to this conception, every being is only a combination of atoms and God created both atoms themselves as well as caused all their combinations. Thus, every change or event in the physical world is a result of a recombination of atoms and all these changes are caused by divine actions. God's operation on atoms are epistemically inaccessible to us since we cannot perceive atoms which are fundamental parts of every physical being. God's acting at the atomic level allows him to have a detailed control over the universe and over each of its smallest parts.[4]

The second remark concerns the premise that God should not break rules (laws of nature) which He created for the world. The laws of the quantum world are, as the contemporary science tells us probabilistic and indeterministic, and, therefore, there are free gaps not determined by these laws. By acting within the constraints of the laws of nature God can cause effects at the macroscopic level, and in this way He can control the destiny of individuals as well as of groups of people. On this view, God can also perform miracles without breaking the laws of nature. However, we must keep in mind that in the last case a miracle should not be understood in a traditional way, i.e., as a violation of the natural order.

The third remark is that there are some important differences among epistemic deists. The first important difference concerns the question of which interpretation of the quantum mechanics is to be preferred. Some epistemic deists opt for the "classical" indeterminist interpretation of the Copenhagen School. According to this account, the only free room for any divine action in the quantum world is, in fact, the result of quantum measurement.[5] If there is no measurement, everything is strictly determined by Schrödinger's equation. Others opt for the so called GRW theory of quantum world (named

which He created for the world is based on the idea of divine perfection; a perfect being does not change rules which it issued.

4 Eric Ormsby, "Islamic Theology", in *The Oxford Handbook of World Philosophy*, ed. Jay L. Garfield and William Edelglass (OUP, 2011), 438.

5 David J. Bartholomew, *God, Chance, and Purpose: Can God have it Both Ways?* (CUP, 2008).

after its proponents: G.C. Ghirardi, A Rimini, and T. Weber).[6] The second difference, closely related to the problem of the chosen interpretation of the quantum mechanics, is the number or frequencies of divine interventions at the quantum level. There are two general options: either divine interventions are *episodic* or they are *frequent*. The first option is possible provided that we prefer the Copenhagen interpretation of the quantum mechanics and the second is possible if we opt for the GRW theory or one of its modifications.

Now, there are some possible objections to each of these options and there are also more general objections that could be raised against all versions of epistemic deism.

II. OBJECTIONS AGAINST EPISTEMIC DEISM

Let us start with those more detailed objections to epistemic deism. One could argue against the first option of divine action at the quantum level by saying that they are irrelevant to the macroscopic world because they are episodic, and hence irrelevant to the history of the macroscopic world. Regarding the second option of divine action at the quantum level (based on the GRW theory), one could counter-argue that it takes place *too often*, and, therefore, the divine action at the quantum level of the world leads to theological determinism which, in turn, is incompatible with the human freedom and independence of the created universe from its Creator.

The first *general* objection is well known under the label "God of the gaps". The core of this objection is that if we cannot find any scientific and natural explanation for a given event we assume that God is causally responsible for that event. But when we have already found a natural and scientific account for it, then the hypothesis of divine action and — more generally — the existence of God starts to be unnecessary. To explain the natural course of events we do not need God any more. For a theist that situation can be very uncomfortable.

6 Cf. Giancarlo Ghirardi, "Collapse Theories", in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford Univ., 2016). It is an important and interesting fact that the GRW theory violates the principle of conservation of energy. Monton even suggests that it is not at all clear that this is a true principle of physics Bradley Monton, "God Acts in the Quantum World", in *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion Volume 5*, ed. Jonathan Kvanvig (OUP, 2014), 180.

Another *general* objection to epistemic deism in any form is that epistemic deism entails limitations on divine omnipotence. There are two reasons for such limitations. The first is that either God can act in the world only at the quantum level in a way allowed by quantum indeterminism of probabilistic laws or that God always *has to act* at the quantum level (on the GRW interpretation of the quantum world it is possible, for example, that human bodies cease to exist at one instant of time) [7]. The second reason for the limitations of divine omnipotence is that the quantum world is beyond our epistemic grasp. Thus, limits of the human mind would determine the limits and forms of divine action in the world.[8]

It is also possible to argue against any epistemic deism by saying that it is based on a scientific theory which is most probably false; the quantum mechanics does not seem to be the final and complete theory of the physical world. The problem with quantum mechanics now is that it does not cover general relativity and the phenomenon of gravity, and there are intense efforts to find a theory of quantum gravity and that theory can differ from the contemporary quantum mechanics.[9]

Last but not least, if God will always obey his own rules (the laws of nature), He will never fulfil his own promises (for example, the Biblical promise of the new Earth and new Heaven; according to the well-known model of cosmology, the universe will be either too big or too small, and, therefore there will be no possibility of transformation of the nature, another reason for that impossibility can be the second law of thermodynamic). It is also worthy of note that epistemic deism is based on "the bottom-up" model of causality: an event at the lower level have effects at the higher level of the reality, but not conversely.

We have presented here some major objections to epistemic deism. Most probably, it would be possible to find others, or to weaken some of the objections presented, but I think that the problems involved are serious enough and it would be a good idea to search for another model of divine action in the world. I would like to consider a model which I called "probabilistic theism".

7 For more on that topic, see Monton, "God Acts in the Quantum World", 182.

8 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).

9 Monton, "God Acts in the Quantum World".

III. PROBABILISTIC THEISM

Probabilistic theism is meant to weaken at least some objections to epistemic deism raised above. The main idea of probabilistic theism is that chance events are part of a divine plan for the world. This could mean that God has a good reason for allowing chance events to happen in the world. By chance (or chance event) I mean an event which has no causal (scientific) explanation and this kind of chance events is usually called an "ontological chance". The existence of an ontological chance entails the existence of an epistemological chance meaning that events which have no causal explanation are unpredictable. Thus, if there are chance events in the world, Laplace's demon cannot exist. Probabilistic theism is based — like epistemic deism — on scientific knowledge. The most important scientific premises of probabilistic theism are: indeterminism of the quantum world and the facts of the cosmic and biological evolution. Very important evidence supporting quantum indeterminism is Bell's famous inequality ("Bell's theorem rules out local hidden variable"). Thus, if our world has its Creator and the world is indeterministic as the contemporary science teaches us, then it follows from this that God allows chance events to happen in the world. Some contemporary metaphysicians provide various possible reasons why God created the universe in an evolutionary and indeterministic manner. The most important of them are the following: the freedom of human will which would be impossible in the world completely determined by God or by natural mechanisms of the universe, the idea of solidarity (the idea of universal interconnection by an evolutionary chain; that is Robin Collins' idea), and the idea of divine perfection. The idea of divine perfection was already alluded to by Saint Augustine in the context of the evolutionary development of the created order of nature. Augustin's idea was that creation by evolution could fit the divine majesty and glory better than creating everything just in one instant of time.

Now, the idea of human freedom which is understood in an incompatibilist sense can be defended on the ground of quantum indeterminism. This is so because if brain events are grounded in quantum states which are essentially indeterministic, then there is no necessity at the quantum level which can be transmitted to the macroscopic level to which the human brain belongs. And then we have two fundamental options (there are more of them but for the sake of brevity I omit them); either there exists nonphysical mind

(in traditional terminology called "immaterial soul") which has the ability and room to act upon the brain and through the brain it can control the human body and its environment, or there exists an emergent mind which is a result of a complex development of the brain, but relatively independent from it, which has the ability and room to act upon the brain and through the brain it can control the body and its parts ("top-down" causality).

The main idea and the key point of probabilistic theism concerning the divine action in the world is that God *does not have to act* at the quantum level in order to achieve his aims in the universe. The indeterminism of the physical level of the world combined with the evolutionary mechanism bringing into existence the creatures willed by God allow Him *not to intervene* in the course of the natural history of the universe. The important premise of this view is that the probability of the emergence of life and human species in the process of evolution is very high and there is no need for any special divine action at the quantum level of the physical world or at the biological level of the world (provided that God wills humans or other complex creatures to exist). One should stress that all proponents of this view share a conviction that theology should be consistent with the contemporary science. All probabilistic theists hold the thesis that God does not break the laws of nature which He created for the world and that He does not act in the quantum world. Such a view seems to be clearly distinct from the epistemic deism. But there are some questions and objections which can be raised against probabilistic theism.

If God doesn't act at the quantum level of the world, then either He acts only at the spiritual level (by influencing human minds but never exerting any form of compulsion; He doesn't act, however, as a *cause* of any particular event — divine action in the world is not causal except *ordinary* divine action, i.e. creation and conservation), or He acts at all levels of the world, the physical and spiritual levels included, but again it is not a causal action (this position seems to be held by process theism).

One remark concerns the "spirituality" or spiritual level of the world. If a probabilistic theist is a proponent of a physicalist (naturalist) idea of human nature, then the spiritual level is simply the most developed, organized and complex physical level of the reality. Anyway, in that case, spiritual means simply physical. That divine action is not causal means that one cannot say that it is God who caused a particular event *x*. Divine causal action in the

world is limited to the creation of the universe (setting the world mechanism in motion) and to the sustaining of the laws of nature (conservation of it).

Well, now let us come back to the problem of miracles, and, at this point, let us remember that miracles were possible within the framework of epistemic deism. Can probabilistic theism explain miracles, such as, for example, the changing of water into wine, parting the Red See or, most importantly, the Resurrection of Jesus?

It seems that, within probabilistic theism, miracles should be viewed in the same way as it was the case in the noninterventionist view based on demythologizing the Bible. Of course, one can try to take a middle position; God acts in a noninterventionist way (through and by the laws of nature) except in miracles when He directly causes a particular (non-natural) event to happen. But if it were the case, then probabilistic theism would collapse or be reduced to epistemic deism or even to traditional interventionism. I think it is a serious trouble for probabilistic theism; either it has to be reduced to noninterventionism or to epistemic deism. Noninterventionism is tantamount to the rejection of Christianity because, if it were true, it would mean that Jesus was not truly raised from the dead. And if probabilistic theism were reduced to epistemic deism, then it would be a position sensitive to the "God of the gaps" objection, as epistemic deism is.

One possibility to avoid the "collapse problem" is to change the model of causality. We can replace the "bottom-up" model of causality by the "top-down" model of it. God acting at the highest (spiritual) level of the world (upon the human minds) indirectly *causes* effects at the lower levels of the world. To illustrate the situation, let us suppose that God by acting upon the mind of a sick person makes it possible for her to heal her sick body or the organ indispensable for life.[10] Let us suppose, that it is a plausible model of miraculous healings and divine action at the level of human minds does not entail breaking any law of nature. But, what about changing water into wine or parting the Red See? It seems that there are two possible options. Either God acts upon minds of the witnesses in such a way that they have a false belief in the miracle which did not happen, or God causes directly such events and intervenes in the order of nature without breaking its laws. The first possibility is inconsistent with divine perfection. The second possibility seems to be a reduction of probabilistic the-

10 David J. Bartholomew, *God of Chance* (SCM Press, 1984).

ism to epistemic deism. Bradley Monton argues convincingly that, if we assume the GRW theory of the quantum world, then the miracles such as parting the Red See or feeding five thousand people with a few loaves of bread and a few fish involve no violation of the laws of nature.[11] But again, if we opt for the second possibility, then we have to do with the set of worries typical for epistemic deism (the "God of the gaps" objection, limitation of divine omnipotence, dependence upon the contemporary state of science). And I have acknowledged that these objections are serious for a Christian theist.

Is there any other position which would allow us to preserve that distinct view on the *special* divine action in the world that we have discussed above and which would be free from the foregoing difficulties? And which would preserve at least some valuable properties ascribed to probabilistic theism; in particular, I mean here some valuable moral intuitions regarding chance evil events which are not to be viewed as part of the divine plan for the world.[12]

I think that there is such a view and it is a very simple modification of probabilistic theism. All the views discussed so far, apart from traditional interventionism, assume that God should follow the laws of nature which He created for the world. But if we assume that the world is a causally open system and we start to understand by *a law of nature* a proposition which "works" or is applied to the world only in the casually closed (isolated) systems, then we are allowed to state that God can act at every level of the world in every way He chooses for this or that reason without breaking any law of nature (Newton/Plantinga solution). In particular, God can cause miracles without violation of the laws of nature and without *being limited in any way by those laws or by human epistemic capacity*. God can act "beyond" the created order of nature. Perhaps, this divine action "beyond" the order of nature without breaking the laws of nature is similar to Thomas Aquinas' idea of miracles?

I am inclined to call this sketchily presented position "open probabilistic theism". I believe the position has all the advantages of probabilistic theism but it is not in danger of collapsing into one with noninterventionism or epistemic deism. Open probabilistic theism has also one important advantage over, let me call it that way, "closed probabilistic theism" in regard to the problem of the

11 Monton, "God Acts in the Quantum World", 175.

12 Dariusz Łukasiewicz, "Argument from Chance", *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 7, no. 1 (2015).

emergent mind.[13]. The problem of the emergent mind, or, to state it in a more general way, the problem of an emergent system[14] arises if we assume — as probabilistic theism has assumed — that the world known to us develops by evolution and human beings are only direct products of the evolutionary processes where chance plays an important role. The problem of emergent properties was formulated by Jaegwon Kim in the following way:

> There are no new causal powers that magically accrue to [upper level] properties over and beyond the causal powers [lower-level] properties. No new causal powers emerge at higher levels, and this goes against the claim … that higher level properties are novel causal powers irreducible to lower-level properties.[15]

Thus, in conclusion, we may say that the evolutionary roots of human bodies join us with the organic world and make us part of it, but in the causally open world our minds can be directly created by God without breaking any laws of nature. If this is the case, we are allowed to say that man was created in the image of God himself (*imago dei*). The doctrine of *imago dei* is a deeply Christian idea including the idea of freedom, reason, personality and human authentic creativity. A very close relation of mind and body makes humans the integral beings which belong to two distinct realms: to the physical world of nature and to the real (understood in a non-physicalist way) spiritual world of mind (soul). Moreover, the quantum and evolutionary indeterminism about which we are told by the contemporary science is consistent with: (i) the idea of divine intervention, (ii) a non-figurative understanding of miracles, (iii) the testimony of the first Christians who simply saw and listened to the words of the resurrected Jesus.

Last but not least, the conception of open probabilistic theism is also consistent with (iv) our hope for eternal life after death given not only to all human beings but also to all our animal ancestors and other creatures because for an absolutely omnipotent, omniscient and loving God everything is possible. It is a God who acts beyond all laws of nature whenever He wants and as He wants to act.

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13 I mean by "closed probabilistic theism" a view that God can act in the world only within the constraints of the laws of nature but in fact He does not act in this way because, as I have said, He does not to have to act in the world in such a manner.

14 A. Peacocke was a strong proponent of emergent systems and properties.

15 Jaegwon Kim, *Philosophy of mind* (Westview Press, ²1998), 232. See also Robert Larmer, "Special Divine Acts: Three Pseudo-Problems and a Blind Alley", *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 7, no. 4 (2015).Larmer 2015.

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