

The Skeptical Theist Response

STEPHEN WYKSTRA

My fellow essayists offer four theodicies—four explanatory *models*, I'll call them—aiming constructively to help us see God's reasons for not preventing more of this world's evils. My own essay aims only to block some recent and trenchant atheistic arguments from analytic philosophers, and my defensive model mostly says that if God does exist, then we should not much *expect* to see, in any fullness or detail, his purposes for not preventing more of this world's evils. Clearly there's a tension here. But might, somehow, my model serve for defense, even as theirs serve their more ambitious aims?

This win-win will work only if their models give but *partial* explanations—leaving large gaps to be guarded by mine. My response here is thus a first effort at gap spotting, focusing especially on assumptions that shape the questions one sees as needing to be addressed by a theodical model. Gaps arise when a model, by its assumptions, erases certain questions—which also, of course, can make invisible its lack of answers to those questions.

ON CARY'S CLASSIC-THEISTIC MODEL

Phillip Cary's essay should convict us all of the need for frequent restudy of those early Christian thinkers whose ideas we so often reduce to cartoon caricatures. Nothing in analytic philosophy matches the analysis of the *nature* of evil given by his triple-A team of Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas. I'm glad, too, to see his list of classic theists including John Calvin. Calvin

and subsequent Reformed theology stressed the “meticulous providence” embraced by Cary’s model, and that model, in the “Hidden Reasons” section, has clear affinities with skeptical theism. The affinities would be deeper—and that section longer—if we could resolve one small apparent difference.

The difference concerns the controversial greater-good principle that Cary and I both embrace. The principle, put roughly, says that whenever God permits a genuine evil, God does so for some ample “justifying reason” involving some greater or outweighing good.¹ We differ, however, on a detail of that principle.

Consider a case where some good person P (God, a good angel, a good mother), for the sake of some positive good G, acts so as to cause or permit some seriously “negative” event E to occur. What *necessary* conditions are satisfied when G gives, normatively speaking, ample *justifying* reason for P’s action? On my own view, one is a No-Other-Way Condition:

G is ample justifying reason for an action permitting E to occur *only if* P had *no other way* to fully secure or promote G than by the action of permitting E or something in a comparably negative ballpark.²

Something like this No-Other-Way Condition seems to me an essential part of a good’s giving one ample justifying reason for permitting an evil. If a doctor achieved the greater good of saving your life by amputating your legs, but knew he could have equally well done this by giving you a simple antibiotic, you wouldn’t say he had ample *justifying reason* for the double amputation. You’d instead want him arrested.

Cary’s model, however, seems to imply that the No-Other-Way Condition is dispensable. That God will “bring some greater good out of the particular evils,” he contends, does *not* mean “that he *must* permit these evils for the sake of these goods.” Even giving us “free will,” he argues, didn’t require God to permit sin: God could have fully gotten this good by giving us from the get-go the “glorious perfect freedom” that God’s redeemed will have in heaven.³ Cary thus seems to reject the No-Other-Way Condition.⁴

¹For simplicity I here let “greater goods” include “preventings of worse evils.”

²Here the “ballpark” might have a foggy boundary: a fully adequate formulation of the No-Other-Way Condition will need to allow for any essentially vague boundaries. Here see Lecture 6 of Peter van Inwagen’s *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

³Cary’s argument fails if God’s bringing Adam-like creatures to the desired “gloriously perfect freedom” requires—as seems to me not implausible—their firsthand experience of his mercy and grace.

⁴Late in his essay, Cary admits a small “no other way” aspect to “the more beautiful story” strand in

I say “seems” because this might be the unwitting result of a shift in focus. Citing Marilyn Adams’s important book, Cary wants his model to highlight those long-range future goods that are compensatory and redemptive *to and for* the *victims* of unjust evil.⁵ For such goods, the model invites roughly this picture: If God *hadn’t* seen a way to bring greater goods for victims out of the evil they’ve suffered, God *wouldn’t* have permitted that evil—but this doesn’t mean God allowed the evils *for the sake of those goods* (as if he willed the evils *in order to* improve the victims). Now a little reflection shows that goods playing such compensating and redemptive goods need *not* satisfy a No-Other-Way Condition. Focusing just on them can thus cause this condition to slip from view.

Here an analogy might help. Imagine a little boy who realizes he’s left his teddy bear “Winnie” at a highway rest stop, and a mother who, despite his heartbreaking pleas to turn back, drives steadily on. Two things, let’s imagine, figure in her choice. First, she wants to arrive in time to prepare her aging father for a hospital appointment where he’ll learn the results of a recent biopsy. Second, she plans to buy her son a “new Winnie” in the hospital gift shop—while also helping him learn that people matter more than things—which, however, he also needs to take better care of. The aims she has for her son play important restorative and redemptive roles, but if we focus just on them, we find nothing that *requires* her to drive steadily on. But it’s the goods intended for her father that play the key roles in her *motivating rationale* for letting old Winnie perish, and reflection confirms that for these goods to play this role, there must be no other lower-cost way by which she can fully achieve them. So here I see Cary’s model as needing to become—like my geezer eyeglasses—more bifocal.⁶ A mono-focus on restorative goods, losing sight of the No-Other-Way Condition essential to motivating goods, will erase our hardest questions—“If God is all-powerful, couldn’t he have done it some other lower-cost way?”—and thereby make invisible some wide gaps in the classic-theistic answers.

in his model. But he hedges it as a mere “conceptual truth” applying only to certain “general kinds” of evils, and so fails to grapple with its role as a necessary condition on goods within the motivating rationale for God’s permission of particular horrendous evils.

⁵For a good encapsulation see Marilyn Adams, “Ignorance, Instrumentality, Compensation, and the Problem of Evil,” *Sophia* 52, no. 1 (2013): 7–26.

⁶For more on keeping these distinct, see Alvin Plantinga’s discussion of Adams in the final pages of his “Supralapsarianism, or ‘O Felix Culpa,’” in *Christian Faith and the Problem of Evil*, ed. Peter van Inwagen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

ON HASKER'S OPEN THEISTIC MODEL

Hasker's open theism gives all theists a valuable big picture of the diverse ways in which human suffering is connected to various great goods of God's universe—including developmental goods to which the evolutionary sciences now give us access. Those sciences also fit the open theistic stress on God's being *in time*: for God, as for us, the past alone is settled and done, whereas the future is a not-yet that is still unsettled. This is in part because it depends on our future free choices, which aren't "settled" until we actually make them. While the *destination* might be divinely assured, the exact *path* to it is not.

On Hasker's version of open theism, that path will be shaped by our ongoing free responses to God's initiatives, in which God is a risk-taking participant in our lives:

When God decides to bring about a particular situation, one that involves creatures in making free choices, it is impossible even for God to know with certainty how those creatures will respond; there is a genuine possibility that they will not respond in the way he intended and desired them to do. (Of course there is much in the Bible that indicates that this not only could but also often does happen.)

In Hasker's first word here—"*When*"—I see a key question for open theists. For how often *does* God make such decisions? Only rarely, at key turning points of world history? Or frequently, in daily hidden ways for each of us? Or something in between?

I read Hasker's model as embracing the "daily" option. So read, his model underscores the biblical view of God as Immanuel, God with us. Or better, God *In-It-with-Us*—where the "it" includes both our exhilarating white-water days and those darker passages through proverbial thicker creeks up which, if God is not In-It-with-Us, we are indeed without a paddle. If this is part of Hasker's model, I nominate it as its most valuable part—its MVP.

But is this MVP compatible with Hasker's fascinating thesis that open theism has the distinctive merit of allowing—indeed, requiring—an *exclusively* "general policy" approach to theodicy? As I understand his terms, a general-policy account explains God's permitting of some class of evils in terms of God's following some "general policy" to secure or promote certain

goods, whereas a “specific benefit” account explains God’s permitting of some *particular* evil by appeal to some specific benefit thereby achieved. Hasker’s thesis is that on open theism, and on it alone, “theodicy has *no need whatever* to appeal to beneficial consequences from God’s permission of specific instances of evil. If the evil in question is the result of a general policy that is itself good and wise, that is a sufficient answer to the problem.”

And open theism is uncongenial with specific-benefit theodicy, for “in a great many instances God cannot know, with certainty, what the consequences of a particular course of action will be, so it is out of the question to make the justification of God’s permission of some evil dependent on something that logically cannot be known.”

I see real promise in Hasker’s insight that in accounting for a whole class of events, a general-policy explanation can in principle render superfluous or otiose any specific-benefit explanations of each event in that class. But in that insight, it seems to me, lurk important new questions for both the general/specific distinction and for open theism itself.

For open theism, the new (at least to me) question is whether God, lacking certain knowledge of my future choice in some envisioned situation, will still have some probabilistic single-case sense of the “objective chance” of my freely deciding to go in one direction (in, say, the direction he desires) rather than the opposite. On this, I think sensible open theists might want to work out a yes position, for free choices are nevertheless clearly *conditioned* by one’s past habitual behavior, one’s character, and one’s movement in the direction of repentance and seeking God’s help in change.

For the distinction itself, the new question is whether a specific-benefit rationale and explanation for some divine decision will then also need to be construed in some decision-theoretic sense. Suppose, for example, that God decides to bring about some crisis situation in your life, knowing that if you respond well, you will through teachable repentance avoid much harm to yourself and others. But suppose, to God’s dismay, you instead choose to respond with pigheaded obstinacy, giving sin an increased hold, with highly injurious results. Would a detailed “theodical” account of *why* God brought about the crisis situation count as a specific-benefit account?

An open theist might answer no—since the hoped-for specific benefits did not in this case materialize. But for Hasker’s model, I think, the right answer

is yes. For if open theism is true, God's decisions will be either—in the parlance of decision theory—“decisions under uncertainty” or “decisions under risk,” and these divine decisions will be motivated by specific benefits of an intrinsically chancy nature—benefits like bringing about this crisis situation that “*will give Wykstra the best chance of getting on the right track.*” And if this is so, any God *In-It-with-Us* open theistic model will cry out for specific-benefit theodicies, for on such a model God's daily decisions and directives reflect his finely tuned *situational* sense of the objective chances of our responding well or poorly to situations he decides to bring about. A fully adequate theodicy of God's decisions would then need to give answers to specific-benefit questions about those *specific* situational parameters—those specific but objectively “chancy” benefits and perils—that grounded God's risky-but-not-reckless call.

Since we finite humans will often lack access to such specifics, I find Hasker's model an ally of skeptical theism. If Hasker decides to embrace an *exclusively* general-policy approach to theodicy, his model will become less friendly. But he will then also be giving up that Immanuel God *In-It-with-Us* that is, as I read him, the MVP of his current model.

ON CRAIG'S MOLINISTIC MODEL

Craig's Molinistic model, a version of classic theism, aligns well with skeptical theism. Like Hasker, Craig sees God as permitting much evil for the sake of having a universe that includes creatures—both human and angelic—gifted with deep moral freedom. Unlike Hasker, his model sees God as securing this freedom in a risk-free way, by attributing to God what I'll call *hyperomniscience*, by which God has eternal knowledge of “*counterfactual conditionals of creaturely freedom.*”

To digest what these are, consider that free choice you made yesterday in Burger King at 12:14 p.m. when you found that stray twenty-dollar bill.

“But wait,” you interrupt, “I wasn't in Burger King yesterday at all.”

Exactly right! Since it didn't *in fact* occur, let's call it a counterfactual situation. Still, it *might* have occurred: after all, God *could* have brought it about, putting you in a situation of having to freely choose whether to furtively take the twenty rather than seek out its rightful owner. So here is the Molinist's first claim: God knows for sure what your free choice *would have* been, if that situation *were* to have occurred yesterday at 12:14 p.m.

But that's just a warmup. God, the Molinist says, *also* knows what your free choice would be if he were to bring about that situation—or more precisely, every possible variant of that situation—a year from now, or at any other future time. Moreover, God hyperknows the same things about Artsky W., my twin brother. Granted, Artsky doesn't in fact exist: my mom's ovum didn't split up that way. But it seems like he's a metaphysically *possible* person—it seems, that is, like God *could* have brought about that egg splitting. And if so, then Molinism says God has hyperknowledge about what Artsky freely chooses in every possible situation *he* could ever be in.

And based on his eternal hyperknowledge of things, says the model, God decided eternally—prior to the womb of time itself—to *not* make that situation in Burger King yesterday an actual one. And similarly, based on his hyperknowledge of Artsky's free choices, God decided not to let Artsky be born into our actual world.

I've here rehearsed my understanding of Molinism because it bears crucially on my one reservation about Craig's paper—his deployment of Molinism against *probabilistic* arguments from evil. Craig thinks Molinism helps by giving a set of doctrines “that would tend to raise the probability of inscrutable evil *given* God's existence.” That is, it raises the probability of inscrutable evil *conditional* on theism. If Molinism does raise this conditional probability, I agree it will help—for it will help show that the theistic hypothesis itself “predicts” that many evils will serve no purpose we can see. But it will do this only if it's true *both* that inscrutable evil has a high probability conditional on Molinism, *and* that Molinism has a high probability conditional on theism. I grant the first but have problems with second. To be sure, I can “imagine” worlds where I have a twin brother Artsky W.; I can also imagine never-never land worlds where Peter Pan, Wendy, and Tinker Bell exist. But even if such worlds are “possible,” I see no reason to think God has hyperknowledge of what counterfactual creatures “in” them freely choose to do, for such things are not real enough for there to be *truths* about them for God to have knowledge of. I thus don't think Molinism has a high probability on theism or Christian theism, and indeed think it likely is false. Still, I'm glad Craig sees Molinism as a friend of skeptical theism. It needs all the friends it can get.

ON OORD'S ESSENTIAL-KENOTIC MODEL

Thomas Oord's "complete solution" to the problem of evil opens by changing the question: "Why does God *permit* evil?" must, he says, change to "Why does God *not prevent* evil?" I get this. It's false to say Elvis Presley *permitted* Hitler's 1940 invasion of France—for Elvis, being then in kindergarten, had total *inability* to stop Hitler. Similarly, Oord wants to say, it's false to say that God *permits* the genuine evils of our world—for God, on his model, has total *inability* to prevent them.

On the model, this of course isn't because God is short on power or knowledge the way Elvis was. It's because God is "essentially kenotic"—as the essence of a triangle is to have three sides, the essential nature of God is to self-limit by *uncontrolling* love toward all created things. As a playful analogy we might consider how good parents "let go" of now-adult sons or daughters, giving them full space to be themselves and do their own thing. Parents find this hard, but for God it flows from his essential nature, loving in an uncontrolling way that gives created things, as it were, *ontological space* to "*do their thing*," in accord with the nature and agency with which he has—according to their kind—gifted each of them.

To see more deeply into Oord's strategy, and raise some worries, let's connect it to Hasker's insights into general-policy theodicy. For what Oord's model does, at bottom, is explain evils by attributing to God a general policy of never unilaterally butting in. Moreover, what makes this a wise policy, on Oord's model, is that it serves a certain global good. To love something is, after all, to desire and pursue the best for that thing, and never butting in is, in Oord's words, part of God's holistic "quest to promote overall well-being" of all created things. Now Hasker, recall, urged that a general-policy account of a *class* of events can, in principle, make it senseless to seek specific-benefit accounts of particular events within that class. This helps us see a key feature of Oord's explanatory strategy. For, on his model, God's nonprevention of a human predator preying on a nine-year-old girl—Carrie, let's call her—has the same explanation as God's nonprevention of a hawk from preying on a rabbit: God by his essential nature cannot unilaterally butt in. For this reason, on Oord's model, it is senseless to ask, "Why did you not prevent this?" of tragedies like the death of nine-year-old Carrie. The model "answers" such questions by erasing them.

My worry is that the model erases too much too quickly. As I see it, Oord's core insight is that a God who lovingly creates a universe of good things like ours must essentially "self-limit" so as—in *some* way and to *some* degree—let those things do their thing. But the crucial question should here be how—and how much—God's essence constrains God to dial back. Oord's model proposes that God must dial back *completely*. Extremes have a certain attractive simplicity, but do we see anything in God's "essential nature" that dictates so unnuanced a divine policy?

A more nuanced policy would, I think, fit better with other things affirmed by Oord and by Scripture. Oord, like Cary and Hasker, sees in created things a scale of complexity and value. If God's policy is attuned to the value of things, might not God—due to his essential nature—*sometimes have to* butt in? Might God not *sometimes*, due to his valuing people more than protons, give a quantum-nudge to some father's synaptic connection, giving him an inexplicable urge to go pick his daughter up from school, instead of letting her walk home as usual? There is merit in supposing that God can't *always* stymie predators in this way, but does reason—or our own experience—tell us that God's essential nature dictates that he can *never* do it?

I don't think so: like Cary and Hasker, I see God as far more active in shaping events. To be sure, this means that I will—like Job—often protest that he isn't active enough, or when he should have been. But am I—who haven't had that much practice in running a universe that is both law-like and providential—really in an epistemic position to judge how much, or when, that is?⁷

CONTRA CRAIG: THE NEGLECTED REFORMED CONCURSUS MODEL

Craig's several deprecating asides on John Calvin and Reformed theology have helped me rediscover my own tradition. Unlike Molinists and open

⁷Of vital importance here are the modal-skeptical considerations advanced by Peter van Inwagen in the final sections of his "The Problem of Evil, the Problem of Air, and the Problem of Silence," reprinted in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 151-74. On the thorny issues about why God doesn't intervene when we (or Jesus) would intervene, see my "Beyond the Impasse: Contemporary Moral Theory and the Crisis of Skeptical Theism," in *Ethics and the Problem of Evil*, ed. James Sterba (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, forthcoming).

theists, who see God as “achieving his ultimate ends through creaturely free decisions,” Craig jokes that Reformed theologians favor a God who foresees that “libertarian free creatures” wouldn’t be worth the trouble and who instead decides “to actualize a world in which he himself determines everything that happens.” As seen by Molinists and open theists, he adds, God is “engaged in the same struggle against sin and suffering that we are”—in sharp contrast with “the all-determining God of Reformed theology, with respect to whom it becomes meaningless to speak of a difference between his direct and permissive will.”⁸

Calvin does indeed find in Scripture a God who is more active in shaping events than we easily imagine. In the biblical narrative of Joseph’s brothers murderously throwing Joseph in a pit to die, Calvin finds a God who does not merely “permit” their evil actions but who actively, directly, and intentionally shapes these actions. “You meant evil against me,” as Joseph much later told his brothers, “but God meant it for good” (Gen 50:20 NASB). While Calvin’s polemics against the permissive/direct distinction can be off-putting, serious Calvin scholarship shows them to be directed at misuses of the distinction by Epicureans and libertines of his own time. When we look beneath the polemics, we find Calvin—with “much subtlety and intuitive sensitivity,” as Neal Judisch puts it—forging a “Calvinian Thomism” that refurbishes the distinctive *concursum* metaphysics pioneered by Thomas Aquinas.⁹

Let’s call this the Reformed Concurrentist model. On the model, I am excited to find, Calvin fully affirms the creature-causative powers of created things—including the power by which human beings, gifted with “will,” make choices. What the model insists—its core insight—is that there is a unique metaphysical relation by which, in the bringing about of *every* natural event/action in our universe, the Creator-causative role of the Creator “co-operates” or acts in *concursum* with the powers with which the creatures are gifted. But on the model, their causal roles and motivations remain different from God’s. God’s Creator-causal role does

⁸In contrast to Craig, Oord says Calvin is right on this point—but he then derives from Calvin’s point exactly the opposite conclusion as does Calvin!

⁹Neal Judisch, “Calvinian Thomism: Providence, Conservation and Concurrence in the Thought of John Calvin,” *Called to Communion*, March 13, 2009, www.calledto communion.com/2009/03/calvinian-thomism-providence-conservation-concurrence-in-the-thought-of-john-calvin/.

“bring it about” that (say) Joseph’s brothers would first murderously decide to leave Joseph in a pit to die, and then relent ever so slightly. But God’s causal role does not, on the model, make this any less than 100 percent *their* deed. Nor does it mean that God was anything less than appalled by their wrongdoing. The Reformed Concurrentist model, then, enables Reformed theology to see God as actively sovereign in all events and actions, while still giving “secondary causes”—including human will—their due. It also enables Calvinists—along with Molinists and open theists—to see God as fully engaged in the struggle against injustice, sin, and suffering.¹⁰ I thus commend Reformed Concurrentism as a neglected constructive model worthy of further exploration.¹¹ While Craig might have meant his remarks to Calvin for evil, God meant them to Calvin—and me—for good.

SKEPTICAL THEISM RECONSIDERED

Skeptical theism, aiming to block difficult atheistic arguments, can easily neglect the need for big-picture answers. I honor my friends’ models for addressing this need. But those difficult arguments can also help us see questions—and gaps—that big-picture models sometimes hide. And these questions and gaps arise in the life of faith itself. Returning to Wolterstorff’s *Lament for a Son*, I find this passage:

Faith endures; but my address to God is uncomfortably, perplexingly, altered. It’s off-target, qualified. I want to ask for Eric back. But I can’t. So I aim around the bulls-eye. I want to ask that God protect the members of my family. But I asked that for Eric.

Of course you must ask God to protect them, I want to say—it’s in the prayer our Lord taught us: “Deliver us from evil.” But if God actively *does* that, must he not have some *particular* reason when he seems *not* to do it? And so we cry out, “Why didn’t you, God, on *this* occasion?”¹²

¹⁰Here see Nicholas Wolterstorff, “The Wounds of God: Calvin’s Theology of Social Justice,” *The Reformed Journal* 37, no. 6 (June 1987): 14-22.

¹¹For a starting point richly connecting Reformed Concurrentism to both history and current analytic philosophy, see Luke Van Horn’s “On Incorporating Middle Knowledge into Calvinism: A Theological/Metaphysical Muddle,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 55, no. 4 (2012): 807-27.

¹²Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 70.

But if faith allows this cry, it must spread out to all other particulars. Just so, Wolterstorff's lament spreads out:

How is faith to endure, O God, when you allow all this scraping and tearing on us? You have allowed rivers of blood to flow, mountains of suffering to pile up, sobs to become humanity's song—all without lifting a finger that we could see. You have allowed bonds of love to be painfully snapped. If you have not abandoned us, explain yourself.¹³

To cling to Immanuel God In-It-with-Us then exacts this price: that when we sit on the mourners' bench, all these hardest particularist questions come swarming in. When God sits with us, we interrogate him—and in his silences new questions swarm in. When the models of my friends seem to leave no gaps, it might be because they quash so many real questions. And by this conversation over models we thus glimpse a spiritual role for skeptical theism: of helping us toward that stillness wherein we might sense a Presence beyond all models.¹⁴

¹³Ibid., 80.

¹⁴I thank Nick Wolterstorff and Kelly James Clark for their helpful fireside feedback on a much-extended version of this essay.