

THE SIMULTANEOUS TRUTH AND FALSITY
OF “EXISTENTIAL INERTIA”

By

Oluwaseyi Bello O.

(@timmodryoid)

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Introduction

One of the best practices I have learned from perennialists is the recognition of valid points of view, and not to see antagonisms where there is a hidden harmony. Such an awareness is one of the marks of objectivity and is very valuable in metaphysics. So imagine my surprise when I hear about the Existential Inertia Thesis (EIT) and how it is supposedly an alternative to, and opposed to, the Doctrine of Divine Conservation (DDC). On first glance, it looks ridiculous, especially after reading Beaudoin ¹. However, upon reading Schmid's defence of EIT ² and then rereading both papers later on, it became very clear that this opposition is a confusion of categories, and is not a true opposition at all. This will become clearer as we go through the logic of EIT and how its proponents misunderstand DDC, which in Schmid's case, is possibly due to Professor Feser's (unintentionally) bad examples. My references for understanding EIT are only Schmid and Beaudoin's papers, as this is not a refutation, but a reconfiguration and synthesis, to show how EIT is ultimately only true in a theistic framework, and is something theistic philosophers have known for millennia.

Misunderstanding Divine Conservation

My problem with the idea that EIT is an alternative to DDC starts from the definitions used for the former. Beaudoin uses this definition (from Mortimer Adler)

*Bodies continue in motion, once set in motion, until counteracting causes intervene to bring them to rest. Contingent individuals continue in existence, **once given existence**, until counteracting causes intervene to deprive them of their existence.*

This is from Schmid:

Necessarily, concrete objects (i) persist in existence (once in existence) without requiring a continuously concurrent sustaining cause of their existence and (ii) cease to exist only if caused to do so.

¹ John Beaudoin, 'The World's Continuance : Divine Conservation or Existential Inertia?', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 61 (2007), 83–98 <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11153-007-9113-1>>.

² Joseph C Schmid, 'Existential Inertia and the Aristotelian Proof', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 0123456789, 2020, 20 <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11153-020-09773-9>>.

My problem here, starting with Beaudoin, is that he seems to locate creation ex nihilo as an event in the past, with divine conservation as what “happens” after. This is seen in statements such as “*The orthodox view has it that God created the world ex nihilo and has ever since conserved its existence*” and most tellingly where he says “*Divine conservation of contingent existents would be needed even were they never created ex nihilo — i.e. even if they have co-existed with God from eternity in the past.*”. My problem with Schmid’s construal is that, although he *seems* to avoid Beaudoin’s sundering of divine creation from divine sustenance, he still mistakes God as a being in time whose creation is, from God’s experience, a discontinuously indefinite series of “moments” where God completely reconstitutes a being ex nihilo. He then proceeds to (rightly) reject divine conservation construed this way and defer to what is essentially another form of Beaudoin’s chosen definition, and again locates the “beginning of existence” at a “moment” in time.

I cannot speak for Professor Feser’s understanding of DDC – although I believe we are not that different in the basics – but the truth is that Divine Conservation is Creation ex nihilo from the point of view of beings in time (contra Beaudoin), and yet, creation is itself necessary. Creation is itself because it has to be itself, and this is a way to Theism. The necessity of the cosmos is something found in Aristotle, and the philosophies of the east. The necessity of creation is not itself a refutation of DDC, but an upward movement to its affirmation. Schmid says:

Why do objects, once in existence, persist in existence instead of being instantly annihilated or annihilated at random, arbitrary points during their existence? EIT provides a simple answer: objects persist rather than succumb to instant or random annihilation because it is metaphysically necessary that they do so (absent causally destructive factors). This answer, analogous to the one concerning existence simpliciter, nicely explains why objects persist rather than chaotically being annihilated: the latter is simply metaphysically impossible. We can see, then, that EIT provides a nice explanation for the data of persistence.

This is correct on one level, but false on another. Any determinist, or even a Platonist, can affirm that it is metaphysically impossible to arbitrarily annihilate the cosmos, but such a point of view is only conditional on the fact that the Cosmos is a theophany, and that, in that capacity,

is eternal ³. But there is also another view, complimentary to it, and that is the fact that if the cosmos is a theophany, then its existence is, in Vedantic terms, “Illusory”.

What this means is that the chief failure of those who oppose EIT to DDT is that they fail to understand what it means for God to “conserve” and what it means to have “sustaining causes”. I will explain below.

Divine conservation, creation, and eternity

When asking the basic question of “why is there something” other than nothing, a valid answer, as Schmid notes, is that “*it is metaphysically necessary that something exists*”. And as he also notes, “*necessary things don’t seem to call out for explanations the way contingent things do. Contingent things, precisely because they genuinely could have been on either side of the dichotomy between existence and non-existence, demand an account as to why they fall on one side of the dichotomy as opposed to the other. Necessarily existent things, by contrast, couldn’t possibly fall on the non-existence side of the dichotomy*”.

But this is not the whole story, as Frithjof Schuon has argued ⁴, things can be both necessary and contingent, from different perspectives. Speaking about the cosmos in particular, Lloyd Gerson ⁵, Frithjof Schuon ⁶, and Robert Bolton ⁷ have all showed how creation ex nihilo works in an eternal universe.

The reason theism is required to make an eternal universe intelligible is the fact that necessary facts themselves are not arbitrary, and are only themselves “relatively necessary” because of the fact of “Necessity” in the first place. Schmid almost gets this when he says:

But God can only make x be the case if x is possible in the first place; for if x is impossible, then clearly God cannot make x obtain. But that means that God’s making x cannot be that in virtue of which x is possible, since God’s making x presupposes x is possible in the first place. There must exist (as it were) a pre-established realm of possibilities and necessity not grounded in God’s making things be the case.

³ Frithjof Schuon and James S. Cutsinger, *The Fullness of God: Frithjof Schuon on Christianity*, World Wisdom, 2017 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1rfss2f.13>>.

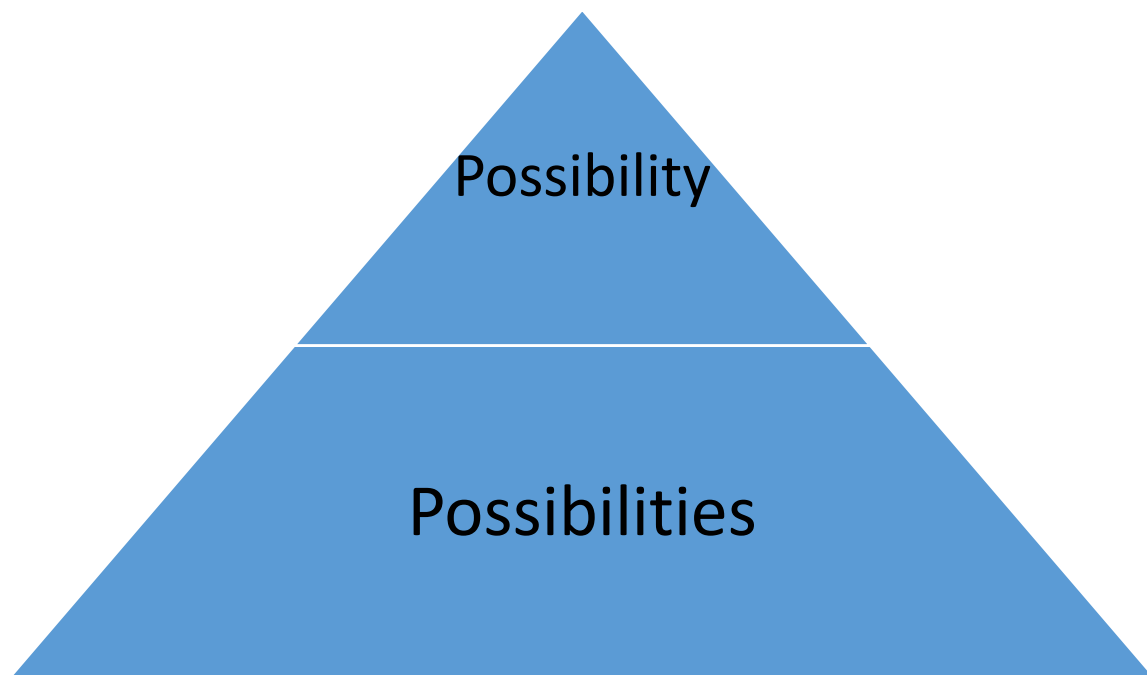
⁴ Frithjof Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human: A New Translation with Selected Letters (Writings of Frithjof Schuon)* (World Wisdom, 2013).

⁵ Lloyd P. Gerson, *Plotinus (The Arguments of the Philosophers)*, 1999.

⁶ Schuon and Cutsinger.

⁷ Robert Bolton, ‘Creation out of Nothing’, *Sacred Web*, 12, 113–30.

Where he gets wrong is that he doesn't realise that *possibilities* only exist because of *Possibility* as such, and *Possibility* as such is its own explanation. It is the ultimate necessity. The necessity of *x* existing is because *x* is possible, but *x* is only possible because of possibility as such. Schmid stops at the penultimate step, missing the clear last step that is Possibility itself, which, when probed deeply, is Necessity viewed from another perspective, and is what we may call "God". So, yes, the existence of an object is grounded, provisionally, in the possibility of its existence; but it is also grounded in possibility as such, and as that is one of God's names (He who makes all things possible), it is therefore true that it is a necessity grounded in God. It is important not to anthropomorphise God in such a way that makes him an extrinsic "entity" of sorts. This is what I see both Schmid and Beaudoin ultimately do. The result is inadvertently "proving" God's necessity while trying to deny it, and in such a way – as in Schmid's case – as to legitimise a major stream of theistic thought, that of Platonism, of which Aristotelianism is a branch ⁸. "How is this Platonism?" You may ask. The answer is found in Schmid's statement that "*There must exist (as it were) a pre-established realm of possibilia...*"; which, as I have already explained, is missing a crucial final step. With that step in mind we have the following hierarchy:



⁸ Lloyd P. Gerson, 'What Is Platonism?', *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 43.3 (2015), 253–76 <<https://doi.org/10.1353/hph.2005.0136>>.

This distinction is analogous to the God and the cosmos, the so called “*analogia entis*”⁹, Possibility representing “God” and Possibilities representing the Cosmos:

*God is both absolute Necessity and infinite Possibility; in the first respect, He transcends everything that is merely possible, whereas, in the second respect, He is, not a given possibility of course since He is absolutely necessary, but Possibility as such; this is to say, He is the Source of all that can be, or must needs be from relative necessity, therefore from participation in absolute Necessity.*¹⁰

Where we see the “Platonic” nature of this distinction is in the nature of these possibilities:

*The notion of possibility gives rise a priori to two interpretations, the first “horizontal” and the second “vertical”, analogically speaking: on the one hand we say “that is possible, therefore it can be done”; on the other hand we say, “that has been done, or that exists, therefore it was possible”. In the first case, the possible is what may either be or not be, and is thus opposed to the necessary, which must be; in the second case, the possible is what can and must be, and is therefore **causal and produces something which is necessary since it exists**. In the latter sense, the notion of the possible corresponds to a retrospective observation, possibility being then an underlying potency which is directed at a necessity of manifestation; in the other sense, the notion is prospective and opens out onto the uncertain.*

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This is platonic because:

*“...what manifests itself is “real” and that what can either manifest itself or not is merely “possible”; but in another respect, which abolishes this distinction, it is the possible which is the real, manifestation being accidental or illusory; in this case, the possible is identified with a Platonic archetype...”*¹²

It is a “platonic archetype” – and this another name for the concept of “form” common to Aristotelians and Platonists – because the possibility of *x* is exactly what makes *x* possible,

⁹ David Bentley Hart, *The Hidden and the Manifest Essays in Theology and Metaphysics* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2017).

¹⁰ Schuon.

¹¹ Schuon.

¹² Schuon.

and therefore what “causes” x in the classical sense of the word “cause”, which is exactly the sense in which “sustaining cause” is used in DDC:

Neither Aristotle’s concept of an aition nor any Scholastic concept of a causa actually corresponds to what we—following our early modern predecessors—mean when we speak of a “cause.” A better rendering of aitia or causae, in the ancient or mediaeval sense, might be “explanations,” “rationales,” “logical descriptions,” or (still better) “rational relations.” The older fourfold nexus of causality was not, that is to say, a defective attempt at modern physical science but instead chiefly a grammar of predication, describing the inherent logical structure of anything that exists insofar as it exists, and reflecting a world in which things and events are at once discretely identifiable and yet part of the larger dynamic continuum of the whole. It was a simple logical picture of a reality in which both stability and change can be recognized and described. And these aitia or causae were intrinsic and indiscerptibly integral relations, distinct dimensions of a single causal logic, not separated forces in only accidental alliance. A final cause, for instance, was an inherent natural end, not an extrinsically imposed design; and this was true even when teleology involved external uses rather than merely internal perfections (as in the case of human artifacts); it was at once a thing’s intrinsic fullness and its external participation in the totality of nature. Thus, in the Liber de causis (that mysterious digest and theological synthesis of the metaphysics of Proclus that entered Western Scholasticism from the Islamic philosophical world), one of the principal “causes” of any isolated substance is the taxonomic category in which that thing subsists, the more “eminent” rational structure to which it belongs. In a sense, a causal relation in this scheme is less like a physical interaction or exchange of energy than it is like a mathematical equation, or like the syntax of a coherent sentence. Admittedly, this is a picture of reality that comes from ages in which it was assumed that the structure of the world was analogous to the structure of rational thought. But, then again, this was an eminently logical assumption—if only because there appears to be a more than illusory or accidental reciprocal openness between mind and world, and because the mind appears genuinely able to penetrate the physical order by way of irreducibly noetic practices like mathematics and logic.¹³

¹³ David Bentley Hart, *Theological Territories: A David Bentley Hart Digest* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2020).

If this is true, and it is, then to say EIT excludes DDC is misguided. A dimension of God as “sustaining cause” of a being is “rationality” itself and not physical elements and their various interconnections and dependencies. To even bring up physics, chemistry and biology in a discussion of metaphysical causal relations beyond a very tenuous analogy is to reveal a very basic misunderstanding of what DDC is, not to mention other concomitant doctrines (Simplicity, Eternity, Omnipotence, etc.). “Rationality”, or “Intelligibility”, which is not only discursive reasoning but “knowability” – which isn’t, as Gerson explains ¹⁴, reducible to discursive reasoning – is another name for “Being”. Whatever is unknowable in principle is indistinguishable from non-existence, and is self-contradictory (which is to say the same thing); for to be able to conceive it is already to know it in some way, and therefore for it to exist in some way (in your mind or in the noetic in general). To say without God’s sustenance – which is the creative act looked at from the temporal perspective – the cosmos would fall into nothingness is to say that without the rational structure of the cosmos grounded in rationality or “knowability” itself (which we call God), which is by definition unlimited, infinite and self-subsistent – otherwise, if rationality itself is limited, then there is a point where rationality is irrational, which is contradictory – the cosmos becomes incoherent, unknowable, and therefore non-existent. The hypothetical scenario where God’s sustenance is “withdrawn” is, on the level of the cosmos itself, an impossible situation meant to show the importance of God, understood metaphysically, in the coherence and reality of the Cosmos. I say “on the level of the cosmos itself” because “existence”, understood normally, is a relational term, synonymous with “manifestation”, which presupposes the distinction between subject and object. The argument from contingency and the argument for simplicity, as well as many classical arguments, all involve a “recession” of the created to the uncreated. It moves, virtually, up the metaphysical, and therefore logical, hierarchy right up to the simplest and most primordial self-explanatory principle, where the distinction between subject and object is erased. We move, virtually, from Duality to Unity. The “apophatic” is precisely a virtual “decreation”. And if, as David Bentley Hart has said ¹⁵, the metaphysical structure of the cosmos is analogous to the logical structure of the logical mind that intuits and knows it, then this “virtual decreation” corresponds to a “real decreation” inherent in the cosmos itself. But this “decreation” is not physical, nor can physics learn of it, because it is not part of its sphere of inquiry.

¹⁴ Gerson, *Plotinus (The Arguments of the Philosophers)*.

¹⁵ Hart, *Theological Territories: A David Bentley Hart Digest*.

It is also not “temporal”, because it is talking about things that undergird time itself. As Rene Guenon quipped, “*he who cannot rise above the vantage-point of temporal succession and envisage all things in simultaneous mode is incapable of the least conception of the metaphysical order.*” This doesn’t mean we do not speak of these things in terms of temporal succession, but that these terms are “symbolic” and “analogical” of things that are not in themselves temporal, otherwise the logic itself fails.

This “Decreation” is therefore eminently “logical”, “ontological”, and “metaphysical”, not physical. Because this is a metaphysical principle, “Decreation” is “simultaneous” with “Creation” as they are complimentary points of view of the eminently logical and ontological “immanation” and “emanation” that spawns the “chain of being”¹⁶.

Virtues of this account:

1. It escapes all 3 of what Beaudoin’s believes an opponent should avoid when countering EIT:
 - a) Simply defining ‘contingent object’ in such a way as to make it a conceptual truth that contingent things require conservation by another being. Going this route only forces us to wonder whether the world we live in really is contingent in this particular sense of the term - something that clearly lacks the intuitive support enjoyed by the claim that the universe is contingent in the more austere logical sense.
 - b) Making his case rely heavily or exclusively on evocative but evidentially unsupported metaphors about being and time, such as one that would have us imagine a stretched coil spring that connects objects to oblivion, ready to snap them back if ever God’s sustaining hand were removed from them; or one that analogizes temporal endurance to movement through space, such that unaided temporal endurance could be secured only by possession of some inconceivable form of temporal propulsion, or a kind of shield to protect objects from the lashing waves of time’s passage. Such metaphors as these can at best be of heuristic value when they have the support of independent argument.

¹⁶ Rene Guenon, *The Multiple States of the Being* (Sophia Perennis, 2004).

- c) Adopting a pantheism that identifies God with the universe itself, so that it becomes a trivial fact that the universe cannot endure without God. This would fail to falsify DEI anyway, since in this case the world is not viewed as dependent for its continuation on some *other*, distinct being.

It escapes (a) because God is not some “being”, and the contingency here is itself “logical”, which for the classical theist is also ontological and metaphysical, and not “physical”. There is no other way to define logical contingency here that is not a dependency of a logical datum upon another, unless you want to define “contingency” as the opposite of “necessity”, the opposition of which I already explained as something that depends on a point of view and is not absolute in anything but God in His fullness.

It escapes (b) because the appropriate metaphors are those of mathematics and not physics or any of the empirical sciences.

It escapes (c) because it doesn’t aim to disprove EIT, but show its theistic implications, without which it collapses into half-truths. Classical Theism is already Panentheistic, and in some sense identifies God with the world, as seen in the various ways Platonisms and Aristotelianisms speak about “participation”, the true implications of which are very well known in Eastern philosophies ¹⁷ and can be seen even in Christian literature ¹⁸.

2. It answers several of Schmid’s objections:

- a) Concerning whether God is a sustaining cause:

You may think God is just such a thing. In response, (i) this causal dependence is certainly not manifest or evident to the senses (i.e. it is compatible with my claim that we don’t observe sustaining causes), and (ii) this causal dependence claim is question-begging in the dialectical context wherein God’s causal sustenance is the very question at issue.

- b) On the objection that the account of divine conservation given below is unnecessary:

¹⁷ Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, ‘On the One and Only Transmigrant.Pdf’, *Journal Of The American Oriental Society*, 3 (1944), 28.

¹⁸ Jordan Daniel Wood, ‘Creation Is Incarnation: The Metaphysical Peculiarity Of The Logoi In Maximus Confessor’, *Modern Theology*, 7177 (2017) <<https://doi.org/10.1111/moth.12382>>; David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, Yale University Press, 2019 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvnwbzd4>>.

On Feser's account, God does not act on a previously existent concrete object to conserve it in existence, preserving its original constituents. Instead, God wholly reconstitutes concrete objects from utter non-being at each and every moment.

It answers (a) because;

For (i), a logical dependency, which like we have seen is taken to be analogical to ontological and metaphysical dependency, is not supposed to be evident to the senses because it is not a physical phenomenon, or in Platonist terms, not “in the world of appearances”.

For (ii), the question of whether or not God is required as a sustaining cause is already answered by the fact that if God is rationality itself, then to question his requirement as sustaining cause is ridiculous. Some may call this disingenuous, that I'm redefining God to fit necessary abstract concepts, but I am really not. In fact, what classical theism does is show us the structure or logical thought and through it, the structure of reality itself. It is that ultimate principle that is revealed we call “God”, whose description in personalist terms is always allegorical and symbolic. That doesn't mean the symbolic language is an empty cipher, but that it is an inkling of something that is “more” than what it says, just like the description of the love you have for someone can never fully exhaust the experience. This “personal dimension” of God must never be let go of because it is essential in maintaining the analogy. This dimension must also not be overstated, because that makes God into a creature among others, a “being”, and is therefore detached from the absolutely necessary nature of his existence.

My response to (b) is that – speaking for my understanding now and not Feser's – God does not “reconstitute” any being all over again at every “moment”. Time is not essentially a discrete series of moments, just like a line is not essentially a series of points. The “temporal value” of a true moment is 0, and $0 + 0 + \dots \infty = 0$. Our division of time is to some extent arbitrary, as we can in principle divide any number of ways and in an indefinite number of sizes, and these represent “intervals” and not “moments”. The true “moment” are the arbitrary “beginnings” in time itself, which separate intervals, and when analysed logically is the same “moment” of “eternity” we call the “eternal present”. I suggest Schmid, if he sees this, read Ananda Coomaraswamy's “Time and Eternity” for more on this ¹⁹. Time is essentially “continuous”,

¹⁹ Ananda K Coomaraswamy, *Time and Eternity* (Select Books, 1989).

and we only divide it into units for convenience. Even in physics, Planck time is not the smallest unit of time simpliciter, it is “*the length of time at which no smaller meaningful length can be validly measured due to the indeterminacy expressed in Werner Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle*”²⁰. It is a statement about what can be measured, not necessarily a statement about time’s ontology, although a few things about the latter can be inferred. Unless you are a temporal “atomist”, the better metaphor for time is a river and not a ticking clock. The “moment” God creates is therefore not a series but “one moment”, the “eternal now”, and it happens “at once”, in the “twinkling of an eye”, and as we can see this coincides perfectly with my explanation whereby temporality is not present in metaphysical causation, something Rene Guenon has explained well²¹. The temporality of creation is then a “special modality” of what is essentially timeless. As the saying goes, “time is the moving image of eternity”, the relationship between the two being aptly represented by a circle, where the centre represents eternity and the circle represents time²². The persistence of a being is then true persistence and not simply a “cloning” of a being through a mythical series of “moments”. This, along with the explanation of God as necessity itself, should undercut the argument that EIT gives the more “primitive” explanation of the persistence of a being in existence.

Conclusion

I have not said everything that can be said in defence of, or against my understanding. I have just set out here to provide an outline of it. I hope my account will benefit both sides and show how they can inform one another. I am on the theistic side, and I would in principle implore any atheist to reconsider his position, but I know it is never that simple, and that it takes more than arguments on a screen to convince anyone, although they can be essential to it. My hope is that this helps in bringing them over to our side, or barring that, enriching their understanding of the theist (particularly the classical theist) position. *Vincit Omnia Veritas*.

²⁰ ‘Planck Time - Simple English Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia’
<https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Planck_time> [accessed 7 October 2020].

²¹ Guenon.

²² Wolfgang Smith, *Cosmos & Transcendence: Breaking Through the Barrier of Scientistic Belief*, Second Edition (Angelico Press, Sophia Perennis, 2008).

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