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Perfection at Risk?

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One of the most important contemporary developments in philosophical theology is the rise of "free-will theism" or "the open view." This recent movement (barely a decade old) is dedicated to challenging what is perhaps the dominant conception of God in the philosophical tradition, a conception reached via *a priori* reflections on what a completely perfect being would have to be like. Properties attributed to God by perfect-being theologians like Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas, include not only supreme goodness, wisdom, and power (upon which all orthodox Christians can agree), but also more recondite properties like the following: necessary existence (existing in every world is better than existing in only some worlds); aseity (a being whose ground for existence is found in something else is not complete unto itself); metaphysical simplicity (this is required by aseity and God's role as first principle); timeless existence (things bound by time are limited and never completely themselves); immutability (change requires time and implies imperfection); impassibility (it is more excellent to be an active subject than a passive object); exhaustive foreknowledge (ignorance of anything leaves divine omniscience incomplete); and meticulous sovereignty (a perfect being would do everything possible to achieve His superlative ends). This list, with its technical jargon and Neoplatonic roots, includes dimensions of the divine nature which most believers certainly never consider; for this reason, a being who satisfies all (or at least a sufficiently large number) of the items on this list might appropriately be called the "God of the philosophers." (I'll reserve the term "perfect-being theist" for anyone who subscribes to the God of the philosophers and does so largely for philosophical reasons.) In challenging this conception of God, "free-will theists" or "openists" (as these names imply) are particularly concerned to safeguard the Biblical picture of the divine-human relationship as one between robustly libertarian agents. While critical of the *ens perfectissimum* model as a whole, free-will theists have focused (so far) on the second half of the list, where ordinary believers are most likely to have considered and (in the case

of foreknowledge and sovereignty) endorsed the positions taken by traditional perfect-being theologians.

Of the various defenses of free-will theism that have been offered to date, the most comprehensive is surely John Sanders' *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence.*[1] In canvassing different views of divine providence, Sanders is primarily interested in whether they conform to the "risk" model or the "no-risk" model. The issue between these two camps, he maintains, cannot be settled by *a priori* reflection on what is *dignum deo* (fitting for God) or by appeal to a question-begging definition of 'sovereignty', but only by observing how God has in fact chosen to relate to us. This *a posteriori* approach eschews the notion of a "God behind God" who "accommodates" himself to human language; instead, the alleged "anthropomorphisms" of Scripture are ineliminable and, indeed, precisely what God wants us to know about Himself. "God has undertaken a project, and it is only from within this project in which God is related to us that we know God at all" (38). Sanders proposes three criteria by which to adjudicate between the "risk" and "no-risk" models. The first, "consonance with tradition," leads him to undertake a thorough review of Old and New Testament materials supportive of a dynamic and risk-taking deity, supplemented by a briefer tour of the post-apostolic tradition showing how the Biblical picture was distorted by the introduction of Neoplatonic ideas (while noting some voices that nevertheless resisted this alien influence). The second criterion is "conceptual intelligibility;" in its service he examines how risk-taking fits into a conceptually coherent picture of the divine nature, and develops and defends the concept of sovereignty to which this view of God leads. The third criterion, "adequacy for the demands of life," elicits a comparison of the risk and no-risk models in such practical areas as sin, salvation, prayer, and divine guidance.

Sanders is often eloquent in arguing this case. His latest book should provide an inspirational rallying-point for those already in the free-will theistic camp, and prove persuasive for many readers who are not antecedently committed on the issues it addresses. But the acid test is how well it engages the position of knowledgeable opponents and provides reasons why they should convert to the author's position. On this score Sanders is much less effective. The issues raised by Sanders in particular, and by free-will theism in general, are among the most important and complicated ones faced by thoughtful Christians, and I cannot in these few pages do them justice. I will

[1] Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1998. InterVarsity has also published the movement's manifesto, *The Openness of God* (1994), by Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger, as well as Basinger's *The Case for Freewill Theism: A Philosophical Assessment* (1996).

therefore content myself with identifying some of the respects in which Sanders' argument seems (to me) to fall short.

First of all, Sanders is not always sufficiently careful in the way he characterizes the position(s) he is arguing against. There are a number of points to be made under this rubric. Most theists do not fall into the pure "no risk" category as Sanders defines it, where this includes God's directly controlling everything and being completely unconditioned by anything external to Himself (10); yet most also subscribe to more of the *ens perfectissimum* package than he thinks legitimate. So where do the bulk of theists fit into Sanders' scheme? They count as free-will theists in the broad sense, inasmuch as they affirm human and divine freedom; but they are not free-will theists in the narrow sense, inasmuch as they do not draw the same conclusions about God's nature and divine providence as do Sanders and his fellow-travelers. It is these middle-of-the-road theists (like myself) that Sanders needs to persuade. Yet they are almost entirely missing from the section of the book devoted to practical applications, where extreme no-risk theists like John Calvin and Paul Helm provide the principal contrast to Sanders' risk model of providence. So even if Sanders' critique of the extremists is cogent, it's not clear what implications this has for more moderate versions of perfect-being theism. And it's not even clear what its implications are for the more extreme versions. This is because rejection of perfect-being theism (whether extreme or moderate) should be based on a fair assessment of its benefits as well as costs, and Sanders never brings the benefits into focus. While he sometimes acknowledges the goods perfect-being theists mistakenly associate with the God of the philosophers, the overall picture the reader is left with is one in which perfect-being theism became ascendant for no better reason than that Neoplatonism was the most congenial intellectual system on offer at the time the formative Church fathers got down to work. But this does not give theological geniuses like Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas their due. There are important jobs that the God of the philosophers can do better than anything else (e.g., providing a wholly satisfying answer to the question, "Why is there something rather than nothing?") If there were more recognition of this in Sanders' book, he might have been more sympathetic to the classical project of showing how the "God of the philosophers" can *be* the "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." The fact that the author of *The Confessions* could also think of God within an essentially Neoplatonic frame of reference should alert us to the limitations of such *tout court* generalizations as that Augustine lacked a relational view of God. (Augustine surely doesn't deny, e.g., that God answers our prayers.) Rather, he proposes an *analysis* of *what it is* for God (the God of the philosophers who is also the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) to be related to us. (Compare: Bishop Berkeley's idealism does not consist in his denying that such things as this copy of *Philosophia Christi* exist; rather, it consists in his

offering a non-materialistic analysis of what it is for this thing to exist.) Because Sanders is unsympathetic to this part of the classical project, he fails to present it in whole. “Whereas classical theism’s root metaphor is God as the pillar around which all else moves,” he writes, “the root metaphor for relational theism is a personal God in loving relations with creaturely persons” (175). This doesn’t seem right; at the very least, it constitutes an unnuanced either-or. When Dante ends the *Divine Comedy* with a paean to “the Love that moves the sun and the other stars,” he is being true to the tradition of perfect-being theism, of which his poem is the supreme literary expression. Augustine, Boethius, Anselm, and Aquinas, to name just four representatives of this tradition, are unanimous in their efforts to unite Sanders’ two metaphors. If it is Sanders’ position that the first metaphor should be rejected in favor of the second, it is his position that is one-sided. I, for one, would consider this strong evidence against free-will theism and in favor of traditional perfect-being theism.

A second problem with Sanders’ case for free-will theism is that, even when his critique of the opposing view is sound, it’s not clear how his own position fares any better. There is no doubt that perfect-being theism presents many puzzles for Christian practice, and Sanders is often on firm ground when pointing these out. I think he’s right, for example, in claiming that there is a special problem of *lament* for the perfect-being theist. It’s not obvious how the things we do in fact lament (like the death by cancer of my one-year-old nephew earlier this year) can be genuinely *lamentable* if a meticulously sovereign deity specifically selected this scenario out of all the available alternatives; if we saw the whole picture as God sees it, including the goods attendant on the thing we are lamenting, the legitimacy of our lament would perhaps be undercut. This line of thought is worrisome, because lament *does* seem legitimate (even Jesus wept). But how is the free-will theist better off in this regard? Let’s compare the two positions. On the assumption of meticulous sovereignty, God sees goods connected to my nephew’s death and judges that his death is not sufficiently lamentable to outweigh those goods. On the risk model of divine sovereignty, God has freely adopted a general policy of nonintervention in cases of suffering *whether or not the suffering is connected to outweighing goods*, and He judges that my nephew’s death is not sufficiently lamentable for Him to make an exception to this policy. It’s just not clear how Sanders’ preferred alternative comes any closer to making lament legitimate. Indeed, meticulous sovereignty has the advantage of being more comforting (as it was to my brother and sister-in-law) because it promises that this tragedy is connected in some intimate and mysterious way with a greater good which somehow redeems it.

Finally, given that Sanders has chosen to highlight divine risk-taking in his alternative to the traditional view, it is surprising that there is so little

attention paid to the notion of risk itself. "But just what do we mean by risk?" he asks (170), but there is no sustained effort to answer the question (beyond quoting some things that others have said *about* risk). Sanders' failure to clarify the nature of risk is responsible for a number of mistakes in his argument, of which I will mention two. (1) He ignores the role of ignorance in risk, asserting that it is only the extent of God's sovereign control over events that determines the degree of divine risk-taking while the extent of God's knowledge makes no difference at all. This is a very strange notion of risk. Suppose you are a contestant on "Let's Make a Deal." The choice between curtains 1, 2, or 3 involves risk, since you might get the year's supply of floor wax instead of the new car. One way to eliminate risk is to exercise "sovereign control" over the situation by bringing it about (through bribery, blackmail, etc.) that there is a new car behind *each* of the curtains. But clearly another way to eliminate risk is to leave the floor wax where it is and simply find out (again through bribery, etc.) which curtain conceals the car. Here risk is eliminated through knowledge alone, without any freedom-inhibiting exercises of sovereignty. Sanders' failure to see this is responsible for a number of mistakes, including his assignment of Molinism to the "risk" model of providence where it clearly does not belong. Because the Molinist God knows what *would* eventuate under any set of initial conditions He might actualize, He knows exactly what He's going to get when (and if) He decides to create a world. Where's the risk? Sanders notes, correctly enough, that this super-knowledgeable God is still not likely to get everything He wants; but this fact is irrelevant to the riskiness of God's venture. If I buy a drink from a properly-functioning vending machine stocked with coke, root beer, and orange soda, I might not get what I really wanted (a ginger ale), but this does not mean that I risked anything when I put my money in the machine. (2) Sanders also gives an extremely one-sided account of where the risk falls. Insofar as God has an interest in how creation turns out, He risks disappointment when He cedes a measure of control to created agents and opts not to micromanage events by exercising meticulous sovereignty. Fair enough; but God's risk is parasitic on another risk, which Sanders completely ignores. God's interests are put at risk when He adopts providential *laissez-faire* only because *we* (about whom He cares deeply) are thereby put at risk. Our eternal felicity is on the line! Yet the ethics of risk-taking when others bear the brunt is not even raised by Sanders. This leads him to overlook the fact that it is often advisable to minimize risk, and leaves him unmotivated to explore other models of providence (like Molinism) which uphold libertarian freedom while reducing risk.

Despite this negative appraisal of Sanders' argument, his recent book is well worth reading, even for sophisticated perfect-being theists. While perfect-being theism, at its best, is sensitive to the biblical data and the requirements of practical Christian life, it is not always at its best, and Sanders

astutely identifies some very real temptations to which it (sometimes) yields. As Christian philosophers, we cannot forget that our *a priori* theorizing about what is *dignum deo* must be disciplined by the *a posteriori* evidence of God's revealed word. In a cautionary tale which has special relevance to Christian philosophers in general and to perfect-being theists in particular, St. Jerome reports a vision in which he stood before the heavenly tribunal and was asked by the Judge to identify himself. "I am a Christian," he replied, but the Judge cut him short: "You lie; you are a follower of Cicero and not of Christ."[2] (This experience so affected Jerome that he abandoned his fine library of classical philosophy and rhetoric!) Though I have not found much in Sanders or the other free-will theists to persuade me that the God of the philosophers is *not* the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, I do appreciate their reminding me that I am not a disciple of Cicero (or Plotinus or Anselm) but a disciple of Christ. This is a reminder that Christian philosophers cannot hear too often. ✝

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[2] Jerome, *Ad Eustochium*.