

Open Theism

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Introduction

Open Theism is a theological movement that offers a new conception of God and related doctrines. Its proponents consider themselves to be evangelical and are from an Arminian background; however, they move beyond classical Arminianism in certain key doctrinal areas. Open Theism significantly modifies traditional concepts of God as it reexamines and redefines certain key aspects of *God's nature* and *God's relationship with the world*.

Defining Open Theism

Where does the term *open* come from? In what respect is Open Theism “open?” Open Theists have two things in mind when they speak of openness: *God* is open to the future and the *future* is open to God. Clark Pinnock explains:

God rules in such a way as to uphold the created structures and, because he gives liberty to his creatures, is happy to accept *the future as open, not closed*, and a relationship with the world that is dynamic, not static. We believe that the Bible presents an open view of God as living and active, involved in history, relating to us and changing in relation to us.... God's openness means that *God is open to the changing realities of history*, that God cares about us and lets what we do impact him.¹

More specifically, as Bruce Ware puts it, Open Theism is essentially a model of God and the world “in which the doctrine of divine foreknowledge (i.e., particularly knowledge of future free human choices) is denied so as not to preclude (as they see it) the genuineness of future contingencies and future free human choices. Hence, the future is ‘open...’”² In other words, on the Open model, human free will requires the future's being to a certain extent open, or *unknowable*, which in turn requires God's being open to, or *not knowing*, certain aspects of the future. God must be open to the future, because the future must be open to God, because man must be free in relation to God. This explains why Open Theism is also known as Free Will Theism, because a certain understanding of human free will figures so prominently in the model.

¹ Clark H. Pinnock, “Systematic Theology,” in *The Openness of God*, Clark Pinnock et al. (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 1994), 104, emphasis added.

² Bruce A. Ware, *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2000), 18, n. 1.

As a new conception of God and the world, Open Theism, to its advocates, “treads the middle path between classical theism, which exaggerates God’s transcendence of the world, and process theism, which presses for radical immanence.”³ More on this will follow, but for now we may consider briefly how Open Theists view Classical Theism and Process Theism, and themselves in between them. Pinnock describes what he calls the traditional view:

The traditional way of thinking about God has some appeal. Not only is it ancient, it portrays God as majestic and unchanging, far beyond the world, enthroned above the rough and tumble, untouched by turbulence and pain. But it is one sided in its preference for God’s magnificent otherness over his loving condescension and it makes it difficult to speak adequately about a personal God. God is not like a stone pillar, in no way affected by the world and alien to real relatedness and reciprocity; God’s sovereignty is not all-controlling such that everything is decided and historical reality is squashed. It is not helpful to think of divine eternity as timelessness, jeopardizing God’s freedom to act in time. It is unsound to think of exhaustive foreknowledge, implying that every detail of the future is already decided. More justice can be done to Scripture to bring the truth of the living God into better theological expression.⁴

On the other side is Process Theology, compared to and contrasted with Open Theism in the following manner by Richard Rice:

[O]pen theism agrees with process thought, against the tradition, that God is not the only factor that accounts for the way things are. There exists a realm of nondivine beings whose decisions, actions, and experiences are not the direct product of the divine will. Their decisions are truly their own. But open theism agrees with the tradition against process thought in holding that the mere existence of such a world is due to God’s free decision.⁵

But not only do Open Theists view themselves as striking a balance between the extremes of Classical and Process Theism; they also see their model as a corrective of Classical Arminianism. Pinnock compares and contrasts Open Theism with Classical Arminianism:

The openness model belongs to the free will theist traditions that are commonly called, not altogether accurately, Arminianism, harking back to the work of Jacob Arminius.... Arminius broke with the classical view of the nature of God in holding that what God foreknows is conditioned by what creatures decide to do and that God genuinely responds to them as significantly free beings. The open view differs from the classical Arminians’,

³ Clark H. Pinnock, “From Augustine to Arminius: A Pilgrimage in Theology,” in *The Grace of God and the Will of Man*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1989), 26.

⁴ Clark H. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God’s Openness* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 7–8.

⁵ Richard Rice, “Process Theism and the Open View of God: The Crucial Difference,” in *Searching for an Adequate God*, ed. John B. Cobb and Clark H. Pinnock (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 185.

however, in its understanding of certain of the divine attributes. Wesley and Arminius, for example, held to the traditional definitions of unchangeability, eternity and omniscience, which openness theists think jeopardize genuinely real divine/human relationships. Thus, openness theism calls for a more radical modification of the tradition than classical Arminianism does.⁶

Mapping Open Theism on the Theological Landscape⁷

From the above it is apparent where Open Theism falls within the range of world views generally and theistic models specifically. Generally speaking, Open Theism, like Classical Theism, is dualistic rather than monistic in world view. One's world view is the set of presuppositions that one holds about the basic make-up of the world.⁸ Most basically, all world views assume that something, as opposed to nothing, is "there." But recognizing *that* something is there is only the first step; the next thing is to determine exactly *what* that something is which is there. To assume that there is only one thing that is there, whether material or nonmaterial, is to embrace a monistic world view. Monism is the metaphysical view that only one thing comprises reality.

On the one hand is Naturalism, which holds that this one thing is *material*: matter is all there ever was, all there is, and all there ever will be.⁹ Naturalism excludes the existence of God altogether. On the other hand is Pantheism, according to which one *immaterial* thing is all that exists. According to Pantheistic Monism, all that exists is God—"the one, infinite-impersonal, ultimate reality."¹⁰ Whatever else appears to exist separately, such as material objects and beings, is illusion. While Naturalism excludes the existence of *God*, Pantheism excludes the existence of anything *but* God. In Naturalism, there is no God, just a world; in Pantheism, there is no world, just God.

Unlike Naturalism and Pantheism, Theism accepts the existence of both God *and* the world. Thus, Theism is essentially a dualistic world view. This is to be distinguished from Dualism itself. According to Dualism, reality is best explained in terms of two mutually irreducible elements. Dualism may be Metaphysical (mind and matter), Epistemological (idea and object), or Ethical (good and evil).¹¹ Ethical Dualism arose as a solution for the problem of evil: if God is

⁶ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 13.

⁷ For a pictorial presentation of this discussion, see the diagram below on p. 12.

⁸ James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, updated and expanded ed. (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 1988), 17.

⁹ Related to Naturalism is Materialism, the view that the physical body is the sum total of human existence. There is no immaterial or spiritual aspect to human existence (see Norman L. Geisler and Paul D. Feinberg, *Introduction to Philosophy* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980], 179–92).

¹⁰ Sire, *Universe Next Door*, 140.

¹¹ Harold B. Kuhn, "Dualism," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 334.

the author of everything that exists; and evil is something that exists; then God is the author of evil. However, if evil exists along side of good as an eternal first principle, then God is not responsible for evil.¹² But in the process of clearing God from blame for evil, Dualism destroys God's transcendence. God alone is not eternal and supreme over a world He created. In Dualism the Creator-creature distinction is lost.

Theism is not Dualism, but it is dualistic—that is, there *are* two things that exist: God and the world. However, according to Theism, there are radical differences between God and the world. While God is an infinite and necessary Being, the world is finite and contingent, brought into existence by God. But this fundamental difference between God and the world must not be taken too far. Deism represents that extreme. According to Deism, God is radically transcendent. He is Creator but little else. He created the world and wound it up like a clock to run on its own, left alone. God is neither personal nor providential; He does not love creation, care for it, or have any relation to it at all. Deism grants God only transcendence and denies Him immanence. This rules out revelation and miracles; the world is a closed system. In Deism, to borrow from Rudyard Kipling, God is God, the world is the world, and never the twain shall meet.¹³

There are three basic elements to the Theistic world view, having to do with the nature of God Himself, the nature of the world, and the nature of God's activity in relation to the world. First, regarding the nature of God, He is both transcendent *and* immanent. God is not utterly immanent, identified *as* the world as in Pantheism. But neither is God utterly transcendent, utterly aloof *from* the world as in Deism. God not only created the world, but He is "immanently present as the sustaining cause of the universe ... God is continually, personally, and intimately involved with sustaining the universe."¹⁴

Second, concerning the nature of the world, creation is *ex nihilo*, "out of nothing." God alone is necessary—He cannot not be; everything else that exists is contingent—it can not be. There would be *nothing* apart from God unless He had made *something*, and that *something* God made came from *nothing*. Third, in terms of God's activity in the world, Theism holds that God *can* and *does* act in the world. Furthermore, God's actions in the world are both natural and supernatural. Naturally, God continually sustains and cares for the world (providence). Supernaturally, God at times intervenes in His world in special ways (miracles).

But there are many brands of Theism—some are Christian, some are not. And even within Christian Theism, there are many variations. Open Theism sets itself apart from, and sees itself as a corrective of, two major theistic world views: Process Theism and Classical Theism. Furthermore, in setting itself apart from Classical Theism, Open Theism distinguishes itself from

¹² Geisler and Feinberg, *Introduction to Philosophy*, 329.

¹³ "Oh, East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet" is the first line of Kipling's *The Ballad of East and West*.

¹⁴ Geisler and Feinberg, *Introduction to Philosophy*, 272.

a variation of it, namely Classical Arminianism. So now we will examine what Open Theists perceive as the flaws of Process Theism, Classical Theism, and Classical Arminianism.

Perceived Flaws of Process Theism

We may boil Process Theology down to five key concepts: one basic metaphysical principle and four concepts related to God's nature, the world, and God's relation to the world. First, Process Theology is based on the metaphysical principle that *reality is a process*, a becoming, and not just a static being. Process Theology does not reject the existence of beings, just beings that are static, unmovable, or unchanging. To process theologians, being *is* becoming.

The second concept concerns the *nature of God*. In keeping with the first concept, if being is fundamentally becoming, then God as a being must likewise be becoming. According to Process Theology, then, God is dipolar or bipolar, not monopolar, by nature. That is, like all actual entities, God's nature is comprised of two parts or poles. God has a primordial nature—His conceptual pole—which is eternal and infinite and comprises the realm of all possibilities. God also has a consequent nature—His physical pole—which is changing, impermanent, and concrete. This consequent nature is the world. "God, then, is dipolar, a unity composed of a physical and a mental pole. In so being, he is like all other actual entities; reality is bipolar."¹⁵

Geisler and Feinberg explain why Process Theology is also known as Panentheism, and how it relates to Theism on one side and Pantheism on the other:

Panentheism means all-in-God. It is perhaps better understood, however, as God-in-all or God-in-the-world. The panentheist believes that God is in the world much like a soul is in a body.... The panentheist is a bipolar, or dipolar, theist. He believes that God and the world are two poles of one overall reality. In this regard panentheism is a kind of 'halfway house' between theism and pantheism. The theist believes God is *beyond* the world (and in it); the pantheist believes God *is* the world; but the panentheist holds that God is *in* the world.¹⁶

The third key concept of Process Theism has to do with the *nature of the world*. Because God is bipolar, there *must* be a world. God is not free to create or not to create. Furthermore, creation is not *ex nihilo*, but *ex hulēs*. "As in dualism, panentheists hold that both poles are eternal. The physical pole (God's 'body') is not created out of nothing. It was always *there*; creation is a continual process of forming it *ex hulēs*, that is, out of matter or stuff already there [ύλη, *material, matter, stuff*]. In fact, properly speaking, God is not sovereign Creator of the world (as in theism) but a Director of world process."¹⁷

¹⁵ John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2001), 162–63.

¹⁶ Geisler and Feinberg, *Introduction to Philosophy*, 281, emphasis original.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 282, emphasis original.

The fourth and fifth key concepts of Process Theism deal with the *nature of God's relation with the world*. Fourth, in relation to the world God's *being* is personal, mutable and passible. Personal means related *to* the world. Since God's own consequent nature is the world, He is the supremely relative being. Mutable means changing *with* the world. Again, since part of God's nature is the world, which is constantly changing, God Himself is undergoing change along with it. Passible means affected *by* the world. What happens in the world really affects God. Not only does this mean that God experiences what we experience, but also that we add value to God's being by what we think and do.

Fifth, in relation to the world God's *actions* are passive and not active, persuasive and not coercive. The actual entities and beings that comprise God's consequent nature possess causal self-determination, and God cannot infringe upon their freedom. God can do all that is doable, but controlling the acts of free, self-determining beings is something that God cannot do. God presents all possibilities for becoming from His primordial nature, but it is up to the individual entities that comprise His consequent nature to decide which possibilities to actualize. It is in their act that God acts. God does not intervene or act unilaterally in the world. Related to this is the matter of evil. Evil arises from the free choices of God's creatures, and thus God is innocent of evil because He is powerless to stop it.

Process Theism stands against Classical Theism in its view of God, the world, and God's relation with the world. Feinberg explains how the former grew in response to the latter: "One of the major motivating factors behind process theology is its critique of classical Christian theism. The totally transcendent, all-powerful monarch God who controls everything and never changes in any way nor feels any emotion, regardless of what happens in our world is deemed both religiously inadequate for contemporary times and inconsistent with the biblical God."¹⁸

With this critique Open Theists agree. Richard Rice explains where Process and Open Theism converge:

For the most part, proponents of the open view of God accept process philosophy's critique of traditional, or classical, theism. They, too, oppose the concept of a divine absolute, utterly unaffected by the world, whose ultimate goal is its own glory. Instead of sovereignty and majesty, open and process theists alike emphasize the divine attributes of love, sensitivity, and compassion. They do not view divine power as the exercise of absolute control. They do not believe that God unilaterally determines the entire course of creaturely events, and they do not believe that divine knowledge includes future free decisions. Both embrace a highly interactive view of God's relation to the world. Not only does God affect the creatures, but the creatures also have an effect on God.¹⁹

¹⁸ Feinberg, *No One Like Him*, 141.

¹⁹ Richard Rice, "Process Theism and the Open View of God," 183.

However, Process Theism and Open Theism diverge at certain key points. First, while in the former the world *must* exist, in the latter the world exists *freely* by God's sovereign choice and creation *ex nihilo*.²⁰ Second, while in the former God can *never* intervene or act directly in the world, in the latter He can and does intervene and act unilaterally.²¹ To Open Theists, Process Theism is deficient because of its portrayal of the God-world relationship: according to the latter, God's relationship with the world is not of His choosing; He is necessarily and ontologically dependent upon the world; He is pervasively conditioned by the world; and He cannot act in the world.²² Open Theists and Classical Theists both agree that Process Theism errs in failing to separate God from the world ontologically, which undermines God's sovereign transcendence over the world He freely created.

Perceived Flaws of Classical Theism

Pinnock's own pilgrimage from Augustine to Arminius and beyond²³ started with his questioning the Calvinist doctrine of perseverance. In light of Scripture's exhortations to persevere and its warnings not to fall away, Pinnock turned from absolute security to embrace conditional security. What he says dawned on him was that "there is a profound mutuality in our dealings with God," a "dimension of reciprocity and conditionality" that we must bring into the picture of God's dealings with us in creation and redemption. And once embraced, this "insight of reciprocity" required Pinnock to modify his theology modification.²⁴

When Pinnock went on to advocate the new Open Theism, at the heart of it was this principle of reciprocity:

God, in grace, grants humans significant freedom to cooperate with or work against God's will for their lives, and he enters into dynamic, give-and-take relationships with us. The Christian life involves a genuine interaction between God and human beings. We respond to God's gracious initiatives and God responds to our responses ... and on it goes. God takes risks in this give-and-take relationship, yet he is endlessly resourceful and competent in working toward his ultimate goals. Sometimes God alone decides how to accomplish these goals. On other occasions, God works with human decisions, adapting his own plans to fit the changing situation. God does not control everything that happens. Rather, he is open to receiving input from his creatures. In loving dialogue, God invites us to participate with him to bring the future into being.²⁵

²⁰ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 78.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 185–87.

²² John Sanders, *The God Who Risks* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1998), 161.

²³ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 13, n. 38.

²⁴ Pinnock, "From Augustine to Arminius," 18–19.

²⁵ Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God*, 7. Pinnock virtually duplicates this paragraph in *Most Moved Mover*, 4.

Note the emphasis on our “give-and-take relationship,” “genuine interaction,” and “loving dialogue” with God. In this reciprocal relationship God “responds” to us, “takes risks” with us, “adapting his own plans” as one “open to receiving input” from us “to bring the future into being.” It seems apparent, then, that at the heart of Pinnock’s criticism of Classical Theism is that it denies what he feels is genuine reciprocity and mutuality between God and the world.

There can be no genuine reciprocity if God determines everything unilaterally, including who will be saved and who will be lost. There is no reciprocity if providence is meticulous, election is unconditional, man is totally depraved, and the atonement is limited and substitutionary. But all of this sounds like an Arminian rejecting Calvinism. Where all of this led Pinnock was indeed beyond Arminius to rethink the very nature of God Himself. So this is where Open Theism takes its stand ultimately against Classical Theism: in its reformulation of the divine attributes.

Open Theists reject traditional formulations of four Classical attributes: immutability, impassibility, timelessness, and omniscience. First, Pinnock says “we must reject the Greek model of immutability.” God is changeable in two ways: in His knowledge and in His actions. Second, we must do away with God’s impassibility—“another axiom of Platonic theology”—that God cannot experience emotion. How can God be love and Christ suffer for our sins if God is impassible? Third, “the Greek category of timelessness ... is more trouble than it is worth.” If God is timeless, He cannot work in time and temporal sequence is an illusion. Last, we must reject “strong omniscience,” namely, that “God knows everything, even the future, in exhaustive detail.” If this is true, then freedom of choice is an illusion.²⁶

As the above makes clear, Open Theists charge that in formulating the divine attributes, Classical Theism has incorporated Greek ideas that are incoherent and foreign to the data of Scripture. The God of Classical Theism is too transcendent to have meaningful interaction with the world, and too controlling to leave room for creaturely freedom.

Perceived Flaws of Classical Arminianism

On the one hand, Open Theism has much in common with Classical Arminianism. “The open view of God grows out of the ideological, if not the ecclesiastical, soil of Wesleyan-Arminianism. It belongs to traditions that affirm human freedom and deny total divine control.”²⁷ Like Jacob Arminius before them, Open Theists embrace three cardinal Arminian doctrines: (1) God’s universal love and salvific will for all of humanity; (2) libertarian free will; and (3) genuine response on the part of God to the free decisions people make.

²⁶ Pinnock, “God Limits His Knowledge,” in *Predestination and Free Will*, ed. David Basinger and Randall Basinger (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 1986), 155–57.

²⁷ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 106.

However, according to Open Theists, Arminius and Wesley did not go far enough since they retained the traditional definitions of divine immutability, eternity, and omniscience. While Arminius broke with Classical Theism in holding that what God foreknows is conditioned by the free decisions of His creatures, he continued to define God's foreknowledge as exhaustive. In the Open view, traditional definitions like this "jeopardize genuinely real divine/human relationships."²⁸

Concerning the divine attributes, what sets Open Theism apart from Classical Arminianism the most is the former's modification of divine omniscience. And it is on this point that Arminians are mainly speaking out against Open Theism. Robert Picirilli fears that Open Theists are betraying the influence of process theology in their rejection of exhaustive foreknowledge. "God is not a Hegelian 'Becoming,'" Picirilli insists.²⁹ Jack Cottrell argues that limiting God's foreknowledge to preserve human freedom is unthinkable in light of the majesty of the eternal God. "To say that God could not foreknow truly free human decisions is either to exalt man too highly or to reduce God to a creaturely status."³⁰ Thomas Oden goes one step further: to deny God exhaustive foreknowledge is downright heretical.³¹

According to Open Theists, Classical Arminianism is incoherent on the issue of divine omniscience. How can God possibly foresee the content of human choices that are free in the libertarian sense? Arminians have answered by appealing either to (1) eternal knowledge, (1) middle knowledge, or (3) certain knowledge. In the first view, since God is eternal his knowledge transcends time. He sees all things past, present, and future as an eternally present "now." Thus, *foreknowledge* in relation to God is a misnomer.

In the second view, not only does God know what *could* happen (natural knowledge), and what *will* happen (free knowledge), He also knows something in between: what *would* happen in any given state of affairs (middle knowledge). Since God knows all possible states of affairs, He knows what people *would* do in any chosen set of circumstances. God cannot not control what people do in any possible state of affairs, because they are free; what He can do, however, is actualize one of those possible worlds and thereby know what His creatures will freely decide to do in that actual world.

In the third view, the future events that God foresees are certain but not necessary. God foreknows the future, but He does not cause it. Right up to the moment someone acts, it can always turn out otherwise. An analogy is drawn to our knowledge of the past: just because we know that something happened in the past does not mean it was necessary and not contingent. In

²⁸ Ibid., 13.

²⁹ Robert E. Picirilli, "Foreknowledge, Freedom, and the Future," *JETS* 43 (2000): 267.

³⁰ Jack W. Cottrell, "Conditional Election," in *Grace Unlimited*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1975), 69.

³¹ Thomas Oden, "The Real Reformers are Traditionalists," *Christianity Today* (February 9, 1998), 46.

a similar way, just because God knows that something will happen in the future does not mean it is necessary and not contingent. God simply knows what I will freely decide because He is God. *How* He does it is a mystery, but *that* He does it is nevertheless true.

Open Theists do not like any of these options. First, regarding eternal knowledge, if God is timelessly eternal then He is also utterly changeless. But if God is completely timeless and changeless, how can He react and respond to the free decisions of His creatures? If He already possesses in one eternal “now” all the knowledge of all the decisions which all His creatures will ever make, in what sense are those decisions truly free?

Second, as for middle knowledge, if God really foreknows what free creatures would do in any set of circumstances, then He foreknows their actions as well as the accompanying circumstances, because He knows what their actions will be. But if their decisions are free in the libertarian sense, they could *always* do otherwise. Thus, God *could* not know what they would do, even if He did know all the accompanying circumstances. Furthermore, if people have libertarian freedom, God cannot know which possible world is the actual world, because the course of any possible world is the product of God-plus-creatures, not just God. “So the course of a world containing free creatures cannot be known in advance.”³²

Third, concerning certain knowledge, if God knows what *will* certainly happen, intuition tells us that it *must* happen that way and no other. “If God’s foreknowledge is infallible, then what he sees cannot fail to happen. This means that the course of future events is fixed, however we explain what actually causes it. And if the future is inevitable, then the apparent experience of free choice is an illusion.”³³

Hence, according to Open Theism, all three of these Classical Arminian attempts fail to reconcile in a coherent way exhaustive divine foreknowledge with libertarian free will. As Ware puts it, the Classical Arminian formula of exhaustive foreknowledge-plus-libertarian freedom lacks ontological grounding: “There is ... no ontological basis for God’s knowing what future free choices and actions will occur.”³⁴ The joining of exhaustive foreknowledge with libertarian freedom makes for an irresolvable tension, and on this Classical and Open Theists agree. Exhaustive foreknowledge by itself excludes libertarian freedom, quite apart from the question of predestination. The directions Classical and Open Theists go, however, to solve the tension are opposite: Classical Theists redefine human freedom to accommodate divine foreknowledge; Open Theists redefine divine foreknowledge to accommodate human freedom.

Open Theists see their position as the only “consistent Arminianism,” since in their view theological consistency requires one committed to libertarian freedom to reformulate his doctrine

³² Richard Rice, “Divine Foreknowledge and Free-Will Theism,” in *The Grace of God and the Will of Man*, 127.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory*, 35.

of divine foreknowledge.³⁵ With this reformulation Open Theists offer Arminians a “more coherent alternative to Calvinism.”³⁶ “Open view advocates, then, propose that, in the end, the only really viable Arminian contender among the available Arminian models of divine providence is open theism. Because both classical and Molinist versions falter, open theism offers the most compelling Arminian version.”³⁷

It is ironic that while Open Theists takes such a strong stand *against* Classical Theists, in a major point of disagreement with Classical Arminians, their closest theological allies, they stand firmly *with* Classical Theists. Open Theists agree with Classical Theists against Classical Arminians that exhaustive divine foreknowledge is incompatible with libertarian human freedom. Open Theists wish that Classical Arminians and others committed to libertarian freedom would see the light and stand with them against Classical Theism with regards to omniscience and other divine attributes.

In this way, then, Open Theists feel that their model carries double value for those who embrace it: (1) it is a more coherent alternative to Classical Theism than Classical Arminianism; and (2) as such, it alone strikes the proper balance between Process and Classical Theism, retaining what is desirable and rejecting what is undesirable from each model. I will say more about this balance below.

Five Pillars of Open Theism

John Sanders claims, and Clark Pinnock concurs, that there are four major points in the Open Theistic model: (1) the love of God; (2) the conditionality of God; (3) the general providence of God; and (4) the libertarian freedom of man.³⁸ However, I would add a fifth, which actually could be considered first: *the reciprocity of God*. We saw how important the principle of reciprocity in the God-world relationship became for Pinnock in the early stages of his pilgrimage, and we see it again even as Sanders summarizes the main points of Open Theism, which he calls “relational theism.”³⁹

I contend that this principle of reciprocity is what underlies each of the other four pillars and binds them together; thus, the principle of reciprocity lies at the heart of what Open Theism is all about. It is what I attempt to capture in my visual depiction of Open Theism in relation to

³⁵ Rice, “Divine Foreknowledge,” 134.

³⁶ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 15.

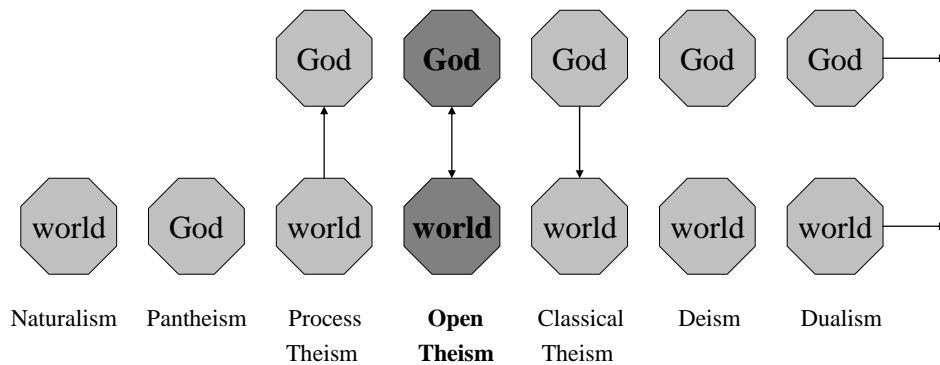
³⁷ Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory*, 42.

³⁸ Sanders, *God Who Risks*, 282, reiterated by Pinnock in *Most Moved Mover*, 4–5.

³⁹ By “relational theism” Sanders means “any model of the divine-human relationship that includes genuine give-and-take relations between God and humans such that there is receptivity and a degree of contingency in God. In give-and-take relationships God receives and does not just give” (Sanders, *God Who Risks*, 12).

other theological models (see diagram below).⁴⁰ Open Theism’s criticism of both Process and Classical Theism is that there is no genuine reciprocity between God and the world in these models. In Process Theism, God is so utterly dependent upon the world that He cannot act upon it in any meaningful way. In Classical Theism, the world is so utterly dependent upon God that it cannot act upon *Him* in any meaningful way. In Process Theism, God is not transcendent *enough* to stand above and act upon the world. God can only take; He cannot give. In Classical Theism, so say Open Theists, God is *too* transcendent to stand *down* and be acted upon *by* the world. God can only give; He cannot take.

Mapping Open Theism on the Theological Landscape



According to Open Theists, theirs is the only theistic model that strikes the proper balance between God’s transcendence and His immanence. Only in Open Theism is there true *reciprocity*—which according to the dictionary entails “mutual dependence, action, or influence”⁴¹—between God and man. Only in Open Theism is there genuine give-and-take between God and the free creatures He has made, which to Open Theists is the true essence of any meaningful relationship between persons.

Notice how this principle of reciprocity surfaces in each of the four points offered by Sanders. First, central to God’s love is His desire “for us to enter into reciprocal relations of love with him

⁴⁰ The idea for the above visual depiction comes from Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Leicester, England: IVP; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 268–270.

⁴¹ Philip Babcock Gove, ed., *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary of the English Language*, unabridged (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, 1993), 1895.

and with our fellow creatures.”⁴² Second, God makes Himself conditional on us *in order to* elicit “our free collaboration” in His divine project. Because He makes Himself contingent on us, He “truly responds to what we do.”⁴³ Third, God exercises general as opposed to meticulous providence, “allowing space for us to operate” in reciprocal relation to Him.⁴⁴ Fourth and finally, “God has granted us the libertarian freedom necessary for a truly personal relationship of love to develop.”⁴⁵ And notice Sanders’s encapsulation of the entire Open Theism model in this final statement: “*In summary, God freely enters into genuine give-and-take-relations with us.*”⁴⁶ It all revolves around the principle of reciprocity, which for Open Theists, as we will see, is at the heart of God’s essence as a Trinity, and which therefore must be at the center of any meaningful relationship between Him and anyone outside of Himself. Let us now examine each of the five pillars of Open Theism, starting with the principle of reciprocity.

The Reciprocity of God

Pinnock describes God most basically as “a triune, loving person.”⁴⁷ However, it is His triunity, His communal nature, which sets the Christian God apart. “Other monotheistic faiths have the problem of a ‘lonely’ God, but this is not true of Christianity. God enjoys loving communion.”⁴⁸ It is this “loving relational essence of the Trinity—three persons in a caring, sensitive and responsive communion”—which “is central to the open view of God.”⁴⁹ Pinnock goes on to describe God’s relational essence:

God’s very being is an open and dynamic structure, a relational ontology of loving persons. God is the power of love and not just sheer almightiness. Relationality belongs to God’s very essence because at the heart of reality is shared life, God’s own life, characterized by spontaneity and giving. Such an essence implies dynamism, both internal and external to God. God’s inner life is inexhaustibly expressive: out of the abundance of his own divine self-sufficiency flow contingent experiences of love with created reality external to God. It

⁴² Sanders, *God Who Risks*, 282. It is important to note the analogy Sanders draws here between our relationships with each other and our relationships with God: both are reciprocal. What becomes apparent is that the reciprocal relationship we share with God appears in Open Theism to be modeled after the reciprocal relationships we share with each other. Or, to look at it another way, the reciprocal relationships God shares in the Trinity become the model for His relationship with us. We all—the members of the Trinity and us—are peers in reciprocal relation.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., emphasis added.

⁴⁷ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 79.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 83.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 84.

seems that God has chosen to express himself in creation such that creation would mirror God-self back to him.⁵⁰

The last two sentences of the above quote reveal how, for Pinnock, God's reciprocal relations within the Trinity provide the model for His reciprocal relations with created beings outside of Himself. The God who enjoys genuine reciprocity—real give-and-take and mutual dependence and influence—within His own triune being desires the same kind of relationships with His creatures.

Being socially triune, God has made a world with freedom, in which loving relationships can flourish. It is an ecosystem capable of echoing back the triune life of God. We may think of humanity as the created image of God's social nature, enacting on the finite level the relational movements that occur eternally in God.⁵¹

This talk of loving relationships between Creator and creature sounds fine, but when we combine it with the previous quote, what it ends up sounding like is this: the relationships God enjoys in the Trinity are grounded in who He is ontologically—in His relational essence; therefore, God must somehow establish the same kind of ontological connection with those He creates outside of Himself if He would enjoy the same kind of reciprocal relations with them. In other words, if the reason the persons of the Trinity can enjoy the truly reciprocal relationships that they do is because they share as ontological equals the divine relational essence of God, then God must somehow make His creatures ontological peers with Himself in order to relate to them in the same reciprocal manner. Notice how the dance imagery that Pinnock uses gives this impression: “In the spirit of the ancient image of the ecstatic dance of the triune God, we can say that the purpose of creation is to express this same delightful movement on the level of the creature, ever summoning new partners to the dance.”⁵²

I acknowledge that Pinnock separates ontologically the Creator from the creature, but if God summons the creature to dance with Him even as He dances with His triune self, how can that Creator-creature distinction be properly maintained? True reciprocity in relationship is based

⁵⁰ Ibid. Sanders makes the same point: “Relationality is an *essential* aspect of God.... The members of the Trinity mutually share and relate to one another.... God decides ... to create significant others and enter into genuine reciprocal relations with them” (God Who Risks, 175–76, emphasis original).

⁵¹ Pinnock, “Systematic Theology,” 110. However, that God made such a world does not mean God is ontologically dependent upon the world. God freely created all things *ex nihilo*. God's being is absolutely independent of the world, making His relationship with it completely voluntary. This also means that God has the power to intervene in the world when He so chooses. Thus, this model of God-world reciprocation is not Process Theism (Pinnock, “Systematic Theology,” 109).

⁵² Ibid., 110–11. Sanders uses the metaphor of dance to say something similar about what makes a relationship real: “God ... does not want to dance alone, dance with a mannequin or hire someone who is obligated to dance with him. God wants to dance with us as persons in fellowship, not with puppets or contracted performers, and thus needs our consent. Mutual fellowship requires reciprocity between two parties” (Sanders, *God Who Risks*, 210–11).

upon the ontological equality of the persons related. The reciprocal relationship between the members of the Trinity is based on their ontological equality as divine persons. Likewise, the reciprocal relationships between people are based on their ontological equality as human beings. How can God have a reciprocal relationship with those who are not His ontological equals without compromising His divine transcendence as one who is wholly other? To continue Pinnock's metaphor, can a creature really dance with "the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords; who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light; whom no man has seen or can see" (1 Tim 6:15–16)? Can a creature really share with the Creator the same kind of reciprocal relationship that the Triune God shares with Himself as Father, Son, and Spirit?⁵³

The Love of God

We have seen that to Pinnock, the most basic understanding of God is that He is a triune, loving person. As a Trinity, He is communal or relational in His very essence. Likewise, according to Open Theists, love is part of who God is. Classical Theists have always viewed love as just one of the attributes of God. Furthermore, in the opinion of Open Theists, Classical Theists locate love too far down the list.⁵⁴ Love ought to stand at the very *head* of the list of divine attributes, because God is not just loving, He "is loving *above all else*."⁵⁵

Rice, therefore, goes one step further. Taking 1 John 4:8 as *the* definitive passage on the nature of God, Rice declares, "The statement *God is love* is as close as the Bible comes to giving us a definition of the divine reality."⁵⁶ Thus, "Love ... is the very essence of the divine nature. Love is what it means to be God."⁵⁷ Rice goes on to say that

love is not only more important than all of God's other attributes, it is more fundamental as well. Love is the essence of the divine reality, the basic source from which all of God's attributes arise. This means that the assertion *God is love* incorporates all there is to say about God.⁵⁸

⁵³ Another problem with this is that the kind of mutual give-and-take between God and man that Open Theists have in mind requires that God not know man fully. God must wait and see what man will do, and then react to it. There are two difficulties here: first, the implications for God's omniscience regarding not only the future but the past and present as well are serious; second, this kind of reciprocal relationship appears to be modeled after those of finite human beings (see Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, 167).

⁵⁴ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 81.

⁵⁵ Richard Rice, "Biblical Support for a New Perspective," in *The Openness of God*, 21, emphasis added.

⁵⁶ Rice, "Biblical Support for a New Perspective," 18.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

Pinnock agrees that love is more than merely an attribute of God; “love is the very essence of His being.” Love is God’s “very nature.”⁵⁹

It is one thing to say “God is love.” But what does it mean for God to be love? What is this love that makes up the very fabric of who God is? Sanders gives three criteria for determining what love is.⁶⁰ First, love must be limitless. The lover has unlimited concern and wants to give all to the beloved. The only limits come from the beloved: love is conditioned by the beloved’s ability to receive it.

Second, love must be *precarious*. This is because love cannot control its object. Love can be rejected, and thus the desire of the lover can be frustrated and not satisfied. Love which so controls its object that the latter cannot fail to reciprocate is false love.

Third, love must be *vulnerable*. This is true because “lovers grant the beloved power over themselves.”⁶¹ Because love is not forced, its outcome cannot be guaranteed. The lover takes great risk when he enters a relationship of love with another. This picture of love becomes for Rice the model for God’s relationship of love with the world. “Persons in relation for the purpose of reciprocating love (the divine project) [is] the lens through which we view the type of providential relationship God has elected to have with the world.”⁶²

This understanding of the love of God raises several questions. First, on what basis can we argue that *love alone* captures the essence of God? As John Frame points out, it is not so much a problem that Open Theists see love as part of God’s essence; the problem is that by defining God’s essence *solely* in terms of love, they exclude other attributes from God’s essence. Thus, God is not essentially sovereign, holy, just, etc. But as Frame argues, each attribute is necessary to the being of God. “Each is essential to him, and therefore his essence includes all of them. . . . Theologians are wrong when they think that the centrality of their favorite attribute excludes the centrality of others.”⁶³

Second, if it is inaccurate to view love as primary *metaphysically*, perhaps Open Theists could argue that we ought to *understand* God’s love as primary because Scripture presents it so. But again, on what basis can the assertion be made? What are the criteria? How could it be

⁵⁹ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 81.

⁶⁰ Sanders draws these criteria from W. H. Vanstone, *The Risk of Love* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

⁶¹ Sanders, *God Who Risks*, 177.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 180.

⁶³ John M. Frame, *No Other God: A Response to Open Theism* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2001), 52.

demonstrated from Scripture that love is God’s most important trait? What about His lordship, sovereignty, almightiness, holiness, jealousy, Spirit, or light?⁶⁴

Third, what are the controlling criteria for defining God’s love the way Open Theists do, as precarious and vulnerable? If all of God’s attributes are part of His essence, then should not His love be defined in relation to those other attributes? Would this not mean that God’s love is a sovereign, righteous, holy, and omnipotent love, to name just a few? Singling out omnipotence, for example, does Scripture describe God’s love as vulnerable to the point of defeat? What does it mean, then, for Jesus to say that *no one* shall snatch His sheep out of His and the Father’s hand (John 10:28–29)? Or for Paul to say that *nothing* can separate us from the love of Christ (Rom 8:35)? “God’s love is a *sovereign* love—not, in the final analysis, a vulnerable love.”⁶⁵

The final problem I see with the Open Theistic treatment of divine love is that, just like in the case of God’s relationality, the model is very human. Human-to-human relationships *are* precarious and risky, and humans who enter relationships of love with other humans *are* placing themselves in a vulnerable position. Why is this? Because of the nature of *love*? Is it not rather because of the nature of *humanity*? Is it not because we are *finite and fallible people* that our relationships of love are so risky? Shall we project this fallible model of fallen human love upon God?

The Conditionality of God

First, for Open Theists, God in His essence is a relational being. As the Triune God He has always enjoyed as Father, Son, and Spirit truly reciprocal relations. As a communal God, His desire in creating was to make the same kind of give-and-take relationships possible with His creatures. Second, Open Theists see love as the defining element of God’s nature. God is love above all else, and as a God of love He freely chose to enter into relationships of love with His creatures, even though by definition such relationships would be precarious. God freely chose to make Himself vulnerable to creatures, giving them power over Himself in relationships fraught with risks.

Because God’s relationships with His creatures must be truly reciprocal and lovingly risky in order to be genuine, God must in a real sense make Himself contingent on us. There must be real “conditionality in God.”⁶⁶ What does this mean? To be contingent is to be dependent. Conditionality is dependency. Thus, according to Open Theism God is somehow dependent upon the world He has made. To what extent? To the extent that He gave us libertarian freedom: “God has sovereignly decided to make some of His actions contingent on our requests and actions.”⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Ibid., 53.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 56, emphasis original.

⁶⁶ Sanders, *God Who Risks*, 282.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

But is not a God who is dependent upon the world the God of Process Theism? Not at all, say the Open Theists. Sanders insists that the God of Open Theism is not *ontologically* dependent upon the world. This is the error of Process Theism, that “God is *necessarily and ontologically* dependent on the world: God would not have being or be who God is apart from the world.”⁶⁸ The difference, then, between Process Theism and Open Theism is not whether or not God is dependent upon the world, but rather the *nature* of that dependence. In Process Theism, God is *necessarily* dependent upon the world. In Open Theism, however, while God is dependent, His dependence is not necessary. It is voluntary:

God, though ontologically distinct from creation (contra process theology), enters into genuine give-and-take relations with his creatures and is resourceful, creative and omniscient instead of all-determining and completely unconditioned by creatures. This has to be understood, however, as God’s *free and sovereign choice* to create this state of affairs. It is not forced on God, as in process thought. God has made significantly free creatures upon whom he conditions some of his actions.⁶⁹

But note again upon what God conditions Himself: our free actions. According to the Open Theistic understanding of libertarian freedom, all of our free decisions are utterly independent of God. He does not know what they will be, and therefore He lacks all of that information. And yet He *needs* that information in order to accomplish His project in this world. He *needs* me! And yet Scripture tells me that God does not need anything from anyone (Acts 17:25). Who has first given anything to God (Rom 11:35)?

I agree with Open Theists’ claim that their God is not *necessarily* dependent on the world. But what about *ontologically*? Is not a God to whom something can be added a God in process—a God who is becoming? This is exactly who the God of Open Theism is. While Open and Process Theism do differ in significant ways, says Pinnock, “The open view shares something with process thought: what we want to overcome is the tilt towards a metaphysic of being and attain a *metaphysic of becoming*.”⁷⁰ But what is Process Theism if not a metaphysic of becoming? As we saw earlier, at the very heart of Process Theology is the metaphysical principle that reality is becoming and not just static being. Rice clearly incorporates this process principle into his Open Theistic model:

The concept of God proposed here shares the process view that God’s relation to the temporal world consists in a succession of concrete experiences, rather than a single timeless perception.... It also shares with process theism the twofold analysis of God, or the ‘dipolar theism,’ described above. It conceives God as both absolute and relative, necessary and contingent, eternal and temporal, changeless and changing. It attributes one element in each

⁶⁸ Ibid., 161, emphasis added.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 162, emphasis added.

⁷⁰ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 142, emphasis added.

pair of contrasts to the appropriate *aspect of God's being*—the essential divine character or the concrete divine experience.⁷¹

On this issue both Process and Open Theists make the same mistake—that is, they confuse “God’s reality with His roles. Just because one agrees that God can change in some respects and does have feelings (God’s role(s) and relationships in our world), that doesn’t mean that one must buy the concept of God as dipolar (God’s reality).”⁷²

Consider the same point with regards to God’s omnipresence. Just because God is everywhere present in that nothing can escape His awareness (Ps 139:7–10), that does not mean He is ontologically present in every point in space. “Scripture teaches that God is present with all that exists, but is distinct from everything. God is also immanent in that he is very much involved in our world (i.e., though transcendent ontologically, God can be very close to us relationally).”⁷³ Open Theists have difficulty escaping the charge that, on their view, an aspect of God’s *being* changes along with the world, and that in His *being*, therefore, He is dependent upon the world.

The General Providence of God

Open Theists reject specific sovereignty, sometimes called meticulous providence, which teaches that God has a purpose for all things and exhaustively controls whatever occurs.⁷⁴ For Sanders, the chief problem with meticulous providence is that it rules out certain experiences, decisions, and actions that he sees the Bible attributing to God.

For instance, the biblical portrait depicts God as being grieved (Gen 6:6), changing his mind (Ex 32:14), resorting to alternative plans (Ex 4:14), being open and responsive to what the creatures do (Jer 18:6–10), being surprised at what people have done (Jer 3:7; 32:35). God sometimes makes himself dependent on our prayers (Jas 4:2). However, these sorts of things make no sense within the framework of specific sovereignty. If God always gets precisely what he desires in each and every situation, then it is incoherent to speak of God’s being grieved about or responding to the human situation. How can God be grieved if precisely what God wanted to

⁷¹ Richard Rice, *God’s Foreknowledge and Man’s Free Will* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1985), 33, cited in Millard J. Erickson, *God the Father Almighty: A Contemporary Exploration of the Divine Attributes* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 84, emphasis added. It is interesting that in Sanders’s opinion, to embrace this “metaphysics of change” along with Process Theists is “to stray from any biblical moorings” (*God Who Risks*, 161).

⁷² Feinberg, *No One Like Him*, 178.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 61. This same distinction between God’s reality and roles helps in the matter of His eternity. Open Theists argue that if God is outside of time, He cannot know what time it is or act within time. Frame counters that viewing God’s relation to time as temporal omnipresence clears up the problem: while God is transcendent in His being—He exists outside of time, He is immanent in His roles—He can enter time to relate to us, to mourn or rejoice in response to our actions, or to hear and respond to our prayers (Frame, *No Other God*, 159).

⁷⁴ This is so even if God “does not exercise causal power to bring about certain things and even though he is not the proximate cause and/or doer of much that happens” (Feinberg, *No One Like Him*, 645).

happen did happen? If specific sovereignty is true, then it is incorrect to speak of God's getting upset with human sin because any sin is specifically what God wanted to come about. It is inconsistent to affirm exhaustive sovereignty and also claim that God wants to give us something but does not give it because we fail to ask him in prayer.⁷⁵

Furthermore, Sanders sees meticulous providence pitting Jesus' will against the Father's. On the one hand, Jesus desires believers to love and forgive one another. But on the other hand, when believers fail to love and forgive, they do so according to the sovereign plan of God. Meticulous providence puts the Father and Son at odds, resulting in a "schizophrenic Godhead."⁷⁶

In contrast to specific sovereignty or meticulous providence, Sanders calls for a general sovereignty or risk model of divine providence. What this means is that God has sovereignly established a type of world in which God sets up general structures or an overall framework for meaning and allows the creatures significant input into exactly how things will turn out. God desires a relationship of love with his creation and so elects to grant it the freedom to enter into a give-and-take relationship with himself. Since God macromanages the overall project (while remaining free to micromanage some things), God takes risks in governing the world. In contrast to specific sovereignty, this model does not claim that God has a specific purpose for each and every event which happens. Instead, God has general purposes in connection with the achievement of the divine project. Within these general structures God permits things to happen, both good and bad, that he does not specifically intend. Yet God may act to bring about a specific event in order to bring the divine project to fruition. The incarnation and the exodus are examples of God's electing to bring about particular events. It is within God's ability to bring about blessing and punishment in human affairs.⁷⁷

Sanders likens God's macromanagement of the world to a teacher's control over his classroom. Since the teacher is responsible for setting up the guidelines for the operation of his class, when his students misbehave, for example, he is accountable. However, the teacher does not control the students to the point of coercion. There is risk and chance involved in the teacher's relationship with his students because his students are free-acting agents.

This is to be contrasted with a ventriloquist's relationship with his dummy. The ventriloquist controls the dummy to the point of coercion: the dummy does exactly what the ventriloquist want him to, and the outcome is guaranteed. Thus, when the dummy says something indecent, for example, the ventriloquist is responsible for saying it.⁷⁸

Sanders likes Michael Langford's analogy of a climbing-party⁷⁹ to God's general providence:

⁷⁵ Sanders, *God Who Risks*, 213.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 213–14.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 215.

⁷⁹ The analogy comes from Michael J. Langford, *Providence* (London: SCM Press, 1981), 5.

The leader is responsible to plan for routes and supplies. As the party climbs, occasional ad hoc decisions will be made in light of the specifics of the terrain and the condition of the climbers. If someone injures a hand, the route may have to be modified, since the preselected path will no longer be possible. Some of these decisions may be made solely by the leader, whereas others may be made in consultation with the party. This analogy highlights the competency and resourcefulness of the leader as well as the need for ad hoc decisions on the journey.⁸⁰

Finally, as the climbing-party analogy makes clear, unforeseen accidents and chance occurrences are inevitable in the general providence model. There is not a divine reason for every event, whether good or bad, because the way God set up the world leaves room for indeterminacy or chance.⁸¹

A couple of things come to mind generally in considering Sanders's presentation of divine providence. First, it is important to note how this model of general providence flows from the previous three pillars of Open Theism. God's general providential relationship with the world is the inevitable result of his desire to have genuine give-and-take relationships with His creatures (reciprocity of God)—relationships based on true love (love of God), which therefore must contain real contingency (conditionality of God). Such relationships are by nature risky and thus *require* a risk model of divine providence. God *cannot* predetermine and control every detail of the relationship, or coerce those with whom He relates to do exactly what He wishes; otherwise, the relationship is not truly personal—a relationship of *persons*.

Second, this model of general providence requires one more major element—actually the entire scheme of Open Theism demands it—that is, libertarian free will. I will say more on the centrality of this fifth and final pillar below. Suffice it to say here that the general providence model clearly demands that free will be libertarian. God cannot control all that occurs in this world because He has chosen to surrender a measure of that control to His free creatures.

Now I would like to respond specifically to Sanders's critique of meticulous providence and then to his presentation of general providence. First, regarding his criticism of meticulous providence, Sanders wonders how it is coherent for God to want something to occur, but then get upset when it does. This fails to accept the twofold nature of God's will as presented in Scripture. God's preceptive will is His precepts—"what God wants us to do with respect to the moral conduct of our life."⁸² God's decretal will, however, is "God's sovereign choice by which he decides whatever happens."⁸³

⁸⁰ Sanders, *God Who Risks*, 216–17.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 215–16.

⁸² Feinberg, *No One Like Him*, 694.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 695.

The classic example is the crucifixion of Christ. On the one hand, God's preceptive will is clearly that one should not commit murder (Exod 20:13), and the one who does shall not go unpunished (Exod 21:12). On the other hand, the death of Christ—the murder of an innocent man—took place “by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:23). “*From the standpoint of God's redemptive purposes, God wanted the crucifixion to occur. But in analyzing the crucifixion in terms of its conformity to God's moral norms about murder, we must say that God did not want it to happen.*”⁸⁴

John Piper speaks of these two perspectives as two separate lenses through which God is able to view the things that occur:

When God looks at a painful or wicked event through his narrow lens, he sees the tragedy or the sin for what it is in itself and he is angered and grieved. “I do not delight in the death of anyone, says the Lord God” (Ezek 18:32). But when God looks at a painful or wicked event through his wide-angle lens, he sees the tragedy or the sin in relation to everything leading up to it and everything flowing out of it. He sees it in all the connections and effects that form a pattern or mosaic stretching into eternity. This mosaic, with all its (good and evil) parts he does delight in (Ps 115:3).⁸⁵

Returning to the crucifixion of Christ, looking through His narrow lens God was no more pleased with the death of His Son than He is with the death of any man (Ezek 18:32). But looking through His wide-angle lens God was pleased to crush His Son (Isa 53:10).⁸⁶ God *can* both foreordain an event *and* grieve over its occurrence (2 Kgs 8:11–12).

The second response to Sanders's criticism of meticulous providence concerns his view that such a model pits the Father against the Son. Two things are important to understand here. First, God does not suffer from schizophrenia: Father and Son are in perfect agreement regarding both the preceptive *and* the decretal will of God. Second, as the incarnate God-man, Jesus Christ's will *was* distinct from His Father's: in Gethsemane Christ submitted His will to that of the Father. Again, the issue is the distinction between the preceptive and decretal will of God. On the one hand, *neither* Father and Son desired the Son's death on the cross (preceptive will). But on the other hand, *both* Father and Son willed that it would occur (decretal will). The agony of the garden was that moment of truth when the Son agreed, at unfathomable personal loss, to carry out the divine decree.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 697, emphasis original.

⁸⁵ John Piper, “Are There Two Wills in God? Divine Election and God's Desire for All to Be Saved,” in *The Grace of God, the Bondage of the Will*, vol. 1, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 126.

⁸⁶ Both Ezek 18:32 and Isa 53:10 use the same root, נָּצַח , *be pleased with, take delight in*, to describe God's attitude toward the matter.

Now I will respond specifically to Sanders's general providence model. First, Sanders claims that while God macromanages the overall project of human history, He can and does at times micromanage in order to bring about specific events like the exodus or incarnation. Sanders woefully underestimates the vast number of future free human choices involved in just one event such as the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Ware examines the prophesied event of the rise of Cyrus as recorded in Isaiah, concluding,

Clearly God predicts and then fulfills a multitude of future actions and events, all of them exactly as he so designs. But consider again here how much of what God predicts involves massive numbers of future free choices and actions of God's moral creatures. How can God predict and guarantee such things as the naming of a future king, his ascendancy to power, his leadership ability and disposition to conquer, his sure victories in battles, the plundering of others' treasuries, the shattering of bronze doors and iron bars, etc., unless God *knows and regulates* precisely what will in fact occur in the future? In the openness model, with the bulk of these future events dependent on future free choices, none of which God can either know or regulate, it becomes impossible to account for the certainty and exactness of these predictions and their fulfillment. So, while this text stops short of explicitly asserting God's exhaustive knowledge of all future actions and events, it does claim of God massive future knowledge, the vast majority of which is simply impossible to account for on openness grounds.⁸⁷

Second, I want to respond to Sanders's comparisons of teacher to student and ventriloquist to dummy. This is a classical example of *petitio principii*, or begging the question. Sanders, like other Open Theists, operates on the assumption that the only legitimate definition of freedom is libertarian, and the only way to understand exhaustive divine control is in terms of manipulation and coercion. Sanders states, "One simply cannot have it both ways: either God controls everything and the divine-human relationship is impersonal, or God does not control everything and so it is possible for the divine-human relationship to be personal."⁸⁸ But this is true *only if* libertarian freedom is the only available brand, and *only if* God's control requires coercion. But neither is necessary. Under the compatibilistic account of freedom, which Scripture does not rule out and in fact seems to demand in light of God's foreknowledge, an act is free if it is voluntary. One who acts in accordance with desire therefore acts freely. Therefore, while God ordains all that occurs, He does not coerce us to act; rather, we act in accordance with our desires, and therefore freely. God ordains what we freely choose to do.

Third, concerning Sanders's description of the climbing-party leader, while this analogy certainly "highlights the competency and resourcefulness of the leader," there are *no guarantees* that he will succeed in leading his party to the summit. Sure, he is resourceful, but anything could happen. So many things are outside of his control. Disaster could so strike that they utterly

⁸⁷ Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, 112–13, emphasis original.

⁸⁸ Sanders, *God Who Risks*, 215.

fail to reach their ultimate goal. In the same way, on what basis can Open Theists be confident that God will be successful in the end? As Ware makes clear,

the sobering truth ... is that, by the openness view, neither we nor God know now whether in fact God will so win in the end. If God is at war, and if God has taken significant risks, then we must wait to see if God will win, and so wait to see if God is in fact glorious.... I conclude that, from an openness perspective, *we simply cannot ascribe to God unqualified glory*. Maybe God will get lucky; maybe he won't. Maybe his free creatures will cooperate better in the future than they have in the past; but maybe things will get immeasurably worse! Can open theists assure us that this cannot happen?⁸⁹

Finally, Sanders's general providence model leaves room for chance. But do the Scriptures? It does not appear so, for the Bible attributes to God's direct control even so-called "chance" events like the casting of lots (Prov 16:33) and random bow shots (1 Kgs 22:34). God indeed "works all things after the counsel of His will" (Eph 1:11).

The Libertarian Freedom of Man

This fifth pillar of Open Theism may be last, but it is certainly not least. In fact, along with the principle of reciprocity, libertarian human freedom is at the heart of Open Theism. It is in Feinberg's view *the* watershed issue that divides positions on God and His relationship to the world into two main camps.⁹⁰ Libertarian freedom is closely related to each of the pillars we have looked at. First, it is necessary for true *reciprocity* between God and man. According to Pinnock, "The Bible itself assumes libertarian freedom when it posits personal give-and-take relationships."⁹¹ Thus, without libertarian freedom, there is no genuine reciprocity between God and man.

Second, libertarian freedom is indispensable for genuine *love* between God and man. In the Open View, a relationship of love by definition entails "intensity and reciprocity" and is "intrinsically dynamic. God is affected by the objects of his love and made vulnerable by them. The loved one can make the lover happy or unhappy.... The loved one can hurt the lover in ways the lover cannot prevent."⁹² This vulnerability is only possible if those God loves possess libertarian freedom. "What God values is the loving relationship, and libertarian freedom is simply a means to that end."⁹³

⁸⁹ Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, 224, emphasis original.

⁹⁰ Feinberg, *No One Like Him*, 626.

⁹¹ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 115.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 82.

⁹³ Sanders, *God Who Risks*, 224.

Third, libertarian freedom is the reason there is *conditionality* with God in relation to man. In entering truly reciprocal relationships of love with us, God has made Himself dependent upon us. To what extent has He done this? To the extent that He has given us libertarian freedom: “God has sovereignly decided to make some of His actions contingent on our requests and actions.”⁹⁴ There could be no conditionality with God without libertarian freedom.

Fourth, libertarian freedom requires that God exercise *general providential control* over the world. If God has truly entered loving and reciprocal relations with people, and has therefore made Himself contingent upon their actions and choices, then He must have granted them libertarian freedom. And if this is so, then God cannot exercise meticulous providential control over them. “God [decided] to grant humans significant freedom ... but what humans do with that freedom is not always specifically part of his plan. For general sovereignty, much of what happens to us in life, even much of what seems important to us, is not specifically part of his plan.”⁹⁵

So human libertarian freedom seems to underlie the entire scheme of Open Theism. Frame ventures that libertarian freedom is

the central issue in the debate concerning open theism. In my judgment, the concept of human freedom in the libertarian sense is the engine that drives open theism, often called freewill theism. For the open theist, libertarian free will serves as a kind of grid, through which all other theological assertions must pass—a general criterion for testing the truth of all other doctrines. For the open theist, only those doctrines that are compatible with libertarian freedom are worthy of consideration; all others must be rejected at the outset. And typically, open theists do not argue the case (such as there is) for libertarian freedom; rather, they assume it. It is their presupposition.⁹⁶

Sanders rejects the notion that libertarian freedom is driving his theological model. While he admits that “some proponents of the risk view begin with libertarian freedom as a control belief, using it to reshape the doctrine of God,” Sanders will not have this charge pinned on him. Instead, he claims to start with the “biblical model of God as a personal being who enters into genuinely reciprocal relations with us,” which “fits nicely with human libertarian freedom.”⁹⁷ Sanders concludes, “If the views defended in this book on omniscience, prayer and God’s love are correct, then libertarian freedom should be assumed.”⁹⁸

⁹⁴ Ibid., 282.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 216.

⁹⁶ Frame, *No Other God*, 119.

⁹⁷ Sanders, *God Who Risks*, 222.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

Sanders's quote supports the claim I made earlier, namely, that the *principle of reciprocity* ultimately drives Open Theism. Genuine reciprocity between God and man, which for Open Theists requires mutual dependence and influence, not only "fits nicely" with libertarian freedom, it *requires* it. Moreover, and here lie some of the most serious implications of Open Theism, just as surely as the principle of reciprocity requires human libertarian freedom, it requires the redefinition of certain divine attributes.

Pinnock tells us that the last major step of his theological pilgrimage was to reexamine and redefine three divine attributes: immutability; timeless eternity; and omniscience. First, God cannot be thought of as absolutely changeless; while He is immutable in His self-existence, God is changeable in His relationships with His creatures. Second, a timeless eternal God could not relate to and interact with the world. Timeless eternity threatens personal agency. God must be somehow in time, not just outside of it. Third, exhaustive foreknowledge threatens human freedom. Getting personal again, says Pinnock,

I found I could not shake off the intuition that such a total omniscience would necessarily mean that everything we will ever choose in the future will have been already spelled out in the divine knowledge register, and consequently the belief that we have truly significant choices to make would seem to be mistaken.... Therefore, I had to ask myself if it was biblically possible to hold that God knows everything that can be known, but that free choices would not be something that can be known even by God because they are not yet settled in reality. Decisions not yet made do not exist anywhere to be known even by God. They are potential—yet to be realized but not yet actual. God can predict a great deal of what we will choose to do, but not all of it, because some of it remains hidden in the mystery of human freedom.⁹⁹

This is by far the most serious territory into which Open Theists have stepped. When we boil it all down, Open Theism stands for this principle: *libertarian human freedom logically entails limited divine foreknowledge.*

Returning to what I stated at the outset, Ware is right when he says that Open Theism is essentially a model of God and the world "in which the doctrine of divine foreknowledge (i.e., particularly knowledge of future free human choices) is denied so as not to preclude (as they see it) the genuineness of future contingencies and future free human choices. Hence, the future is 'open....'"¹⁰⁰ In other words, on the Open model, genuine contingencies between God and man require human libertarian freedom. This requires that the future be to a certain extent open, or *unknowable*, which in turn requires God's being open to, or *not knowing*, certain aspects of the future.

⁹⁹ Pinnock, "From Augustine to Arminius," 25.

¹⁰⁰ Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, 18, n. 1.

Conclusion

Open Theism offers, against Calvinist and Arminian brands of Classical Theism as well as Process Theism, a provocative model of God, the world, and God's relation to the world. At the heart of Open Theism is a logic that runs something like this:

1. *God must be open to the future—that is, He must not know all of it.*
2. *The previous is true because the future must be open to God—that is, it must not all be knowable, even to God.*
3. *The previous is true because man must be free in the libertarian sense—that is, in his free choices he must be absolutely autonomous from God's unilateral control.*
4. *The previous is true because genuine reciprocity of relationship demands it.*

It truly all comes down then, in my opinion, to the principle of reciprocity: the great divine project—that which God wants more than anything else out of this world—is the formation of personal, loving, reciprocal relationships with His creatures. Reciprocity demands libertarian freedom; libertarian freedom demands an unknowable future; and an unknowable future demands a God who cannot know it.