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### **published in**

Conjunctive Explanations in Science and Religion  
2023

### **DOI (link to publisher)**

[10.4324/9781003251101-26](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003251101-26)

### **document version**

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

### **document license**

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[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

### **citation for published version (APA)**

van den Brink, G. (2023). A Re-Evaluation of Non-Overlapping Magisteria: A Response. In D. A. Finnegan, D. H. Glass, M. Leidenhag, & D. N. Livingstone (Eds.), *Conjunctive Explanations in Science and Religion* (pp. 265-268). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003251101-26>

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# A Re-Evaluation of Non-Overlapping Magisteria

## A Response

*Gijsbert van den Brink*

We should be grateful to David Brown for a rich and challenging chapter, which abundantly testifies to his firm grasp of recent debates in the field of theology and science and especially of his keen insight into some of its most vexed questions: how to properly conceptualise notions of creation and divine action. Brown's chapter is also, of course, nicely provocative in the present context since Brown provides what epistemologists call an "undercutting defeater" of the very rationale underlying this volume by questioning the legitimacy of the concept of conjunctive explanation as a possible way to connect the fields of theology and science.<sup>1</sup> Opting for a specific version of NOMA, Brown rejects what he calls the "engagement thesis," i.e., the fruitful interaction between science and religion that others have conceptualised in terms of dialogue (Ian Barbour), complementarity (Donald MacKay) or convergence (John Haught). Instead, he suggests that "divine activity and created activity are concerned with entirely different and mutually exclusive explanations." We might even ask whether the phrase "divine activity" is not a slip of the pen here since the basic thrust of Brown's paper is that God should not be conceived as a personal agent: agency-language is not applicable to God, who is not "another actor or being alongside others." There is only one act – if that is the right concept (Brown uses the word in scare quotes) – in which God is involved: that of "donating being." Drawing on Thomas Aquinas in particular, Brown argues that the doctrine of creation is about ontological derivation and dependency, but in a crucial way going beyond Thomas, he concludes from that that creation is not about a particular divine act that has been performed "in the beginning."

From a Christian theological perspective, Brown's proposal is quite radical. It implies, for example, that God did not bring the universe into existence, reveal Godself to humans, guide the people of Israel, become incarnate in Jesus Christ, does not inspire people through his Spirit, will not realise God's kingdom – or perform any other action whatsoever.<sup>2</sup> God does not even lure the world towards the future, as process theists hold. Brown seems to realise that this view deviates considerably from historic Christianity (his appeal to Tillich hardly changes that fact). So why should

we think about God in this way? Is it because science forces us into this direction? Not necessarily. Brown suggests that the conservation of energy is “incompatible with the idea of a God who ... can cause or realise things within the universe.” But he acknowledges that this is a moot point and that on some interpretations no contradiction is involved. Is it, then, because of theological considerations that we should adopt this radicalised version of Thomism (as we may call it)? Brown intimates this even more strongly, but strangely enough he does not actually argue for it.<sup>3</sup> On the contrary, at the end of his chapter, he readily grants that “theistic personalism” – the view that God is a personal agent who aspires a personal relationship with humans – may be a “theologically legitimate position.”<sup>4</sup> The point of his chapter is just “to show that there is a significant theological position that would have serious reservations to that sort of thinking.” Well, perhaps we already knew that.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, even though Brown explains his position with admirable clarity, he leaves us with some ambiguities and *non sequiturs*. For example, although he contends that “to say that God (...) is the ground of being (...) prevents God from acting *per accidens* (i.e., as personal agent),” he does not *demonstrate* this – which would require more conceptual analysis than he actually delivers. To suggest a remote analogy: why could not the author of a novel at the same time figure, or become incarnate, as the protagonist (or another character) in her novel? Perhaps contemporary Thomists should be more faithful to their namegiver, following Aquinas in holding the two together. Next, although he denies that God is “a cause in any sense,” at the same time, Brown holds that God is “the cause of being” or “the cause *per se*” – which is confusing. One may wonder whether causal language is still appropriate here since, in ordinary language, to cause an entity or event is to make that entity or event come about, to bring it into existence, which clearly presupposes notions of time and change, whereas Brown sharply dissociates “the cause *per se*” from such notions. He even goes so far as to claim that in a (possible) world in which there is no universe, God still “‘does’ the one cause *per se*.” What then does this cause cause? Surely, one cannot cause – period. One always causes *something*.<sup>6</sup> But even if God “causes” the universe, one may wonder what it means to believe in a God upon whom the world is ontologically dependent if this God does not make any difference at all in and for the world (logical positivists would give short shrift to such a position, questioning its difference with not believing in God at all). Finally, whereas most of his allies are contemporary Thomists and liberal Protestants à la Tillich, in a slightly bewildering passage, Brown tries to draw Dutch Reformed theologian Anthony Hoekema into his camp. The most natural reading of Hoekema’s comment on Seth’s being made in the image of God, however, is that this image was just passed on to him by his father Adam. So, of course, Adam’s act of begetting

Seth does not stop Seth from being created in the image of God. It is a far stretch to see an intimation of the “important distinction” between acting *per se* and *per accidens* here. It seems clear that Hoekema stood firmly in the long tradition according to which God is a personal being.

Now why does Brown consider his view superior to the view that God is a Person, or in any case, can be truly addressed as such?<sup>7</sup> In the end, it seems that the main reason is his resistance to the notion of univocality of being. Although Brown does not define this notion with precision, the “univocality of being test” implies that God should not be considered as “a less limited personal being” – less limited, presumably, than we humans are. To me, it is not clear why this test – rather than, let us say, the Gospel – should serve as Christian theology’s most fundamental touchstone. By taking this criterion as his starting point, however, Brown has rendered us the great service of highlighting the constraints of the field within which the search for conjunctive explanations in science and religion starts to make sense in the first place.

## Notes

- 1 For the concept of undercutting defeaters, see e.g., John L. Pollock, “Defeasible Reasoning,” *Cognitive Science* 11 (1987): 481–518.
- 2 Relying on his chapter in this volume, one might even doubt whether Brown advocates a form of *Christian* theology. In his *Incarnation and Neo-Darwinism: Evolution, Ontology and Divine Activity* (Durham: Sacristy Press, 2019), however, Christology takes centre stage.
- 3 It is characteristic that Brown claims that his chapter in this volume “has offered two *examples* in support of that conclusion” (italics mine); examples typically do not support conclusions – *arguments* do.
- 4 His appeal to Thomas Aquinas by way of response will not do in this connection since Brown has clearly, and rightly so, distinguished his position from that of Aquinas.
- 5 Maurice Wiles, for example, defended a similar position in his *God’s Action in the World* (London: SCM Press, 1986); cf. already his *Remaking Christian Doctrine* (London: SCM Press, 1974), 98, where he explains that his view “is not deistic (...) in that it allows for a continuing relationship of God to the world as source of existence (...). It is deistic in so far as it refrains from claiming any effective causation on the part of God in relation to particular occurrences.” For a thoughtful response to Wiles, see Vincent Brümmer, *Speaking of a Personal God. An Essay in Philosophical Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 108–27.
- 6 Or does Brown mean that God eternally causes God self, having in mind the doctrine of divine aseity? Even if that is the case, it is unclear what it means to “do” a cause.
- 7 Keith Ward, “Is God a Person?,” in *Christian Faith and Philosophical Theology*, eds. Gijsbert van den Brink, Luco J. van den Brom and Marcel Sarot (Kampen: KokPharos, 1992), 258–66, argues that whereas God is “as far beyond a person as the infinite is beyond the finite,” God may still be truly thought of and related to as a person (265).

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