

# Being and Doing in the Concept of God

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Received: 31 May 2007 / Accepted: 11 June 2007 /  
Published online: 21 August 2007  
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**Abstract** In this essay I use the notion of divine values, those values analytically assigned to the concept of God, as a means of understanding replies to criticisms of open theism. I begin by orienting open theism according to the divine values open theist's embrace within the larger context of relational theology. I then present three criticisms, a theological criticism, a practical criticism and a philosophical criticism and an open theist reply to each. Finally, I attempt to show the underlying motivation which unifies the open theist's responses and points out where progress can be made in such discussions. This paper was delivered during the APA Pacific 2007 Mini-Conference on Models of God.

**Keywords** Open theism · Divine values · Omniscience · Divine perfection

## Introduction

I shall call *Divine values*, those values that we analytically assign to the concept of the divine. Whatever divine values there may be they are probably not as clear cut as we are often inclined to believe. When asking someone to choose between alternative conceptions of the divine nature, what one person might take to be an analytical concept others outright reject. My purpose here is to explore the role our value concepts play in how we assess open theism. To this end, I will begin by identifying some of the value concepts associated with the view of the divine embraced by open theism (and other similar theological models). I will then attempt to show how three otherwise divergent criticisms, a theological criticism, a practical criticism and a philosophical criticism can be best understood as sharing a difference of opinion about the divine values embraced by open theists. Finally, I hope to provide a brief discussion of how control beliefs and philosophical assumptions can be used in a significant interchange.

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## Values

We often include action concepts in our list of divine values. We are not going to be satisfied with a god if, like the number 2, it does not really do anything. Typical action oriented properties assigned to the concept of the divine include: omnipotence, creator, redeemer, and the notion that God exercises providential control over the outcome of the created order. Clearly open theism is not the only theological model which would embrace the connection of action with value in the concept of the divine nature. Furthermore, action is not the only divine value that any particular open theist might want to embrace.

The means by which open theism approaches this connection between the divine nature and action is often described as relational theology.<sup>1</sup> Not just any action is something that open theists are seeking in elucidating the divine nature. According to open theists and others, the controlling idea of divine action is that of relationship. Relational theology, as the name implies, has relationship as the core divine value. Of course it is easy to focus strictly on the divine–human relationship, but at a deeper level God seeks to be in relationship with the whole of the created order. One way to characterize relational theology is that it makes sense of a wide array of views about God’s purposes, actions, and intentions throughout all creation by virtue of the claim that God values the relationships that the created order offers.<sup>2</sup> Open theism then is a subset of those relational theologies that attempt to put forward a consistent understanding of the conditions necessary for the relationships God seeks. To this end, open theists claim we must understand the created order as one that is not uniquely determined by the divine creative act. It is “open” in the sense that there is more than one possible outcome in creation. Two theological flash points are readily apparent from this. First, according to open theists not everything that happens in creation was ordained (or foreordained) by God. God takes risks in achieving the divine goals. Second, because of this openness, future states of creation are inaccessible to the divine consciousness. God cannot know the outcome in its totality.<sup>3</sup> God lacks exhaustive definite foreknowledge. There are other points of contention but these two seem to be big costs in the relational model that open theists embrace.

## Criticisms

The controversial claims of open theists invite a number of replies or criticisms of open theism, some sensible and some that are amazingly obtuse. I have picked several as a means to identify common themes in the openness model. I have tried to

<sup>1</sup> It is also sometimes referred to in the literature as freewill theology.

<sup>2</sup> Again, I don’t make this claim strictly for open theism. This is true of theological models other than open theism as well.

<sup>3</sup> Open theists differ on the scope of God’s knowledge, but they agree that while God may know the end to which he will bring creation, God does not know the future free actions of particular individuals.

group them into the domains of theological concerns, practical concerns and philosophical concerns. What I have in mind by these labels is distinguishing what we think about God, what we think about how we should act, pray, and so forth, and finally how our conceptual framework will look. I offer this distinction merely for its usefulness and not because I am convinced there are deep conceptual facts to base this distinction upon; however, none of what I argue rests on this.

A central theological concern, one at the heart of a variety of expressed criticisms, is that open theism fails to describe a being whose glory is worthy of our worship. One way this is stated is that the god of open theism fails to be the being ‘than which no greater can be conceived’ (Anselm’s perfect being). In particular open theists are said to ‘fail to embrace the perfection of God’. Stating it this way makes it sound more like a philosophical concern than theology; however, the point can be expressed in more common theological modes by saying: that the god of open theism fails to be infinite, expresses a lesser glory or reduces God to the image and imagination of humanity. One of the more interesting related criticisms here is that open theism incorrectly uses love as the central divine attribute. Another is that the very notion of divine risk is abhorrent.<sup>4</sup>

Several practical criticisms are leveled at open theism which center around the idea that the open theistic model gives us a God who cannot perform the function we expect. Critics claim open theists cannot rely upon God to be fully in control and fully knowledgeable about the future. When we pray and ask for divine guidance we expect these things of God. One explanation offered for why open theists commit this foible is that they don’t read biblical texts the right way. There are several related criticisms including things like: open theists can’t affirm inerrancy (where the practical implication drawn is that they cannot get correct guidance from the Bible), that prophecy is impossible so open theists cannot properly form an eschatology and finally, God is unable to bring about his goals for creation and hence cannot be relied upon to work life’s pains and misfortunes for good.

Philosophical criticisms are mostly aimed at the metaphysical structure that open theists put forward.<sup>5</sup> One specific philosophical criticism is open theism wrongly presupposes a dynamic view of time and because of the denial of the existence of the future, open theists cannot affirm obvious truths like, ‘tomorrow either Bob will play golf or Bob will not play golf’. Open theists accept a dynamic view of time as

<sup>4</sup> I have intentionally not included references for these criticisms as my point is not to attack or belittle them but to lay out a framework for understanding an open theist’s response.

<sup>5</sup> One criticism is that open theists fail to have a fully developed metaphysic. I think this might well be right, but I’m not too impressed with it as a criticism given that I don’t know that I can say I am aware of any system which has a fully developed metaphysic. Thomism seems to be the closest to having a complete metaphysic. Perhaps the intent of this is to say that it is not *adequately* developed, but I am unaware of how this is to be shown to be the case. Having a ‘fully developed’ metaphysic may have its costs as well. Two that have been suggested to me are that with a more fully developed metaphysic there will be more danger that the metaphysical system will exert too much control in the interchange between one’s philosophy and theology. An additional concern is that by having a ‘more fully developed’ metaphysic a theological system will lack a certain valuable flexibility. These were suggested by William Hasker and John Sanders, respectively.

necessary for the options that they take as a required part of free will.<sup>6</sup> If the stasis model of time is correct,<sup>7</sup> there already exists a unique future and hence the future cannot properly be said to be open. There are a number of related criticisms ranging from, options that open theists are criticized for failing to consider, such as middle knowledge, to entailments that open theists are said to wrongly make, for instance, that atemporality entails immutability.

## A Framework for Open Theist Replies

While I do not think all criticisms can be handled by merely identifying differences in background assumptions and control beliefs, I do think many problems can be best understood in this way. Our assumptions and control beliefs are a complex interweaving of many different commitments and motivations, some of which may not be immediately introspectively available to us. Nonetheless, what I hope to do here is identify some of the conceptual motivations for why open theists make the claims they do in a way that undermines the criticisms offered. In some cases we may find that open theists just don't share assumptions with their critics. In other cases we may share the assumption in its propositional form, but disagree about how the assumption should fit into the set of beliefs which we use to shape our opinions on these matters. Especially in these situations I hope to defuse some of the animus that is common. Following the pattern I set above,<sup>8</sup> I will examine these beliefs under the heading of theological, practical and philosophical. I will first survey some of the possible responses and then try to show what is behind these responses in a way that gives some common conceptual themes regarding the divine values we hold.

As I identified in the opening discussion about the structure of our concept of the divine, open theists hold as a control belief that God seeks to be in loving relationship with the created order. This guides open theists' view of divine perfection. In cases where we do not share the belief that relationship is a divine goal, no doubt we will also disagree about the divine character entailed by perfection. In short we could agree with the divine value of perfection but without a shared standard of perfection we might still disagree about what it means to be perfect. Nonetheless, I am sure that many, or at the very least some, critics of open theism would agree with the claim, God seeks to be in loving relationships.

Since we agree to this, how can it be the source of such differing opinions about the divine character and activity? I think the best way to characterize the problem is to look at how this belief functions with other beliefs we hold to be true. I think that open theists want to use this belief to guide other beliefs in a way that many find unfamiliar and some find unacceptable. We are back to the problem that even if we

<sup>6</sup> Open theists accept the libertarian analysis of free will. One formulation is that S (some subject) was free with respect to A (some action), if and only if, S was able to have done other than A. Open theists are incompatibilists, rejecting the view that a single action could be both determined and free.

<sup>7</sup> In the literature on this topic this model of time is also called the static theory, the B-theory, the tenseless theory or the block theory.

<sup>8</sup> As before, I do so with no intention of any deep commitment to its structure other than a perceived immediate usefulness.

agree that God is properly understood to be perfect, we may or may not share the standard of perfection. Open theists use the concept of loving relationship as a means of understanding the nature of divine perfection. When Thomas Aquinas and others tell us that to be perfect God must be immutable,<sup>9</sup> open theists respond by first wondering how an immutable being might be related to creation. An open theist will use the notion of God's desire to be in loving relationship with creation as a standard by which perfection is to be measured.<sup>10</sup> My point here and in the following section is that most of the criticisms above are fairly useless. If we want to make meaningful head way in understanding each other and understanding and ultimately judging models of the divine character what we need to do is come to a better understanding of control beliefs and the motivation for these control beliefs.

A practical consideration that seems to be behind many criticisms has to do with hermeneutics. Our traditions are often used to define our interpretations. What we often fail to see and have a difficult time accepting is that those traditions are fallible. This is particularly true when it comes to how we read canonical texts. This is not merely a problem for Christianity, but I will focus my attention there as open theism is an outgrowth of that larger tradition. We often assume, and sometimes explicitly assert that there is one proper interpretation of a text. It seems to me, practically speaking, one thing that open theists are committed to that enables them to continue to view their model of God as belonging within the Christian tradition, is that there can be a variety of legitimate interpretations of biblical passages. There is no single hermeneutical system which yields a unique and correct meaning for scriptural texts.<sup>11</sup> This belief is certainly not unique to open theists; however, when it is made explicit, criticisms which pit specific verses or passages against a theological model can be better analyzed. Without this we continue to talk past each other. With it we can begin to examine larger contexts and weigh the promise of differing interpretations.<sup>12</sup> When we do this, other practical concerns, things like our reliance on God, can be similarly addressed.

<sup>9</sup> It is important to note here that Thomas and others treat immutability as what some have termed 'strong immutability'. A thing is strongly immutable if it cannot change in any of its intrinsic properties. This can be contrasted with weak immutability where some subset of a thing's properties is changeless but other intrinsic properties might change. Those espousing weak immutability of God often say things like, God cannot change in his character, goodness or nature, but that God does change in other ways. For example, he changes when he responds in love and compassion to a prayer that we offer, or in response to a request we make. Open theists can accept weak immutability, but of course, so can any number of theological views. I will use the term 'immutability' as synonymous with 'strong immutability'.

<sup>10</sup> This is not merely true of open theism rather it is true of relational theologies in general.

<sup>11</sup> This need not be thought to lead to a far reaching relativism. As a friend and mentor (Charles Moore) used to say interpretation is plastic, but not infinitely plastic.

<sup>12</sup> It is worth noting that those of differing theological traditions offer interpretations as well. This is most obvious when they are addressing 'difficult' passages where on the face of it the passage looks to contradict their chosen view. While this is when it is most obvious I would hasten to add that even when we (open theist or others from differing theological traditions) take a passage at 'face value' we are giving an interpretation. Rendering a meaning which is devoid of interpretation is not possible. The move from scripture to doctrine makes this most clear. Doctrine is underdetermined by the text. This is true in part because, as Pinnock has affirmed, the Bible is pretheoretical. I prefer to say that the Bible is not a metaphysic text. Hence we cannot assume that there is a metaphysic presupposed by the text and demand an interpretation based on that.

Finally, I think there are a number of philosophical commitments behind open theism.<sup>13</sup> I do not think this should come to much but clearly in some criticisms there isn't even a commitment to the role of the law of non-contradiction. I must point out that not every claim of contradiction in the literature is correct; however, that of course is a matter to be met case by case. What is a concern are the places where there is not a commitment to even the principle that if two claims are directly contradictory then one of them must be false.<sup>14</sup> Open theists are at times here criticized for putting logic or philosophy above God. Whether this criticism is legitimate or not the law of non-contradiction is something which we must agree on if we are to proceed. If not there will be no real hope of resolve for other criticisms.<sup>15</sup>

Two other philosophical commitments seem to be significant and probably a good deal more controversial. The first is a commitment to libertarian free will and in particular to the view that for there to be genuine freedom there must be alternatives which the free being has real access to actualizing. That is to say in a given situation to be genuinely free I must be able to do more than one thing. Many open theists think this implies that there is not a fact of the matter about what I will do. If the future exists and is a unique and complete state then there is a fact of the matter about whether I will play golf tomorrow.<sup>16</sup> This would entail the rejection of libertarian freewill.

The second significant and controversial philosophical commitment is to a dynamic view of time – usually presentism.<sup>17</sup> The very point of calling this model the open model is to affirm the notion that the future is not fixed. Most open theists deny the very existence of the future. This is controversial, but when this commitment is made clear, the basis for the implications can be directly discussed. In short you won't have a cogent argument against open theism by simply assuming the stasis view of time.

### Unifying These Replies

So far we have seen that there may be a number of direct replies available to the open theist to the criticisms raised. My point in raising these criticisms is to argue that there are concepts which provide an underlying unity to these responses.

<sup>13</sup> Being a philosopher I no doubt will over emphasize this portion.

<sup>14</sup> Usually the explanation is given that because our ways are not God's ways contradictions can be meaningfully asserted of the divine. If this view is pushed everything can be said to be true of God, but that is hardly a useful theological position to take.

<sup>15</sup> It seems worth pointing out that the discussion between open theists and others is not unique in this regard. Without accepting the law of non-contradiction we can not really get anywhere in a dialog.

<sup>16</sup> This is not a commitment to a form of causal determinism that would entail fatalism. Even in the case where someone claims the existence of a unique future but asserts that the future will be what it is because of what I will choose to do (I don't actually know if this statement makes sense but it has been used in my presence so I will appeal to it here) there is a problem. I call this view simple determinism where the future is determined, but I am the cause of what happens. The problem the open theist asserts is that if there is a unique future (determinism) then I am not able to do otherwise. There is a fact of the matter and hence there are not alternatives which I might actualize. See Hasker, W. (2002). The absence of a timeless God. In: G. E. Ganssle & D. M. Woodruff (Eds.), *God and time: Essays on the divine nature* (pp. 197–198). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>17</sup> The dynamic view of time is that the manifold of time is not complete. The most common form of this is presentism. The presentist claims that only the present exists; the past is no more and the future has not yet come to be.

Perhaps this can be most clearly seen by starting with the discussion of practical criticisms. A key component there seemed to be the variety of hermeneutical approaches and the different interpretations they yield. While open theists might share the view with many that there is no one right hermeneutical approach which yields *the only correct interpretation*, there is more an open theist will say in this regard. What guides the open theist in interpreting a particular Biblical passage is the notion of divine relationship. What we might call an Openness Sympathetic Interpretation (OSI) is the interpretation which gives the fullest and richest sense of the relationships that God enters into with creation. When considering a Biblical passage where it would appear that God responds in a fashion that would require temporal succession we might consider the following distinct interpretations. The first interpretation might treat the language of the passage anthropomorphically concluding that while the passage gives the appearance of temporal succession we should not view it as actually being committed to such. A second interpretation might treat the passage as a more direct descriptive account and as such implying that there was temporal succession in the divine–human interaction. The principle which will guide the open theist in choosing between these is to prefer the interpretation which expresses the fullest and richest relationship between God and creation.

The same basic commitment unifies the other two replies to criticisms outlined above. The principle that guides the open theist in deciding which view of God might best express the ‘divine glory’ or ‘perfection’ is the commitment to value of relationship that open theists view as a divine value.<sup>18</sup> The basis for the philosophical commitments to libertarian free will and a dynamic conception of time is that each of these views seem to make better sense of the dynamic divine–human interaction and in particular they best account for a full and rich relationship. So, for example, even though with a stasis view of time we can give an account of change, the open theist will not be satisfied with this view because in their mind the account of change offered does not provide for the rich and full relationships that they see as a fundamental value. The unity which underlies the open theist’s response to these distinct criticisms is found in their commitment to the connection between the divine nature and the divine activity of seeking loving relationships.

## A Dialectic of Models

The crux of my discussion here is not merely to identify what we should be arguing about or what are the important criticisms of open theism but rather, and I hope more significantly, it is about how we approach these problems. Useful critical discussions of open theism are going to be like many encounters with intractable issues. That is to say we are liable to find that after working carefully through an issue we discover an underlying intuition which strikes us in a distinctly different way than it does our interlocutor. If this is really what is at the heart of the matter we will not simply be able to offer a Bible verse or cogent syllogism and be done with things.

<sup>18</sup> Recall that a divine value is a value which is analytically a part of the divine nature.



Perhaps however, there is a larger framework for discussions which may have a chance to be fruitful. The first step toward this end is to grant that there is room for discussion. This requires acceptance that honest well-informed people can disagree about these things. I am committed to the view that there are real philosophical disagreements, ones where when we clear away confusions about meaning and what not, people and philosophers in particular, disagree about pretty fundamental ways of thinking about the world and about what we should consider when we try to clarify the way the world is. For these things there are no cogent arguments, ones which start from obviously true or even widely agreed upon premises and lead in unquestionable ways to a single conclusion. This situation is not limited to philosophy but extends to other conceptual frameworks like politics. A consequence of this is that rational people can share a set of accepted facts and still come to different conclusions. If this is true, it follows that it doesn't make sense to believe, like so many people seem to believe, that all intelligent reasonably well-informed people are: democrats, or Christians, or materialists etc.<sup>19</sup>

Once we concede that honest, good intentioned, reasonably intelligent people can disagree about fundamental values which shape our view of the Divine nature, where does this lead? First, it leads away from a good deal of overly charged rhetorical attacks. Second, it leads away from thinking the issue can be settled by pointing to a few Bible verses or by appealing to some commitment made by a prominent figure in church history. But it does not lead to mere relativism on the matter either. I think people can be swayed and the conversation can be moved in one direction or another.<sup>20</sup> We move forward here more with illustration and thought experiments which reveal the consequences of our commitments than we do with precisely laid out arguments or a list of scripture texts. There can be and often is real progress at this level; it comes when we offer examples and examine consequences with the most charitable interpretation of the position we are examining.

## Conclusion

When we work our way back to the control beliefs and philosophical assumptions, we find there are real differences of opinion which motivate different models of the divine nature. However, when we work in this way, while we might well better understand our interlocutor we will also find it much more difficult to show what is wrong (if anything) with their view. There are real criticisms and difficulties in open theism, but I know of no view of the divine nature which isn't in the same position.

<sup>19</sup> Much of my thinking on this has been shaped by Peter van Inwagen and to some lesser extent by the writings of David Lewis. See van Inwagen, P. (1996). It is wrong, everywhere, always and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence. In: J. Jordan & D. Howard-Snyder (Eds.), *Faith, freedom and rationality* (pp. 137–153). New Jersey: Rowman & Littlefield. Reprinted in, Stump, E., & Murry, M. (Eds.) (1999). *The big questions: Philosophy of religion*. (pp. 273–284). Oxford: Blackwell. David Lewis has voiced somewhat similar things, see his introduction in, Lewis, D. (1983). *Philosophical paper* (Vol. 1, p. x). New York: Oxford University Press.

<sup>20</sup> Although I disagree with his position, I think Thomas Flint has done a good job setting this up in his discussion of middle knowledge and the incarnation. This paper was read at the SCP, in the spring of 2003.