

Essay

# Compassionate Deism and the Grammar of Permission

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**Abstract:** Both theism and atheism assume that God permits evil. But neither theism nor atheism make this assumption with due attention to what I call, following Wittgenstein, the grammar of the term ‘permission’. When this grammar is examined, it becomes clear that this assumption cannot avoid the atheistic force of the argument from evil. To rescue belief in God, I propose the adoption of a position I call compassionate deism. This position is a combination of Christian theism and traditional deism. The combination is produced by making a slight deistic modification of Christian theism in the direction of non-intervention, and a slight modification of deism in the direction of compassion. Such a compassionate deism denies the common assumption made by both Christian theism and atheism, namely, that God permits evil, and thus avoids the theistic denial of the reality of evil and the atheist’s denial of God’s goodness.

**Keywords:** intervention; permission; deism; compassion; Wittgenstein; grammar



**Citation:** Hall, Ronald. 2021. Compassionate Deism and the Grammar of Permission. *Religions* 12: 200. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12030200>

Academic Editors: James Sterba and Paul Morris

Received: 4 February 2021  
Accepted: 15 March 2021  
Published: 17 March 2021

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Who finds the money when you pay the rent? Did you think that money was heaven sent?

Paul McCartney

In this paper, I will present and defend a version of deism that can be fruitfully combined with traditional Christian theism to produce a compelling response to the problem of evil. I call this combination “compassionate deism”.<sup>1</sup> This combination is possible because both agree with a basic belief that God exists as the creator of the heavens and the earth. As such, both deny atheism’s rejection of the belief that such a creator God exists.

My project of combining deism and Christian theism may seem doomed from the start, since Christianity is a theistic religion and by most accounts, deism is not a form of theism. Indeed, there is sense to the claim that, by definition, deism is a form of a-theism. But it does not follow that the combination is a form of atheism.

Because there are different concepts of God, there can be a variety of “atheisms”. For example, the denial of a particular theistic concept of God (say in pantheism) might count as atheism relative to other theistic concepts (say panentheism) and the denial of any form of theism (say in Buddhism) might seem to entail that every non-theistic concept of God is a form of atheism. Of course, a non-theistic concept of God is, by definition, a-theistic but it may not be atheistic, at least if its theology affirms the existence of a divine reality of some sort. That is, if God’s existence is affirmed in a-theistic or, or non-theistic theologies, these theologies cannot count as forms of atheism. While in general, I take the term ‘atheism’ to mean, *tout court*, a denial of the existence of God, however conceived, in the discussion of

<sup>1</sup> For an extensive discussion of various forms of deism, see (Taylor 1989). Taylor connects the emergence of modern forms of deism to the 18th-century adoption of a picture of nature that is mechanistic (in the sense that it works independently of God’s will) and yet teleological (in the sense that it is designed by God to work toward the good without his interference). This picture of nature, along with the creation of self-sufficient reason designed into human beings, allowed God to withdraw from both natural events and from human affairs and to assume a disengaged point of view on the world analogous to the picture of the disengaged spectator of empiricism at the center of the epistemic standpoint of the emerging sciences. (p. 248ff).

the problem of evil that is to follow, I will take ‘atheism’ to have a narrower meaning. In this discussion, ‘atheism’ is synonymous with an anti-theistic denial that a creator God exists.

As I understand it, neither deism nor Christian theism are forms of atheism in this narrow sense. That is, both agree that God exists as the creator of the universe. They join hands as opponents to atheism in this narrow sense. To make this combination feasible, we will need to make some changes in both. We will need to make a slight deistic modification of Christian theism in the direction of non-intervention, and a slight modification of deism in the direction of compassion. If this can be done, if these two views join forces, this alliance can mount a strong counter argument to atheism’s assault on their common belief in the existence of a creator God by defeating atheism’s strongest ally, the problem of evil.

Attempts to combine these two forms of belief in God, Christian theism, and deism, have had a respectable history, figuring prominently, for example, in the development of the American Republic. It is widely known that Thomas Jefferson was one of many in this colonial period that embraced a form of Christian (theistic) deism.

The core beliefs of these forms of Christian Deism are (1) that there is a God who freely created the universe and (2) that God designed the workings of his creation to run independently of his permission. Christian theism, of course, has no problem in embracing the first of these core beliefs. However, it may find it difficult, if not impossible, to accept the deistic idea that what happens in the realm of human affairs and in nature does not require God’s permission. To counter this, I will try to present deism in a way that may overcome this difficulty.

To use a favorite metaphor of deism, in one respect God’s relation to the world he creates is analogous to the relation of a watch maker who designs the hands of the clock to move independently of the permission of the maker.<sup>2</sup> Because the movement of the hands is independent of the maker’s permission, it makes no sense to suppose that she must constantly intervene in the mechanism to keep it going. The clock, we might say, is designed to have a life of its own. Of course, the maker can intervene to stop the clock, or to get it running again if it breaks, or to keep it wound up. But certainly, it makes no sense to think that the clock needs the maker’s continued intervention into the mechanism to continue renewing her permission to keep it ticking. Although we do not need to accept this metaphor without qualification, as I do not, it captures the core of the deistic doctrine that the workings of the creation are designed to function independently of God’s permission. If God does not permit evil, it evil does not require his permission, the door is closed to the possibility of intervening in the creation to renew, withdraw, suspend, or deny his “evil permits”. When divine permission is denied, so are divine interventions that would continue or cancel these permits.

We are ready now to turn to my project of formulating a response to the problem of evil that the alliance of deism and Christian theism, what I call compassionate deism, makes possible.

As I understand it, the problem of evil finally reduces to the problem of divine permission.<sup>3</sup> The problem is easy to state. As omnipotent, it seems that God has the power to intervene in gratuitous suffering, and given that he is perfectly good, perfectly loving, he

<sup>2</sup> The Newtonian universe was often compared to a clock because of the regularity of its mechanical operations. Deists seized on this image to formulate the argument from design, namely that the clockwork order of the universe implied an intelligent designer, i.e., God the cosmic clockmaker are by their nature violations of the laws of nature, laws whose regularity and universality were confirmed by Newtonian mechanics, they cannot be credited. Providential intervention in human history similarly interfered with the clocklike workings of the universe and impiously implied the shoddy workmanship of the original design. Unlike the God of Scripture, the deist God was remarkably distant; after designing his clock, he simply wound it up and let it run. At the same time, his benevolence was evidenced by the astounding precision and beauty of his workmanship. Indeed, part of the attraction of deism lay in its foisting a sort of cosmic optimism. A rational and benevolent deity would only design what Voltaire lampooned as “the best of all possible worlds,” and all earthly injustice and suffering was either merely apparent or would be rectified in the hereafter. True deist piety was moral behavior in keeping with the Golden Rule of benevolence” Staloff, Darren. “Deism and the Founding of the United States”. National Humanities Center. <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/eighteen/ekeyinfo/deism> (accessed on 5 March 2021).

<sup>3</sup> What gives rise to my focus on the concept of permission is the fact that it figures so prominently in the latest work of the guest editor of this special issue of Religions. I am referring to James Sterba’s book (Sterba 2019). Over and over in this book, Sterba poses the problem of evil in the way so many others have done, namely, in terms of God’s permission. He asks: “Could it be that God’s permitting all the evil in our world is justified by the opportunity for soul-making it provides?” (p. 35). His answer is “No”.

should want to intervene and stop such suffering; yet gratuitous suffering persists. Since evil persists, it seems that the fact that God does not, or does not always, intervene to stop such events and actions demands an explanation and justification from the Christian theist. Why is it that God does not always intervene to stop evil, especially given the presumption that a good God should want to stop evil? The absence of such a justification seems to leave no other option than the abandonment of a belief in God.

Indeed, many have found atheism the only intelligible response to the problem of evil. Again, the atheist assumes that God permits the existence of gratuitous suffering but that he does not, when he could, intervene to deny this permission. And further, the atheist argues that because God does not act to intervene, when he could, in even the most horrendous suffering he permits, he cannot be good, and hence cannot exist.

Christian theism is quick to come to the rescue of its deepest conviction that a good God does exist even in the face of evil. On this view, God could intervene in gratuitous suffering and sometimes he does and sometimes he does not. But when he does not intervene, he has a good reason for this, even if we do not know what this reason is. In a recent debate about this matter, James Sterba has represented atheism and William Hasker Christian theism.<sup>4</sup>

The response of the type that Hasker proposes has been well discussed in the literature of skeptical theism. The argument of skeptical theism is that God has good moral reasons for permitting suffering that he could stop or prevent. And for the Christian theist, God sometimes intervenes and stops or prevents suffering. Sometimes he does not. But in all cases, suffering would not exist at all without God's permission. When God does not stop or prevent suffering, this is because he has good moral reasons for not intervening. In those cases where he refuses to intervene, this calls for a justification. To retain his goodness, God must have morally good reasons for permitting evil, even if the limited perspective of the human keeps these reasons hidden.

The atheistic response has something important in common with the Christian theistic response to the problem of evil. Like its theistic counterpart, atheism assumes that the existence of evil is the result of divine permission. As the atheist argues, if God exists and if the evil that exists is the result of God's permission, God's goodness is destroyed. It is simply not intelligible to think that a good God could permit evil. Like the atheist, the Christian theist does not deny the existence of evil, and strikingly does not deny that it is the result of God's permission. It holds, however, that God's goodness is preserved because his non-intervention is justified and hence somehow testifies to it.

The Christian theistic response to evil is less than convincing. The Christian theist asks us to believe that God permits suffering and sometimes intervenes to stop or prevent it, which implies he has this power of intervention, and sometimes he does not exercise it. However, when God does not intervene, he has a good reason not to, even though we cannot conceive of what this reason might be.

What is missing from these two positions is any further comment on the implication of the obvious fact that both the atheist and the Christian theist agree that evil is the result of divine permission. What we need here is a clear concept of permission. This is necessary in order to understand the relation between permission and intervention and to understand why these related concepts have no place in deism.

Following Wittgenstein, I note that it is a mistake to think that the word 'permission' (or 'permit') has just one common meaning. Rather, he invites us to see that any term, for example, the term 'permission', and hence the concept it names, can be used in many different ways. As Wittgenstein would say, the meaning of a term is a function of the logic of its use, what he calls its grammar. Violating the grammar of a term produces nonsense. In paying attention to the grammar or the logic of the term 'permission', we will notice that it is related to other terms and concepts in the various of its use. In tracking usage,

<sup>4</sup> See the June 2020 Issue of the *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*. Here you find a symposium on Sterba's book and a significant criticism of it by William Hasker.

we notice, for example, that ‘permission’ is often conceptually related to the concepts of ‘allowing’ and ‘granting’ both of which are actions that can be undertaken or refused. We also notice that it makes no sense to use ‘permission’ in cases where there is no conceptual room for the possibility of denial or refusal. For example, it makes no sense to say that triangles are permitted to have only three sides, just as it is nonsense for a judge to grant a person permission to be a married bachelor.

Some sensible uses of the term ‘permission’ have their home in games, board and field where rules determine what is and is not permitted. Moving the knight diagonally is not permitted, not allowed in chess. Rules govern when we are permitted to touch the soccer ball and when we are not permitted to do so. It makes no sense, however, to say that playing the game with a soccer ball is permitted or not permitted. That is, in some cases the term ‘permission’ has no application. This is because, as a matter of grammar in Wittgenstein’s sense, some things that occur are neither permitted or not permitted because they are not subject to being granted, denied, or withdrawn. For example, if we return to the deist metaphor, the hands of a clock are neither permitted nor not permitted to move. The term ‘permission’ has no application here; the hands of the clock just move independently of permission.

Tracking the use of “permission”, we see that it is grammatically connected to concepts like granting, denying, reversing and revoking. What cannot be granted or denied cannot count as being permitted. Given this grammar, are atheists and Christian theists alike justified in applying the term ‘permission’ as an apt characterization of God’s relation to evil?

I propose that the usual affirmative responses to these questions in both Christian theism and atheism reveal their inattention to the grammar of ‘permission’. And this is where they both go astray. Atheism does not question the theistic view that evil is a matter of divine permission, but thinks this permission is inconsistent with God’s goodness and reason enough to reject God’s existence. Theists defend God’s permission of evil as a sign of God’s goodness since this permission advances soul-making.<sup>5</sup>

I think the virtue of deism is that it does not accord the term ‘permission’ any place in its understanding of the origins of evil. This is what I might say is the deist’s attunement to the grammar of ‘permission’. What deism sees as well is that there is an important grammatical relation between ‘permission’ and ‘intervention’. Clearly the doctrine of non-intervention must exclude divine permission. Because the concept of permission is grammatically wedded to the concepts of withdrawal and denial, it is clear that only permissions granted can be revoked.

Given that permission opens the door to intervention, we must ask why God sometimes does not enter this door. That is, why does God not intervene when the door to this is wide open? Permits can be revoked only if they have been granted. Here is where the atheist’s charge that the failure of God to enter the door his permission opens is a failure sufficient to destroy God’s goodness.<sup>6</sup> Certainly, this charge against God’s goodness is difficult, if not impossible, as I think it is, to answer. Should not a good God want to enter the door to intervention and to revoke the evil his permission produced? After all, does God not have the power and authority to do this? (Keep in mind that God’s omnipotent power is limited to what is logically consistent and to what is not grammatical nonsense. For example, it is not logically possible for God to make it rain and not rain at the same time in the same place and it is grammatical nonsense to suppose that a disembodied God can ride a bicycle.)

<sup>5</sup> Even though soul-making was a central feature of John Hick’s famous theodicy, even he recognized its limits. He says: “Let the hypothesis of a divine purpose of soul-making be adopted, and let it be further granted that an environment which is to serve this purpose cannot be a permanent hedonistic paradise but must offer to man real tasks, challenges, and problems. Still the question must be asked: Need the world contain the more extreme and crushing evils with it in fact contains? (Hick 1966, p. 365). Commenting on this William Wainwright says, “Although God may have good reasons for permitting these evils, we have little idea of what they may be. Many of us will wonder whether anyone *could* have morally sufficient reasons for permitting evils of this kind”. (Wainwright 1999, p. 96).

<sup>6</sup> William Rowe takes up the issue that worries James Serba regarding the God’s permitting horrendous evil. As Rowe puts it, no goods we know of justify God’s permitting such gratuitous evil. See for example, (Rowe 1979, pp. 335–41).

Given these difficulties, is there a way for the theist to save God's goodness? I think not, at least so long as the theist agrees with the atheist that evil is permitted by God. But the deist may offer the theist a way out. The first step is to deny that evil is permitted by God. This closes the door to intervention. The second step is to adopt the deist account of the origin of evil. This account denies that evil is permitted by God. Rather, than locate the origin of evil in God's permission, the deist locates it in the design of the creation.

One might think that this is exactly the position some theists (non-Deists) have adopted. I am thinking here of theists who adopt the freewill defense. But, as I will explain, this defense falls short of abandoning the concept of permission in the radical way that deism abandons it. This failure leaves intact the grammatical confusion that supposing that God permits evil entails.

In the freewill defense, even as discussed by its modern-day father, Plantinga, God is said to allow or permit moral evil. Moral evil produces suffering that is the result of free action. God is not permitted to intervene in free actions without denying freedom, even the freedom to sin. This is clear since such an intervention would make any free choice that humans make depend ultimately on what God decides. If it is ultimately God who decides to allow an act or not, this turns the free act of an agent into an illusion. If God intervenes in free choices in this way, it turns out that God is the hidden secret agent behind every human supposedly free act (Malebranche might like this).<sup>7</sup>

Claiming that God permits evil insofar as he permits humans to act freely, runs counter to the claim that God designed the human in such a way as to make freedom intrinsic to his design. Of course, he could have created a different kind of world in which human beings do not have this intrinsic feature. But it is testimony to God's goodness that he thought it wiser to create a kind of world with the human capacity for freedom designed into it, than to create a world without such a design. For God to be able to intervene in human choices implies that he has the power to overturn his decision to make the kind of world he thought was the best kind of world to create. In his wisdom, he must have thought that a world with the capacity for freedom is a better kind of world than one without it, even though this decision implied the logical impossibility of his intervention in the workings of human affairs.

The freewill defense of God's existence in the face of evil, seems to hold out the possibility that the origin of moral evil is located in God's design and not in his permission. If the source of evil lies in God's design of the human and not in God's permission, it seems that the workings of this capacity are independent of the permission of its maker just as the turning of the hands of the clock are independent of the permission of its maker. Once the creation is finished, once the capacity for freedom is installed, it continues to govern human action and needs no further permission to do so. So, in this defense, it follows that it is not a flaw in God's omnipotence to claim that he cannot stop moral evil. This is so, since he would have to deprive the human of the very design that he intended it to have, which he thought unwise even in the face of knowing full well that human beings vested with this capacity would be ipso facto vested with the capacity for moral evil. As omnipotent, God can do all things that are possible, but he could not design the world in such a way that the capacity for freedom could avoid the horrible consequences of its misuse.

Given that the actual world is the kind of world in which the capacity for human freedom is intrinsic, we can be grateful to God for designing the world in just the way he did. Our gratitude is warranted if we think a world in which freedom is possible is a better kind of world than a world in which it is not possible. God's design is testimony to his goodness. If we welcome the capacity of freedom as a good, it is a short step to seeing that God's intervention to stop moral evil would entail a denial of God's creative and good design.

<sup>7</sup> Sterba denies that the free-will defense can justify God's permission the amount of evil and especially the horrendous consequences of free action. He argues that the free-will Defense cannot justify "... God's permission of significant and especially horrendous consequences of wrongful actions." p. 6.

The free-will defense thus edges close to deism in defending the thesis that God's intervention in human freedom is necessarily an impossibility since it would violate the nature of the human. If the human is endowed with the capacity of freedom it is grammatical nonsense to think of this in terms of permission. In this light, it is puzzling to me why expressions of this defense continue to imagine that it has provided a justification for why God permits suffering. Perhaps it is time to stop thinking of evil as a function of God's permission. And perhaps this would take us a little closer to embracing the deistic thesis of divine non-intervention in human decisions.

What turns this deism toward compassionate deism is the realization that God's design is founded on his love for his creatures. He does not abandon his creation in the way the clock maker may abandon his clock, no matter how beautiful or dare I say striking.<sup>8</sup> This is not so in God's case. He does not abandon the world that he created and evaluated as good nor abandon the human which he evaluated as very good. He continues to observe its workings with an interest that is foreign to the clock maker. This is so because the world God designed does not have a fixed cycle of the sort that clocks embody, finite and infinitely repeating. The historical world that God designed is open ended with no fixed outcome. It will have its surprises, its joys and tragedies, its disappointments, its successes, all of which keep God's interest in us from waning and keeps him near. Knowing that God takes a deep and abiding interest in our lives, that he has hopes for each of us, and that he suffers with us, is testimony to his goodness. Realizing this can generate, indeed, ought to generate, gratitude. And it may open us to seeing that God's decision to give us the gift of a life that is independent of his will was motivated by nothing less than his eternal compassion.

Things are a bit different when it comes to natural evil. As it is defined, natural evil consists of the horrendous suffering that is not caused by human decisions. This leaves two possibilities, it is permitted by God or it is a result of chance or necessity.

Clearly, it would not seem to be in the interest of those who believe in the existence of God to hold that God's permission is the cause of such suffering. Yet versions of skeptical theism accept the first of the two possibilities. This is a way of accepting that God is the cause of natural evil by engaging in a sleight of hand. In order to accept God as the cause of natural evil, we must transcend the human limited point of view and consider how things are seen from God's unlimited point of view. The deception in this reasoning comes in holding that God has a good reason for inflicting what appears to humans as gratuitous suffering even though that reason escapes our understanding. The willful deception here comes in trying to rescue God's goodness by turning evil into a disguised good. What appears to the human as something bad, from the divine point of view, is really in the long run something good.

If we are unable to accept this move of skeptical theism, that is, if we are unable to deny the real existence of natural evil by turning it into a good, we must consider the second possibility. This is the possibility that natural evil really exists, and that it is not permitted by God nor can it be stopped by the exercise of his omnipotence. When divine agency is eliminated as the cause of natural evil, how do we explain it? This brings us to the second possibility: it is a result of chance or necessity.

We come then to two versions of the deistic doctrine of non-interference, one based on necessity and the other on chance. As I understand it, the Enlightenment version of deistic non-intervention is based on necessity. A dominant metaphor of nature in this age is the machine. The idea was that God made the clock of nature, wound it up, and set it into motion without any further help from him. As I have discussed, a clock operates on the

<sup>8</sup> The eminent chemist and devout Christian credited with the modern experimental method, Robert Boyle (1627–1691), insisted that the world was not like a puppet that required the constant movement of a puppet-master; it was like a grand clock, in which the parts are so skillfully contrived that, once they are set in motion by their maker, they proceed according to his ingenious design. For Boyle, a world so excellently wrought that it could operate without continual divine impetus was superior to one that required constant intervention. As historian of science and religion [Brooke \(2002, p. 165\)](#) has put it, "That the machinery necessary for life had been packed into the minutest mite was, for Boyle, more astounding evidence for a deity than the larger machinery of the macrocosm". The Divine Clockmaker—Melissa Cain Travis.

basis of the determined necessity of cause and effect and hence runs independently from its maker. Man-made machines are subject to breakdowns, but on the view of Enlightenment deism the God-made machine of nature cannot break down. Hence, in the machine of nature there is never a need for God to step in and fix it. He can only shut it down. As well, there is no real place for chance in the workings of the machine of nature.

This older view of nature, this Newtonian view, was overturned in modern physics. Here a new element was introduced, the element of chance, of indeterminacy, something once called luck. But even the introduction of chance into the natural order, does not create an opening for God's intervention. Just as God cannot intervene with a free decision without making it no longer a free decision, God cannot intervene in an event that happens by chance without making this event no longer a matter of chance. If such an event were the result of God's permission, God could stop it by canceling his permission. And of course, many try to claim that what appears to be a chance event is actually an event of causal necessity, the cause of which is not known. That is, some think that such "chance" events are not really chance events but disguised determined events. What makes such events look like they are produced by chance is our ignorance of the cause that determined it. This seems like a sleight of hand similar to the move made in skeptical theism.

But suppose that God designed chance into the workings of nature. If chance is built into the natural order, it would make no sense to think that it is a matter of divine permission. It is simply nonsense to claim that one and the same event can be a matter of chance and at the same time be a matter of permission.

But this is where things get difficult for a belief in God. As the atheist notes, believing that God designed chance into the natural world, undermines, and ultimately destroys God's goodness. As the atheist is well aware, chance events, storms, diseases, and so forth, often lead to great suffering. So, why would a good God include chance into his design of nature? Moreover, why would God design some events to be out of his omnipotent control? Chance events, by definition, would be out of God's control. But this would be inconsistent with God's omnipotence. Hence, if God exists, there are no chance events. So, as the atheist reasons that what appears to be a chance natural event is actually a function of God's act of permission. But this just makes things all the worse for the belief in God, since God's permission of destructive storms and catastrophic diseases is all the more at odds with God's goodness.

Perhaps compassionate deism can offer a plausible defense for why God saw fit to design chance into the natural world. This would be a defense that parallels the defense of God's decision to design the capacity of freedom into the human reality. Recall, that defense is the claim that a world with freedom, despite the fact that it can be the cause of suffering, is a better kind of world than a world without it. We ask then whether a world where chance is a reality and as such often leads to suffering is a better kind of world than one without it. Perhaps this decision does not violate God's goodness but testifies to it.

Such a defense is exactly the strategy adopted by what is called the virtue defense. According to this defense, it was God's goodness that guided him to design a natural world with chance built into it. Where is the goodness in this? Perhaps it dawns when we see that exposure to chance invites the development of the virtues that God wanted his creatures to embrace on their own, virtues God himself embodies, virtues such as love and compassion and generosity. Perhaps there is no better way to invite this moral development than to place human beings in a natural world that is exposed to chance. So, even though this exposure leads to natural evil, in a parallel way that the capacity for freedom leads to moral evil, God's design testifies to his goodness.

In wanting his creatures to develop these virtues on their own, we see a critical difference between Enlightenment versions of the deistic doctrine of non-interference and the version I am calling compassionate deism. The clock maker/winder leaves his machine to run by itself. In the vision of compassionate deism, the world that is open to chance is not simply abandoned to chance. Indeed, is not abandoned at all. In compassionate deism, God is with us as an empathetic observer and as infinitely interested in the development

of our lives, especially in how our lives turn out. He is open to being surprised and to being disappointed. Motivated by love, God shares in our joys and in our suffering as well. Indeed, he suffers with us.

#### Concluding Unscientific Postscript

The key concepts at play in my defense of deism have been permission, intervention, and design. We can think of deism as a response to the atheist's argument from evil. According to this argument, if God permits evil, as he obviously does, then he should be able to intervene in human affairs and in nature to withdraw this permission and thus override it and stop or prevent it, which he obviously does not do. That he does not so intervene seems to be a devastating assault on his goodness and a coup de gras to God's existence.

To mount a defense against the atheist's argument, deism denies its fundamental premise, namely, that God permits evil. To make this denial plausible, the deist focuses on the concept of design. This concept is grammatically independent from permission and intervention. This is shown in the grammatical oddity of saying, for example, the engineer permits or somehow allows the bridge she builds to have the design she gives it. It just makes no sense to say that the engineer permits or allows his suspension bridge to be a suspension bridge. And after the bridge is finished, the basic design cannot be removed without demolition and redesign.

Of course, the model for design drawn from engineering, cannot be applied to God's creation, *mutatus mutandis*. The engineer makes things out of existing material, God creates ex nihilo. The deist contends that God designed contingency into creation rather than permitting it. That is, God does not permit or allow the creation to be subject to contingency, he designed this openness into it. We might say, God's design created the ontological possibility of possibility, or, if you will, he brought the reality of possibility into being what it is, which is quite different than permitting it. As God designed it, there is no way to avoid the possibility of moral and natural catastrophe apart from the radical intervention of demolition and redesign.

God's decision to design the creation as he did create it, that is, as open to moral and natural catastrophe, does not imply that he permits this openness and could intervene to suspend or cancel this design at will. Indeed, quite the contrary. Of course, he could have created a different kind of world, and it is always open to him to bring the world he did create to an end and to bring another one forth. Short of this, his design cannot be revoked.

The deist insists that God cannot intervene in the workings of human affairs and the workings of nature; these workings must be left to be just what they were designed to be. What turns deism into compassionate deism is its understanding of the design of God's creation as testimony to his love and goodness. Compassionate deism takes this design to reveal God's careful interest in making just that kind of world that is a fit place for his creatures to develop a life of their own. It is God's love that sets this worldly table and his goodness that invites us to it.

There is, however, no coercion involved in this invitation; it is an invitation, not a summons. It is an invitation that is designed into the creation itself. As such, this invitation is there for anyone and everyone who has eyes to see and ears to hear. Because the compassionate deist insists that the acceptance or rejection of this invitation to develop a life of one's own must be free and unencumbered, it is necessary that God keep an appropriate non-intervening distance from the exercise of this freedom.

I started this essay with a quotation of the Beatles' song, "Lady Madonna". So, it is fitting to end with another, "Let it Be". This song, written by John and Paul, names deeply etched in the Christian myth, calls on Mother Mary (the Mother of God?) in times of trouble to whisper these words of comfort, "let it be". How would the deist interpret these words? This depends on how the words "let" and "it" are used.

If we think that God permits evil, this is just to say that he sometimes simply "lets it be." And for the believer, this permission is OK since it is allowed for a greater good. But

to read “let it be” this way amounts to embracing the very premise of atheism (that God permits evil), the premise that deism is trying to deny.

There is a way to interpret “let it be” that does not read it as a matter of granting permission. Suppose that the “it” in “let it be” refers to design. As such, there is no place in “it” for permission and hence no room for intervention. It makes no sense to say that a wheel is permitted to be round; its being round is a feature of its design and fixes what it is. Similarly, the design of God’s creation, like the design of the engineer’s bridge, is not a matter of permission and intervention. The completed bridge, like the completed creation, opens to good and bad consequences. The engineer of the bridge cannot control these consequences, just as God cannot control how the capacity for freedom will be used. In both cases, these consequences, good and bad, are independent of the permission of the designer. The designer must live with the consequences of his design. God’s design makes nature and human affairs to be just what they are, and as such he cannot revoke them short of destroying what they are.

So perhaps in times of trouble, if God comes to us and whispers in our ears “let it be”, he may be trying to tell us to stop wishing for a different kind of world, a world with a different design.<sup>9</sup> Of course, God wants us to keep trying to reduce the amount of evil in this world, since it is clearly far from being the best possible world. Perhaps, however, he just wants to tell us that evil in this world is a consequence of design, not a consequence of permission. As well, he might want us to see clearly that the design of this world reflects his wisdom and goodness. So, his whisper might well be a call to embrace this world as the best possible *kind of world*, at least for his purpose. And what might his purpose be? I cannot think of a purpose more noble than giving his creatures a place that invites them to develop a life of their own. Surely God knew that this world, the world he created, is just the kind of world that is fit for human flourishing and thus a perfect kind of place where his creatures can, on their own, find a life of their own.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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<sup>9</sup> I think here of the final days of Antony Flew, the famous atheist who had a kind of death bed conversion from atheism to deism. Antony Flew was famously converted from atheism to deism. Before his late conversion, he based his atheism on the failure of theism to offer a rational justification for God’s right to **allow** evil and suffering despite his ability to **intervene** and stop it. In his last book, Professor Flew announced his conversion from atheism to deism. He says: “To the surprise of all concerned, I announced at the start that I now accept the existence of a God. What might have been an intense exchange of opposing views ended up as a joint exploration of the developments in modern science that seemed to point to a higher Intelligence” (p. 79). And further, “I now believe that the universe was brought into existence by an infinite Intelligence. I believe that this universe’s intricate laws manifest what scientists have called the Mind of God. I believe that life and reproduction originate in a divine Source” (p. 92). See (Flew and Varghese 2008). The Problem of evil was at the heart of Flew’s conversion to deism. In an interview with Gary Habermas, Flew as asked: “In your view, then, God hasn’t done anything about evil. Flew answers: “No, not at all, other than producing a lot of it” See “My Pilgrimage from Atheism to Theism: A Discussion between Antony Flew and Gary Habermas” (2004). It is not clear what Flew means by saying that God produces a lot of evil. Does he mean that even though God cannot stop it, he nevertheless causes it? This would seem to question God’s goodness, or at least call for a justification for this production. In this respect, Flew seems to waiver on his deistic commitment to the importance of non-interference not to mention the commitment of the compassionate deist to divine goodness. My own conversion to compassionate deism was not a conversion from atheism but a conversion from theism.