

PROVIDENCE AND MYSTERY:  
FROM *OPEN THEISM* TO NEW APPROACHES

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**Abstract:** In the recent debate on Christian theism, the position called Open Theism (OT) tries to solve the dilemma of omniscience and human freedom. In OT, the key word of the human-divine relationship is “risk”: in his relationship with us, God is a risk-taker in that he adapts his plan to human decisions and to the situations that arise from them. “Risk” is the fundamental characteristic of any true love relationship. According to OT, God has no exhaustive knowledge of how humans will use their will, and the divine plan for this world is not seen as fixed for eternity. OT distinguishes between *meticulous providence* and *general providence* and denies that the former can exist. After illustrating these positions and a particular view of OT called *essential kenosis*, I highlight some of their weaknesses and conclude by asking whether the concept of *mystery* (at least in some of its possible interpretations: I outline four “solutions”) can enable a reconciliation between classical theism and OT. By applying an approach to the notion of mystery usually connected to the Trinity, I show that the dilemma of omniscience, human freedom and providence does not compromise the plausibility of theism.

**Keywords:** Open Theism; essential kenosis; meticulous providence; mystery; omniscience

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## 1. *Why start from Open Theism*

Open Theism (OT) has become a widespread and well-known theory in the Anglo-American context and, increasingly, also in Italy<sup>1</sup>. Recent publications testify that this theory is considered an essential reference by analytic philosophers of religion<sup>2</sup>, whether they support or criticize it. It therefore seems appropriate, for those interested in the theme of providence (at least in the context of contemporary analytic philosophy of religion), to start from OT as the culmination of a reflection that presupposes (and takes its distance from) the long tradition of Classical Theism (CT) and is at the same time the manifestation of unsolved and perhaps unsolvable theoretical problems. An introduction to this doctrine is available online<sup>3</sup> – assuming that a univocal version can be extrapolated from the set of proposals put forward by many authors<sup>4</sup>. In the first part of this essay I summarise only the fundamental concepts, updating the bibliography where possible and analysing in particular a recently developed position known as essential kenosis (EK).

I then outline a few criticisms of this position in order to show how the introduction of the concept of mystery – at least in one of its definitions – could offer a way to reconcile CT and OT. When addressed from the perspective of OT, the theme of providence inevitably becomes intertwined – as has often happened in history – with that of omniscience. Moreover, the set of perspectives that we currently label as “Open Theism” came to life precisely from the discussion of this divine attribute, to which every other divine property must necessarily refer.

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<sup>2</sup> See for example the essays by De Florio, Frigerio and Micheletti in D. Bertini, D. Migliorini (eds), *Relations. Ontology and Philosophy of Religion*, Mimesis International, Verona 2018.

<sup>3</sup> D. Migliorini, *Il Dio che “rischia” e che “cambia”*. *Introduzione all’Open Theism*, “Nuovo Giornale di Filosofia della Religione” (online), 2018, 8, <https://journals.uniurb.it/index.php/NGFR/article/view/3172> (07\03\2022); see J. Rissler, *Open Theism*, in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://iep.utm.edu/o-theism/#:~:text=Open%20Theism%20is%20the%20thesis,freely%20do%20in%20the%20future>.

<sup>4</sup> According to Arbour’s introduction to B.H. Arbour, K. Timpe (eds), *Philosophical Essays Against Open Theism*, (Routledge, London 2018) and to his included essay (*A Few Worries About the Systematic Metaphysics of Open Future Open Theism*, pp. 45-67) it does not seem exaggerated to say that there are as many *open theisms* as there are *open theists*.

## 2. *The general theses on providence of Open Theism*

The central claim of OT, Rice writes, is that God's experience of the world is open rather than closed: time is real to God and his experience consists in the infallible and progressive registration of temporal reality<sup>5</sup>. The future, then, is just as essentially indefinite from God's perspective as it is from ours.

According to Rhoda, OT refers to at least five kinds of openness<sup>6</sup> (causal, alethic, epistemic, ontic and providential). In the case of providential openness – the theme of this essay – the key word of the human-divine relationship is *risk*: God takes risks in the relationship with us and adapts his plan to human choices<sup>7</sup>. If God's decisions depend on the response of free creatures, then creating and ruling the world is indeed a risky business for him<sup>8</sup>.

According to OT, risk is the fundamental characteristic of any love relationship<sup>9</sup>, because only where there is freedom is there also love. With respect to freedom, many OT supporters adopt the so-called *libertarian thesis* or *libertarianism*, according to which an agent acts with free will only if the act is not causally determined by something external to her subject, if the agent has the *possibility to do otherwise* and if her intellect and her will are the sole and ultimate sources (or primary causes) of her act<sup>10</sup>. The ensuing OT theory of providence, according to Basinger, is based on the following theses: the creation *from nothing* and the possibility for God to intervene unilaterally in the world; the creation of a human being who is free in the libertarian sense of the adjective<sup>11</sup> (over whom God has no total control); God's respect for this

<sup>5</sup> R. Rice, *God's Foreknowledge and Man's Free Will*, Wipf and Stock, Eugene 2004, pp. 25-26.

<sup>6</sup> A.R. Rhoda, *The Fivefold Openness of the Future*, in W. Hasker, T. Oord, D. Zimmerman (eds), *God in an Open Universe*, Pickwick, Eugene 2011, p. 92.

<sup>7</sup> C. Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God: a Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, 1994, p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> C. Pinnock, *The Grace of God and the Will of Man*, Bethany House, Bloomington 1995, p. 197; for the most recent work by W. Hasker, see: *Future Truth and Freedom*, "International Journal for Philosophy of Religion", 2012, 90\2, pp. 109-119, where the author presents a different solution from those he has defended so far.

<sup>9</sup> See R. Rice, *God's Foreknowledge*, cit., p. 42.

<sup>10</sup> It is not the only possible definition, as there is a wide discussion on what characterizes a libertarian position. See: T. O'Connor, Ch. Franklin, *Free Will*, in E.N. Zalta (ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (online)*, 2022, URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2022/entries/freewill/>>.

<sup>11</sup> See L. Zagzebski, *The Dilemma of Freedom and Foreknowledge*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1996.

freedom even if it produces undesirable results (gratuitous evil); the possibility for God to be affected by what happens to us, as a loving father; and the lack, on God's part, of an exhaustive knowledge of how humans will use their will<sup>12</sup>.

The first of these theses is what differentiates OT from other – albeit similar – theories such as Process Theism (PT)<sup>13</sup>, where God increases with the world. In PT, God is a relational interconnection and acts and suffers with the entities of the world<sup>14</sup>, while in OT the only thing that evolves in God is his knowledge: the world remains ontologically distinct from God. However, OT does not necessarily support the thesis of God's possible unilateral intervention in creation. Oord, for example, rejects this idea (as we will see when retracing his position in section 3).

The account of providence characterized by God's dynamic experience of the world was developed in what is widely considered the essential reference on this question: *The God Who Risks. A Theology of Divine Providence* by John Sanders<sup>15</sup>. Its fundamental philosophical premises – including the claim that God is not timeless and the defence of “dynamic omniscience”<sup>16</sup> (after the alleged failure of ockhamism, molinism, or the boethian solution) – have become “classic” in OT, just like his theses on providence (although several authors have proposed variations of Sanders' vision). In general, OT does not consider the divine plan for this world as fixed and determined once and for all by God, because divine purposes are dynamically implemented<sup>17</sup>. By adapting to the free choices of human beings, divine plans can change. OT then distinguishes: (1) God's ultimate goals for the world (fixed for eternity); and (2) the courses of action that he undertakes to achieve them (dynamic). God can prepare a general plan that goes from the moment of creation to the recapitulation of all things – as indicated in the theses listed above – but he does not plan all the intermediary stages. The only certainties are the beginning and the end.

<sup>12</sup> Basinger in C. Pinnock, *The Openness of God: a Biblical Challenge*, cit., p. 156.

<sup>13</sup> For a summary, see D. Viney, *Process Theism*, in E.N. Zalta (eds), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (online)*, 2018, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/process-theism/> (07/03/2022).

<sup>14</sup> P. Clayton, *The God Who Is (not) One*, in C. Boesel, A. Wesley (eds), *Divine Multiplicity: Trinities, Diversities, and the Nature of Relation*, Fordham Univ. Press, New York 2013, pp. 19-37.

<sup>15</sup> J. Sanders, *The God Who Risks: a Theology of Divine Providence*, Intervarsity Press, Westmont 1998.

<sup>16</sup> For an analysis of these premises, see D. Migliorini, *Il Dio che “rischia” e che “cambia”*, cit.

<sup>17</sup> R. Rice, *God's Foreknowledge*, cit., p. 65. A precursor, almost always forgotten, of an evolutionary idea of providence, could be Irenaeus (see: B. Benats, *Il ritmo trinitario della verità, la teologia di Ireneo di Lione*, Città Nuova, Roma 2006; G. Bentivenga, *Economia di salvezza e creazione nel pensiero di S. Ireneo*, Herder, Roma 1973).

About God's ability to execute his plan with certainty (*security of control*), Sanders and OT authors distinguish between a God who is:

*risk-free*: everything that happens, happens in accordance with God's intentions<sup>18</sup>;  
and

*a risk-taker*: God engages in courses of action without having complete knowledge of the results. This is due to the choice of creating creatures endowed with significant freedom (libertarian thesis) and who are capable, therefore, of producing even gratuitous evil not foreseen by God<sup>19</sup>.

They also distinguish between:

*meticulous providence*: God foresees and intervenes in every single event in the world, even the smallest one<sup>20</sup>;  
and

*general providence*: God only foresees the general course of history and has an overall strategy and plan<sup>21</sup> but does not interfere with the evolution of creation.

OT openly rejects meticulous providence<sup>22</sup> but admits general providence. A recurring analogy<sup>23</sup> is that of the chess players, proposed by Geach to ensure that, despite the freedom enjoyed by God's creatures (the players) and the indefiniteness of the future, God (a player) maintains general control over creation<sup>24</sup>. The theatre director or the leader of a group of climbers<sup>25</sup> have also been used as analogies, bearing in mind that these analogies claim that the

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<sup>18</sup> W. Hasker, *How good/bad is Middle Knowledge? A reply to Basinger*, "International Journal for Philosophy of Religion", 1993, 33\2, pp. 111-118, here p. 114.

<sup>19</sup> D. Basinger, *Middle Knowledge and Divine Control: Some Clarifications*, "International Journal for Philosophy of Religion", 1991, 30, pp. 129-139, here p. 135.

<sup>20</sup> According to Hasker, with this providence God ensures that no case of wickedness is permitted without the generation of a greater good (W. Hasker, *God, Time and Knowledge*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1989, p. 203).

<sup>21</sup> This providence, according to Hasker, allows the occurrence of individual cases of wickedness which, as such, are pure evil (*ibid.*, p. 204).

<sup>22</sup> See for example: A.R. Rhoda, *Gratuitous Evil and Divine Providence*, "Religious Studies", 2010, 46\3, pp. 281-302; *Id.*, *Open Theism and Other Models of Divine Providence*, in J. Diller, A. Kasher (eds), *Models of God and Alternative Ultimate Realities*, Springer, Heidelberg 2013, pp. 287-298.

<sup>23</sup> R. Rice, *God's Foreknowledge*, *cit.*, p. 63; J. Sanders, *The God Who Risks: a Theology of Divine Providence*, *cit.*, p. 243.

<sup>24</sup> P. Geach, *Providence and Evil*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1977, p. 58.

<sup>25</sup> See J. Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, *cit.*, p. 229; for many others: A.R. Rhoda, *Beyond the Chess Master Analogy. Game Theory and Divine Providence*, in T.J. Oord (eds), *Creation Made Free: Open Theology Engaging Science*, Wipf & Stock, Eugene, 2009, pp. 153-160.

course of the game has not been already decided but that God's final victory is guaranteed<sup>26</sup>, and that He is the one who decides the rules of the game<sup>27</sup>.

The chess analogy also means that God has the ability to integrate everything within his plan<sup>28</sup>, even gratuitous evil<sup>29</sup>. In the game of life, therefore, God can sometimes decide for himself what will happen, but he usually modifies his plan to accommodate the free choices of his creatures<sup>30</sup>. In the chess model, God the risk-taker is "playing" against humans and therefore takes risks: the human players' moves may not be what He desires and, as a loving master, he may deplore the mistakes of the players, be compassionate towards their limited abilities and willing to give them a further chance rather than proceed with checkmate (the final victory). He risks being rejected by humans and suffering from the pains that humans inflict on other creatures.

As we can see, the theme of *gratuitous evil* is correlated to that of providence, since God should intervene providentially to avoid this type of evil (negative actions or events that have no reason to exist, not even in virtue of a higher good<sup>31</sup>). OT offers a solution to this problem: Sanders invites us, for example, to move from *free will defence* to *the logic of love defence*, according to which evil is a side effect of a choice of love that takes concrete form in the creation of free human beings with whom God can establish a relationship of true friendship<sup>32</sup>. If God intervened in human choices, he would radically alter the initial conditions of his project, including the existence of a free, spontaneous creature, configured as a co-creator<sup>33</sup> who contributes to the divine design by her choices and actions.

OT therefore rejects *meticulous providence* as a manipulative vision of the human-divine relationship, while *general providence* guarantees a relation of personal friendship (*logic of love*). The God of OT is the God of the real possibilities offered to humans<sup>34</sup>: given his infinite knowledge of all that is past and present, God takes a wise risk, but a risk nevertheless<sup>35</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> See J. Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, cit., p. 244.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

<sup>28</sup> R. Rice, *God's Foreknowledge*, cit., p. 68.

<sup>29</sup> J. Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, cit., p. 192.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174.

<sup>31</sup> See R. Rice, *God's Foreknowledge*, cit., p. 71.

<sup>32</sup> J. Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, cit., p. 268.

<sup>33</sup> R. Rice, *God's Foreknowledge*, cit., p. 37.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 92-93.

<sup>35</sup> G. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids 2000, p. 57.

Another theme connected to the question of providence is *grace*. Sanders points out that God's justice cannot involve damning someone, otherwise God's justice would be dependent on the actions of bad people<sup>36</sup>. Loving a person implies allowing the possibility that she may place herself, by her will, outside of the relationship<sup>37</sup>. The reprobation of the sinner, from this point of view, is the respect of her conscious decision. Here Sanders introduces the concept of *conditional election*: God agrees to be conditioned by the actions of humans also regarding their election<sup>38</sup>.

Where a libertarian definition of freedom is accepted, therefore, there can be no *efficacious grace* – coercive, unalterable and irresistible. An “irresistible grace” would be an oxymoron. There can only be *sufficient grace*, that is, a prior decision of God to enter a relationship with humans. Grace is an invitation and a choice of God in favour of humans, which they can accept by collaborating with it. Human beings can decide, however, to place themselves outside this grace by their choices<sup>39</sup>.

Finally, according to OT, if God possessed a meticulous providence, he could not really answer the prayers, since the latter would depend on God's eternal plan and not the other way round<sup>40</sup>. A supporter of OT would also affirm that a free creature is such because she can ask for assistance from God<sup>41</sup>, who intervenes if the request comes from a person of faith, thus respecting her freedom. Divine activity then depends temporally (and logically) on our petitionary prayers. Our prayers make a difference because God is in a personal relationship with us and responds to us<sup>42</sup>.

### 3. Providence and “essential kenosis”: a recent model

Building on Sanders' positions, Thomas Oord – today one of the best-known supporters of OT and director of the *Center for Open and Relational Theology*<sup>43</sup> – proposes his own version of God's providential action from a

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<sup>36</sup> J. Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, cit., p. 253.

<sup>37</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 256.

<sup>39</sup> Sanders would say that grace resembles a dance: J. Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, cit., p. 257.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., pp. 278-279.

<sup>41</sup> C. Pinnock, *The Openness of God*, cit., p. 158.

<sup>42</sup> J. Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, cit., pp. 280-81; see R. Collins, *Prayer and Open Theism: A Participatory, Co-Creator Model*, in W. Hasker, T. Oord, D. Zimmerman (eds), *God in an Open Universe*, cit., pp. 161-186.

<sup>43</sup> See: <https://c4ort.com/>

relational and open perspective. He compares the God-world-creature relationship to *jazz*<sup>44</sup>, a melody with a fair amount of improvisation<sup>45</sup>. Oord proposes a critical radicalization of Sanders' position. Oord's fundamental objections to him is that in Sanders' account "love does not come first". Where the attribute of love prevails, God cannot exercise meticulous providence, not because he *does not want* to – as claimed by Sanders – but because *he cannot* do so. Oord's position is therefore a radicalization of Sanders', which, while certainly illuminating and correct, he does not consider as complete. Let me elaborate.

According to Oord, a generic *open and relational theology* (ORT) accepts at least three theses: (1) that God and creatures are related: God is influenced by creation and is relational; (2) the future is not determined and not even God knows it perfectly; (3) love is the main attribute of God. This set of positions, Oord continues, is fundamental to understanding God's providence<sup>46</sup>. Specifically, he proposes a version of ORT called EK, which is placed at the centre of a spectrum of conceptions of providence. At the two opposite ends of this spectrum we find the "omni-causal" God and the "indifferent" God<sup>47</sup>.

The premise of the EK model – which also draws inspiration from Polkinghorne's work<sup>48</sup> – is that in the world there is genuine human freedom and a coexistence of chaotic and regular physical processes: in other words, there is structural *ontological openness*<sup>49</sup>. God created order from chaos, but he did not eliminate the *structural indeterminism* of nature. God constantly directs this order and, through his love, pushes indeterminacy towards form; but a serious doctrine of providence cannot deny – according to Oord – the chaotic aspects (randomness) of reality that still exist and freedom as we experience it<sup>50</sup>. ORT then affirms the coexistence of *genuine randomness* and

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<sup>44</sup> T.J. Oord, *Open and Relational Theology*, SacraSage, Grasmere 2021, p. 28.

<sup>45</sup> J. Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, cit., p. 245.

<sup>46</sup> Oord offers a summary of the countless publications on the question of providence and relational theology that have appeared in other Christian denominations (and related journals): T. Oord, *The Uncontrolling Love of God. An Open and Relational Account of Providence*, InterVarsity, Downers Grove 2015, pp. 113-112.

<sup>47</sup> T. Oord, *The Uncontrolling Love of God*, cit., p. 83.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 120-129.

<sup>50</sup> See P. Göcke, *Did God Know It? God's Relation to a World of Chance and Randomness*, "International Journal for Philosophy of Religion", 2015, 78\2, pp. 233-254. A few articles on OT and the multiverse: T. Blank, *The Open Theistic Multiverse*, "Philosophia Christi",



*lawlike regularity*. Both are essential and current aspects of the cosmos that can be neither denied nor reduced to each other. EK sees the universe as an open system contained in a larger system – the Divine Matrix (the system of systems), which, through grace, permeates the universe as a whole and affects its parts, while being influenced by the parts in an inextricable circularity<sup>51</sup>. God is a kind of “attractor” capable of continually bringing chaos to higher forms of organization<sup>52</sup>. This implies that in God there must be a kenosis of his power and knowledge, since He can only attract towards an end, but not completely determine and control creation.

According to some OT supporters, an entity capable of indeterminism (a human with free will) can emerge only from a physical structure characterized by causal indeterminism. The purpose of the universe, then, would be to make morality possible<sup>53</sup> – a result that can be achieved only by degrees: from an indeterministic substratum, natural selection begins by rewarding the development of life forms; then of life forms capable of social behaviour (empathy); and finally, of those capable of intelligent and moral behaviour. Intelligent, moral and free life would therefore be the result of the combined and random action of “microscopic indeterminism” and “selective indeterminism”: the first is the reason for the second and, at the same time, for its result (a being capable of freedom). The indeterministic world, therefore, would enable the emergence of the soul, as claimed by Hasker<sup>54</sup>. In the logic of love, central to OT, the personal relationship between God and a free and conscious person is the purpose of creation for which God makes a gift of himself (in various forms of kenosis). Consequently, the world’s indeterminism is necessary for the subsequent emergence of the soul and human freedom. But indeterminism itself implies that God has no control over the world. The link between freedom and indeterminism, in EK, obviously leads to a wider problem – which we cannot fully address here – about the nature of freedom as such. Some authors criticise the indeterministic position

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2018, 20\2, pp. 429-441; E.R. Crozat, *Does Open Theism Explain God’s Planning of Creation?*, “*Philosophia Christi*”, 2019, 21, pp. 407-417.

<sup>51</sup> T.J. Oord, *The Uncontrolling Love of God*, cit., p. 283 e pp. 306-307.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 286. According to Russell, for example, God creates order from quantum chaos, i.e. he creates order through the properties of chaos (R.J. Russell, *Quantum Physics in Philosophical and Theological Perspective*, [1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1988], in R.J. Russell et al. (eds), *Physics, Philosophy and Theology*, Vatican Observatory Foundation, Città del Vaticano 1997, pp. 343-374).

<sup>53</sup> T.J. Oord, *An Open Theology Doctrine of Creation and Solution to the Problem of Evil*, in *Id.*, *Creation Made Free*, cit., p. 33.

<sup>54</sup> W. Hasker, *The Need for a Bigger God*, in *Id.* (ed.), *God in an Open Universe*, cit., p. 24.

of libertarianism as a form of causal determinism, since the agent does not act for her will, but “follows” indeterministic processes without being able to orient them<sup>55</sup>.

In Oord’s account, kenosis is not intended as a *voluntary* self-limitation of God. In this, Oord clearly distinguishes himself from Polkinghorne. Oord’s EK model states that the “gift of oneself” (as the word “kenosis” is understood by the author) is the primary attribute of the divine essence. This attribute is necessary and eternal, and therefore does not correspond to a voluntary choice: God must love, and *kenotic love is his nature*. This implies that he necessarily creates the free human being and a free nature<sup>56</sup>. This justifies the existence of gratuitous evil, whose presence in the world, as we have seen, is undeniable according to OT. Although many evils find no rational explanation, God does not intervene: he is so good as to be kenotic, having granted true freedom to his creatures and the world (in the form of indeterminism). God therefore has no faults: the responsibility for gratuitous evil lies entirely with his creatures. *God cannot intervene* because otherwise he would contradict his own nature.

The connection between the questions of providence and gratuitous evil emerges even more clearly here. Much of what OTR argues about providence stems from the “problem of evil”. To most of these authors, the “classic” solutions to this problem are not sufficient: to save Christian theism, it is better to turn to dynamic omniscience, to the kenotic essence and to the vision of providence that derives from these two elements combined.

In EK God cannot unilaterally prevent gratuitous evil for two essential reasons: he does not have complete control over creation (since the indeterminism present in it is consequent to the very nature of a loving God who could only create it in this way) and he has no control over humans (created necessarily free, out of love). If God is love, he loves without controlling. This God is not a God who “chooses” not to intervene to block an evil action or a natural catastrophe, but a God who cannot intervene, since his non-intervention is implied by his nature. God cannot take away the freedom given to humans and nature. Therefore, an *uncontrolling God* is no longer guilty of the evil produced by his creatures. In the EK model God cannot be coercive, in the sense of acting as a sufficient cause or of unilaterally determining created entities.

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<sup>55</sup> See T. O’Connor, Ch. Franklin, *Free Will*, cit.; see also R. Kane, *On the Role of Indeterminism in Libertarian Free Will*, “Philosophical Explorations”, 2015, 19, pp. 2-16.

<sup>56</sup> T.J. Oord, *The Uncontrolling Love of God*, cit., p. 94.

To Oord, this is the only perspective that can fully “solve” the problem of evil. Even with regard to the evil produced by natural events (e.g., a hurricane), the causal openness (indeterminism) of the world allows us to hypothesize a *free-process defence*<sup>57</sup>: “free” physical processes (because they are indeterminate), combined with human free will, create situations of pain, but both are necessary to creation<sup>58</sup> and not fully controllable by God.

The EK model, however, does not claim that God never intervenes in the world. Oord firmly asserts – against supporters of PT such as Philip Clayton<sup>59</sup> – that God can do miracles. As mentioned in the second paragraph, this thesis distinguishes OT from PT, since in the latter God depends on the world and can never miraculously intervene. At most, in PT, God acts in the universe through persuasion<sup>60</sup>. However, despite the firmness with which the thesis is proclaimed, even in EK a God who controls neither creation nor humans must “hope” that they somehow “respond” to his persuasive call. Obviously, difficulties arise here: how microorganisms and physical particles can “oppose” or “respond positively” to the action of God remains quite mysterious, even in EK.

It seems that we must ultimately refer to a mysterious action of God, whose efficacy is unpredictable even for Him. The possibility of performing miracles is therefore compromised. Oord argues, however, that the claim that God cannot impose miracles, even though he sometimes manages to perform them, is better than that of CT, according to which God arbitrarily decides when to be good to someone<sup>61</sup>. However, the problems remain: OT, at least in the EK version, is not as radical as PT, but at the price of a precarious balance that seems an ambiguity.

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<sup>57</sup> T.J. Oord (eds), *The Polkinghorne Reader. Science, Faith and the Search for Meaning*, Templeton Press, West Conshohocken 2010, p. 73.

<sup>58</sup> G.L. Schaab, *Trinity in Relation: Creation, Incarnation, and Grace in an Evolving Cosmos*, Anselm Academic, Winona 2012, p. 202.

<sup>59</sup> T.J. Oord, *The Uncontrolling Love of God*, cit., p. 91.

<sup>60</sup> Or the more famous *Lure of God*, see A. Case-Winters, *Rethinking Divine Presence and Activity in World Process*, in T.J. Oord (ed.), *Creation Made Free*, cit., pp. 69-87.

<sup>61</sup> As it has been pointed out, many doctrines are connected to one another – with reciprocal gains and losses. It is therefore less a question of solving all the problems than of deciding which problems we prefer to live with: see C. De Florio, A. Frigerio, *Divine Foreknowledge and Providence Trade-offs between Human Freedom and Government of the Universe*, “Theologica” (online), 2021, 5 <https://ojs.uclouvain.be/index.php/theologica/article/view/55003> (07/03/2022); see Id., *Divine Omniscience and Human Free Will. A Logical and Metaphysical Analysis*, Palgrave, Cham, 2019.

#### 4. Criticisms of the account of providence in Open Theism

The criticisms moved to the general theses of OT<sup>62</sup> range from the excessive simplification of the traditional doctrine to the mystification of the biblical message<sup>63</sup>. Ware argues, for example, that in OT God becomes too similar to human beings and that the idea of risk makes him excessively immanent. The accusation is one of anthropomorphism: OT postulates a God that is too limited, diminished in his glory and magnificence. Similarly, Piper argues that the ignorance attributed to God by OT regarding human affairs is far greater than what OT admits<sup>64</sup>. Hasker responds to these criticisms by noting that God must be *big enough*<sup>65</sup> for the universe we know and that in order to measure the extent of “enough” it is necessary to understand what it means to be a “good leader”: a glorious God, Hasker argues, need not be obsessed with scrutinizing everything, but he may have a desire to bring the universe to its best possible state through a gradual and evolutionary process.

Another criticism concerns the metaphysical aspect: the vision of providence proposed by OT is based on the existence of dynamic omniscience, which in turn is based on the denial of the existence of the future (with respect to metaphysics of temporality, usually OT supporters are *A-theorists*; this is also a debated issue, which involves the metaphysical premises of OT itself, on which it is not possible to dwell in this work<sup>66</sup>). In the case of EK, dynamic omniscience is intrinsic to the kenotic nature of God, and not a choice of self-limitation. The problem here, however, is not whether God can limit his omniscience for logical reasons or out of love, but whether he can increase his knowledge when free – unforeseeable – actions are performed. This increase would imply a potentiality in God.

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<sup>62</sup> See D. Migliorini, *Il Dio che “rischia”*, cit.

<sup>63</sup> F. Yöney, *An Examination of the Biblical Evidence for Open Theism*, “*Heythrop Journal*”, 2020, 61\2, pp. 253-266; R.L. Thomas, *The Hermeneutics of “Open Theism”*, “*The Master’s Seminary Journal*”, 2001, 12\2, pp. 179-202; S.J. Wellum, *The Openness of God: a critical Assessment*, “*Reformation&Revival*”, 2001, 10, pp. 137-60, here p. 153.

<sup>64</sup> J. Piper, *The Enormous Ignorance of God*, 1997 (online), <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-enormous-ignorance-of-god> (10\03\2022).

<sup>65</sup> W. Hasker, *The Need for a Bigger God*, in W. Hasker (ed.), *God in an Open Universe*, cit.

<sup>66</sup> For an overview, see: D. Zimmermann, *The A-theory of Time, Presentism, and Open Theism*, in M. Y. Stewart (ed.), *Science and Religion in Dialogue*, Wiley-Blackwell, Malden 2010, pp. 791-809.

Usually, OT claims that God can conceivably pass from one degree of perfection to another<sup>67</sup>: God knows everything that is possible to know up to the present moment; therefore, with respect to every moment, God is perfect. According to OT, perfection does not consist in knowing the truth of all propositions, but in knowing the truth of all propositions that have truth value. Those concerning the future, having not yet been verified by the future itself (according to the A-theory of the time), have no truth value and therefore God is not required to know them. This “logical limitation” is intrinsically reasonable but implies that, in order to increase his knowledge, God should change and therefore have a potentiality, with all the difficulties that this entails. A classical theist might object that every characteristic of God constitutes his nature and therefore, if God’s knowledge is potential, God himself is potential.

God’s incremental knowledge implies a *structural potentiality*, essential (in the case of EK) to God. In order to solve this problem, many supporters of OT, including Oord, use Hartshorne’s famous distinction between *existence* and *actuality*<sup>68</sup>. God would be “Pure Act” in the sense that he necessarily exists (existence) and thus some aspects of his nature would be immutable. Other aspects, like knowledge, are changing and evolving (actuality). However, this is a problematic position, at least from the point of view of a classical theist<sup>69</sup>, since one cannot so easily distinguish two “parts” of God’s nature and separate, for example, God’s knowledge (potential, incremental) from his nature (necessary). Distinguishing two “parts” of God’s nature – thus ensuring that some parts of God have certain characteristics while others have different ones – implies denying absolute divine simplicity<sup>70</sup>. In order to safeguard the libertarian model, OT is willing to support this denial. Here, then, dynamic omniscience sweeps away all the classical attributes of God. As for the objection of CT supporters, namely that essence and existence coincide in God, and so he is either entirely act or entirely potentiality, OT

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<sup>67</sup> This position is also supported by R. Swinburne: see D. Migliorini, *Faith and Philosophy: Richard Swinburne and the Analytic Philosophy of Religion – An Interview*, “Philosophical Investigations”, 2021, 44\4, pp. 345-371.

<sup>68</sup> For example: T.J. Oord, *Open and Relational Theology*, cit., p. 41.

<sup>69</sup> Stump, for example, believes that we cannot give up simplicity, but that we must correctly grasp the way in which Aquinas understands it. According to her, God can be absolutely simple even if he truly responds to the free actions of creatures, because the act of knowing does not imply passibility (see E. Stump, *The God of the Bible and the God of the Philosophers*, cit., pp. 77-97).

<sup>70</sup> D. Migliorini, *Il Dio che “rischia”*, cit.

would reply that some properties of God (such as his absolute goodness) are immutable, while others (such as his knowledge) change.

Here we note a profound disagreement between OT and CT: supporters of CT believe that one must first justify the existence of God – the logical conditions that determine his existence – and, in order to do so, affirm that he is absolutely simple<sup>71</sup>, necessary, perfect, immutable and eternal. Without these characteristics we would not actually be talking about God, but about any other created entity. Supporters of OT, on the other hand, do not start from the logical conditions of the existence of God, but discuss single attributes starting from a single issue (freedom or evil), going so far as to “sacrifice” the attributes that CT considers indispensable (simplicity, for example)<sup>72</sup>.

As we can see, OT tries to avoid affirming that God is pure potentiality, as happens in PT, where God is defined as Creativity. The latter step is not even considered in the EK model or, in general, by any supporter of OT. However, this fundamental metaphysical question cannot remain ambiguous. Is it then possible to conceive of God as potentiality rather than as Pure Act? Can God be infinite potentiality and therefore be in constant dynamism, without becoming the creativity of PT, with all the apophases it entails<sup>73</sup>? Can we think of dynamism as fulfilment and self-realization through generation and creation, even in the case of God? OT may be able to do so without turning into PT, but at the price of an ambiguous use of the words it uses to describe God. Power, act, fulfilment, eternity, simplicity, perfection (etc.) would be symbols used to talk about God without however grasping his true nature. We will return to this point at the end of the essay.

With respect to the idea of God as a “risk-taker”, Stump argues that the God of Aquinas is actually a God who takes risks<sup>74</sup>, but this does not force one to abandon CT. Stump insists that the doctrines of eternity and simplicity, if correctly understood, solve the problem of compatibility between omni-

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<sup>71</sup> Stump’s position is emblematic: see E. Stump, *The God of the Bible and the God of the Philosophers*, cit., pp. 101-104.

<sup>72</sup> See M. Micheletti, *Radical Divine Alterity and the God-World Relationship*, in D. Bertini, D. Migliorini (eds), *Relations*, cit., pp. 166-169.

<sup>73</sup> About the problems of PT, see M.A. Pugliese, *The One, the Many, and the Trinity: Joseph A. Bracken and the Challenge of Process Metaphysics*, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington 2010.

<sup>74</sup> E. Stump, *The Openness of God: Eternity and Free Will*, in B.H. Arbour, K. Timpe (eds), *Philosophical Essays*, cit., pp. 21-36, here p. 36, note 26. Stump considers and criticises some positions of OT also in *The God of the Bible and the God of the Philosophers*, Marquette University Press, Milwaukee 2016.

science and human freedom. According to her, OT would be useful only to those who have not fully understood the CT developed by Aquinas.

Welty, instead, tries to show that OT is not as advantageous as other alternatives. According to OT supporters, gratuitous evil could not exist if God had meticulous providence. If there were such an evil, God could not have that kind of providence. Welty points out, however, that in the OT system gratuitous evil is functional to God's plan and choice of giving freedom to humans. At this point, the evil is no longer gratuitous but exists in function of a greater good. If for every evil there is a reason why God should allow it, no evil would be "gratuitous". Therefore, once the evidence of the existence of gratuitous evil is removed, there is no need to remove the meticulous providence that justifies it<sup>75</sup>.

Welty also argues that the idea of providence proposed by OT is no less meticulous than other theisms. He calls it a *meticulish* providence. Of course, at the beginning of creation God does not know how human history will unfold. However, when every single human action is about to take place, God knows all the past and all the present: he knows perfectly well how to intervene, because human actions are almost always predictable when all the inclinations of humans are precisely known just before a choice is made. God would then be able to foresee gratuitous evil a moment before it is done, and he could intervene<sup>76</sup>. Curiously, opponents of OT accuse this form of theism of proposing a God that is both too ignorant and too wise.

Finally, according to Welty, the God of OT risks little for himself, but makes his creatures take a great risk (that of being subject to gratuitous evil)<sup>77</sup>. Indeed, one could add, if the God of OT does actually control very little – not even whether what He creates is really the best of all possible worlds – being supremely good, out of caution he should not create anything at all because his creative choice could lead to creating the worst of all possible worlds.

We have seen some general criticisms of the account of providence proposed by OT, which may also apply to EK. Let us now focus, more specifically, on the thesis of EK, presented by its supporters as the "most complete" view of providence that one can elaborate. First, the use made of scientific discoveries in EK appears rather problematic. As mentioned above, the kenotic model is based on indeterminism at the microscopic level. The fact

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<sup>75</sup> G. Welty, *Open Theism, Risk-taking, and the Problem of Evil*, in B.H. Arbour, K. Timpe (eds), *Philosophical Essays*, cit., pp. 140-158, here pp. 143-145.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 146-147.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 153-154.

that Quantum Physics and General Relativity imply radical indeterminism, however, is only one of the possible interpretations of the data we have. Currently, we are not certain about the ontological and metaphysical conclusions that we can draw from the – still very partial – physical discoveries concerning the microscopic world. According to Lewis<sup>78</sup>, the interpretation of quantum mechanics could even be an example of under-determination. This would mean that every interpretation of physical theories is a valid description of empirical data.

If this were the case, however – if indeed each interpretation corresponded to a profoundly different ontology<sup>79</sup> – we would be unable to extract a univocal ontology from physical theories. Basing an entire theological position on a possible but very uncertain philosophical interpretation of scientific discoveries would then be somewhat imprudent. The risk is that, as science and philosophy change, the corresponding theology would have to be thrown away. If the latter were presented as the only answer to the problem of evil (and of many other problems that afflict theism), theism itself would be at risk of collapse.

Furthermore, the way in which God can act and control an indeterministic reality remains very vague even in EK, although this approach is presented as the most complete relational theology. God “persuades” creation, but has no real power over it. God cannot stop a hurricane, even if he wanted to. If nature has an ineluctable kernel of indeterminacy, then God can never intervene with certainty. In this case, is it enough to say that he acts this way out of love? OT supporters think so, but one could argue that love can also prompt one to force others to avoid certain actions. If a friend is about to jump off a cliff to commit suicide, violence can be necessary to save them. If a friend has cancer, we may force them to go on chemo (which also “hurts”), even at the cost of being very strict with them. If God has no way of doing this, an uncontrolling God could by no means be a good friend. Moreover, how could a God who only “attracts” be sure to “win the game of chess” and “determine the rules of the game”?

### 5. *Providence and mystery: some new solutions*

As we have seen, it is difficult to choose between the solutions to the difficulties that emerge from the intertwining of omniscience and providence

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<sup>78</sup> P.J. Lewis, *Interpretations of Quantum Mechanics*, “Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy” (online), <http://www.iep.utm.edu/int-qm/> (11\10\2017).

<sup>79</sup> See D. Migliorini, *Ontologie relazionali e metafisica trinitaria*, Morcelliana, Brescia 2022.



(and the related “problem of evil”) suggested by CT and OT. The latter is somewhere halfway between CT and PT, taking from these theories what is functional to its own paradigm but neglecting their thornier metaphysical questions. The same consideration applies to EK, which presents a few aporias and difficulties, in particular about providence. In EK, the mode of action of a kenotic God who attempts to ensure the freedom of humans and nature is described but not really explained.

On the other hand, we have seen that the dilemma of omniscience, human freedom and providence challenges our understanding of the way in which God is existence, simplicity, pure and eternal act. In the case of OT, we are pushed to consider the coexistence in God of these attributes *alongside* their opposites, reconciling them in a divine character even prior to the Pure Act of “being love”. If PT has brought this operation to its logical consequences, accepting a potentiality in God in the form of Creativity, OT seems to maintain an ambiguous position (by rejecting process theology in its most radical outcomes). More specifically, the doctrines of providence of OT and EK still have problematic aspects, both in their individual theses and in relation to the metaphysics that should support them.

Although we cannot carry out a detailed critique of PT here, let us try, by hypothesis, to take this *undecidability* – that is, the impossibility of a clear choice between CT, PT and OT, as they all underline important aspects of the nature of God and leave many unsolved and unsolvable problems – as the inevitable outcome of the discussion, which also derives, in part, from metaphysical premises that are often undecidable and irreconcilable<sup>80</sup>. The criticisms and countercriticisms that CT, OT and PT move to one another do not seem sufficiently convincing. The value of these arguments could then lie in their heuristic function: they express a persisting tension in theology<sup>81</sup> between the need to make justice to the love of God, his providential power and omniscience, and to human freedom and the presence of gratuitous evil in the world. A tension that does not seem to disappear in any of the three theisms. The re-emergence, in contemporary analytical discussion, of the question of omniscience and freedom (and therefore of providence) may be due to the fact that no satisfactory answer has apparently been given in

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<sup>80</sup> For example, placing oneself in an A-theory of time conflicts with divine omniscience, but placing oneself in a B-theory of time implies a radical difficulty for a libertarian conception of human freedom. The disagreement between theisms also arises from the fact that there are no shared notions of omniscience and freedom.

<sup>81</sup> T.J. Oord (ed.), *The Polkinghorne Reader*, cit., p. 69.

Christian doctrine. Is this a dead end? Are there other paths to explore? Can the three theisms be understood together?

A *first solution* could be to adopt a position similar to the one developed by Aquinas (in the wake of a rich tradition) regarding the Trinity<sup>82</sup>: we have neither a rational demonstration nor a complete explanation of this dogma, but as long as we can neutralize the evidence of its contradiction, even in the absence of exhaustive explanations, the Trinity can be believed in as a true doctrine *ex suppositione*. The Trinity is, in this sense, *beyond* reason, but not *against* it. It is properly a *mystery of faith*.

In the same way, given that God exists and is necessarily omniscient, and given that human beings must be able to be free (in a libertarian sense), as long as the two concepts are not evidently contradictory they remain compatible – again – *ex suppositione*. We do not know exactly how (for example, we cannot completely explain how divine knowledge and its causation occur), but a doctrine that is not proven to be contradictory can continue to be believed in. In this case, all three theisms would be partial (and as such insufficient) attempts to explain a mystery that reason can never completely grasp. All three theisms develop different strategies to neutralize the perception of contradiction.

In the case of CT, some neutralization strategies – such as ockhamism, molinism<sup>83</sup>, or Stump’s notion of eternity<sup>84</sup> – are based on the concept of *divine knowledge*. Others try to re-define *human freedom* in a non-libertarian sense, developing a form of *compatibilism*, ascribable to CT (Anselm and Augustine are sometimes considered to be supporters of this position). In the case of OT, which considers these neutralizations unsatisfactory, the strategy consists in a logical limitation of omniscience, perfection and divine simplicity, and therefore in a re-definition of the *nature of God*. In the case of

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<sup>82</sup> See P. Porro, *Tommaso d’Aquino. Un profilo storico-filosofico*, Carocci, Roma 2017; see D. Migliorini, *Trinity and Mystery. Three Models for the Contemporary Debate in Analytic Philosophy of Religion*, in “Dialegesthai”, 2022, 24, online.

<sup>83</sup> See D. Migliorini, *L’ockhamismo nel dibattito analitico contemporaneo sull’onniscienza divina. Un bilancio*, “Laurentianum”, 2015, 56, pp. 33-86; Id., *Prospettive del molinismo nel dibattito contemporaneo sull’onniscienza divina*, “Verifiche”, 2015, 44, pp. 71-106.

<sup>84</sup> E. Stump - N. Kretzmann, *Eternity*, “The Journal of Philosophy”, 1981, 78, pp. 429-458; K. Rogers, *The Necessity of the Present and Anselm’s Eternalist Response to the Problem of Theological Fatalism*, “Religious studies”, 2007, 43\1, pp. 25-47. For a critical discussion: D. Migliorini, *La soluzione di Boezio nel dibattito contemporaneo sull’onniscienza divina: un bilancio*, “Rassegna di Teologia”, 2016, 57, pp. 15-53.

PT, this limitation implies also the explicit acceptance that God is Creativity (and is therefore an immanent God).

What do these strategies have in common is the unconscious belief that there can be a complete explanation of the doctrine. They all try to rationalize the mystery (acting on different points: knowledge of God, nature of God, types of human freedom) and therefore to completely explain it. Nevertheless, their mutual criticisms betray their internal fragility and partiality. They show that the theme of providence is one of the *mysteria of faith* that are *beyond* reason.

A *second solution* to avoid the perceived contradiction would consist in emphasizing the analogical use of the terms (as in the case of the Trinity<sup>85</sup>), recognizing, for example, that the *God's knowledge* is qualitatively different from the human one and that we have only an analogical concept, never completely precise, even of *human freedom*. Given the inevitable analogical use of the terms, therefore, we would also have the possibility of reconciling them, since the analogy never allows us to make explicit a real contradiction. Once we recognize that the terms “freedom” and “omniscience” are described with approximation and that we do not have a clear concept of either (the aforementioned debate on the definition of human freedom is a case in point<sup>86</sup>), then the reconciliation between omniscience and human freedom can indeed be considered a mystery of faith. In the case of omniscience, the analogical use of the term is due to the fact that we do not have an exhaustive knowledge of the essence of God, since God is an absolutely simple synthesis of all his attributes. Furthermore, the intuitive and timeless way in which God knows escapes human understanding. Our analogical use, therefore, refers to the *ontological difference* between God and creatures<sup>87</sup>. This analogical model, far from being new, was commonly developed within CT – at least in its medieval versions. It should be brought back into use. From this point of view, CT could provide tools to understand the above-mentioned notion of *undecidability*, but at the price of explicitly recognizing the mysteriousness of its own doctrine.

Regarding the analogical use of the concept of *human freedom* and the difficulties of defining it, let us expand on our previous considerations.

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<sup>85</sup> See D. Migliorini, *Trinity and Mystery*.

<sup>86</sup> See T. O'Connor, Ch. Franklin, *Free Will*, cit.

<sup>87</sup> A similar position can be found in: E. Stump, *The God of the Bible and the God of the Philosophers*, cit., p. 92; Stump proposes to apply a “quantum metaphysics” to God, in order to express what human reason cannot comprehend, the *quid est* of God.

Rogers points out<sup>88</sup> that the requirement of OT that the subject should be able to choose between A and B without being determined by anything (*freedom of indifference*) implies that no one is ever really free. The agent should be indifferent to the choice until the choice, but in this case the choice would not be linked to any motivation – it would not even be fully “a choice” of a person. Rogers’s observation brings up the often-overlooked question of the *mystery of human freedom*. Anyone who has tried to define this freedom and the nature of free choices has wound up in a labyrinth of dead ends. And although Rogers’s definition of freedom is not the only one possible, there are reasons to believe that any theory or definition about human freedom presents aporias<sup>89</sup>. In fact, there does not seem to be any way to reconcile the salient aspects that characterize this freedom: spontaneity, indifference, and control. Some philosophers choose to eliminate one in order to make the system work, for example by opting for a “compatibilist” position<sup>90</sup>. However, we seem to need all three aspects together in order to account for what we perceive as our own freedom. Thus, freedom remains a mystery.

To broaden the scope even further, the way in which God acts and is present in the world is also at the crossroads of several mysteries. One has to do with the deepest nature of the cosmos (at the quantum level: marked by inscrutable chaos, ontologically destabilizing indeterminism and probabilism, relations that are substances and substances that are mysteriously relations<sup>91</sup>) and another is the way in which God controls it (his providential action). Given all these mysteries, it is not surprising that the way to reconcile omniscience, freedom and providence is mysterious. An awareness of the analogical use of terms, therefore, could be a strategy not only in CT, but also in OT and PT (perhaps leading them to converge).

The *third solution* is a radicalization of the previous one: an awareness of the analogical approximation could lead to considering the mystery of providence also as a non-problem. In this case we are reminded of Hume, who

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<sup>88</sup> K. Rogers, *Foreknowledge, Freedom, and Vicious Circle: Anselm vs Open Theism*, in B.H. Armour, K. Timpe (eds), *Philosophical Essays*, cit., pp. 93-109, here pp. 97-98.

<sup>89</sup> On this intricate issue, see the introductory reading: M. De Caro, *Il libero arbitrio, un'introduzione*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2004.

<sup>90</sup> D. Migliorini, *Dall'incompatibilismo di Pike all'Open Theism: il dibattito sull'onniscienza divina nella filosofia analitica della religione*, “Rivista di Filosofia”, 2014, 105, pp. 273-288.

<sup>91</sup> See D. Migliorini, *Ontologie relazionali e metafisica trinitaria*, Morcelliana, Brescia 2022; see also: Id., *Troubles with Trinitarian (Relational) Theism: Trinity and Gunk*, in D. Bertini, D. Migliorini, *Relations. Ontology and Philosophy of Religion*, Mimesis International, Verona 2018, pp. 181-200; L. Candiotti, G. Pezzano, *Filosofia delle relazioni*, il Melangolo, Genova 2019.

argued that the problem of evil arises from an epistemological question<sup>92</sup>, that is, from the fact that we can neither know how much evil there is in the world, nor if it has a purpose<sup>93</sup>. No conclusive evidence can ever be produced, nor is it possible to calculate, estimate and compare all the pains and pleasures in the life of all humans, unless we state that our common criteria of truth and falsehood cannot be applied to the problem of evil<sup>94</sup>. Certain conclusions (theistic or atheistic<sup>95</sup>), Hume argues, can be drawn only if one is already convinced of them<sup>96</sup>: the world does not provide unequivocal evidence to support them. We can infer from this that evil is not a real problem for theism, i.e., it is not decisive in the choice between theism and atheism.

A similar reasoning could apply to the questions of omniscience, human freedom, and providence. Our epistemological limits do not allow us to fully define either omniscience or human freedom: the evidence of their contradictory nature cannot be found, and the problem disappears. We are convinced that God guides the creation and that we are free, but we cannot say how. The solution of the dilemma is not essential for choosing between theism and atheism.

Let us stick to the *first solution*, which considers the questions of providence and omniscience-freedom, understood as being *beyond* reason, belong to the *mysteries of faith* (just like the Trinity or the Incarnation) and not, like other divines attributes, to the *praeambula fidei*. One might argue, however, that the doctrine is true only because there is no evidence that it is false, which is a fallacy, an *argumentum ad ignorantiam*. I think nevertheless that the proposed “solution” escapes this objection insofar as it does not pretend to affirm that the doctrine *is proven to be true* but only that it remains *potentially true*. We are not sure that it is true, but since there is no evidence that it is false, we can believe this possibility *by faith* (and not because it is proven).

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<sup>92</sup> See G. Paganini, *Lettura dei Dialoghi*, introduzione a D. Hume, *Dialoghi*, Rizzoli, Milano 2014, pp. 66-73.

<sup>93</sup> Echoes of this position are found in *skeptical theism*: see H. McCann, D.M. Johnson, *Divine Providence*, in E.N. Zalta (ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (online)*, 2017, par. 10, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/providence-divine/> (07/03/2022).

<sup>94</sup> D. Hume, *Dialoghi sulla religione naturale*, cit., pp. 329-331. [*Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*].

<sup>95</sup> Hume therefore seems to argue that the dispute between atheists and theists is only a dispute of words, since they ultimately reach a very similar – vaguely apophatic – conclusion (G. Paganini, *Lettura dei Dialoghi*, introduction to D. Hume, *Dialoghi*, cit., pp. 66-73).

<sup>96</sup> D. Hume, *Dialoghi*, cit., p. 339.

Note that this proposal differs at least in part from DeVito and McNabb's<sup>97</sup>, based on Anderson's *Merely Apparent Contradictions Resulting from Unarticulated Equivocation*<sup>98</sup>. Applying his concept to the theme of omniscience, the authors claim that it is possible to justify believing in paradoxes: it is sufficient to appeal to our inability to fully know the nature of God. What seems a paradox to us, therefore, is such only because our cognitive faculties are limited: in reality, from God's perspective (who can solve the paradox with his infinite intellectual capacity) the paradox is only apparent. My "first solution", inspired by Thomism, is different because it follows Aquinas' belief that it is not possible to believe in a paradox. We may believe that something *exceeds* reason when we have rebut the arguments that show its contradictions, even if we then lack a complete explanation of the matter (a doctrine is not necessarily false just because it cannot be proved to be true). If, on the other hand, a doctrine appears inevitably paradoxical to us, we cannot appeal to a God who, in his infinite rational capacity, can resolve it.

Divine providence could then be placed in this frame of mystery, which appears as the only way to reconcile providence with the experience of a loving God who enters a relationship with free creatures. We can ask ourselves, however, what we have gained, from a theoretical point of view, with respect to the mystery to which EK leads us, mentioned in the previous paragraph. One answer could be that it is a gain in terms of awareness. While EK (or, in a wider perspective, all three theisms) claims to have solved the theoretical issues with rational arguments, hiding the dead ends, in the solution put forward here the mystery is made explicit as a *speculative necessity* and justified as reasonably acceptable. It is an epistemological limit that is declared and defined in its aspects, meanings and implications.

## 6. Final considerations: safeguarding the mystery

While CT, OT and PT appear to have rationally solved the problem of providence, omniscience and freedom, from the perspective described in the "first solution" they actually fail to do so, each for different reasons<sup>99</sup>. They sin of "idolatry" – the completely human and understandable desire to explain

<sup>97</sup> M. DeVito, R.D. McNabb, *Divine Foreknowledge and Human Free Will: Embracing the Paradox*, "International Journal of Philosophy of Religion", 2021, 90, pp. 93-107.

<sup>98</sup> J. Anderson, *Paradox in Christian Theology: An Analysis of Its Presence, Character, and Epistemic Status*, Wipf and Stock, Eugene 2007; Id., *On the Rationality of Positive Mysterianism*, "International Journal of Philosophy of Religion", 2018, 83, pp. 291-307.

<sup>99</sup> D. Migliorini, *Dall'incompatibilismo di Pike all'Open Theism*, cit., pp. 273-288.

everything about God and his creation. The dispute between these theisms, then, can only bring to mind the result of an ancient controversy, very similar in terms of both theme and theological centrality: in the past, secular and recurring theological disputes on omniscience, freedom and providence – culminating in the *De auxiliis* (1597-1606) controversy – were put to an end through the dogmatic re-affirmation of two truths that reason is unable to recompose (full divine omniscience and full human freedom).

As in the case of the Trinity<sup>100</sup>, this conclusion aimed to protect the mystery against any philosophical rationalization (a role that dogma has played in many disputes), against any “heresy” or choice (*haíresis*), which, in the name of rationality, could reduce the richness of the revealed mystery. The contemporary debate between the three theisms leads to a very similar result: *undecidability* has reappeared as a structural factor and seems to be overcome only in the dimension of mystery. Of course, one can always hope that reason will eventually resolve the mystery, but there are also good reasons to hope that it will not achieve this “idolatrous” result.

If the *first solution* is correct, the question of omniscience and providence will prove a relevant – and fruitful – theoretical challenge because it is placed at the intersection of a *plurality of mysteries*: freedom, omniscience, nature, being, the simplicity and eternity of God, his modality of knowledge, and his nature as Pure Act. Precisely because none of these notions has a clear and complete definition, we can imagine that their harmonic composition belongs to the mystery that encompasses them<sup>101</sup>.

OT, CT and PT could be made to coexist by juxtaposing their doctrines and re-thinking their “poles”, i.e., their apparently distant positions, within an apophatic conception that would leave room for mystery. The three theisms could be valid but partial attempts to describe the reality of God, true only if taken as moments of overall truth. What has been said about the Trinity would then apply to omniscience, too: «Having formulated the truth in this

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<sup>100</sup> The ancient and contemporary Trinitarian debates clearly show that any attempt to logically explain the Trinity leads to an unorthodox version of the dogma; when we try to maintain the dogma in all its richness, however, the logical solutions fail (see D. Migliorini, *A “Kantian-inspired” Argument for the Trinity*, forthcoming).

<sup>101</sup> Taking up and adapting an intuition of Schmitt to our context, we can say that the Christian position on providence/omniscience and freedom is a *complexio oppositorum*, a synthesis of opposites (never given harmoniously) that tries to hold together all possible positions (see C. Schmitt, *Cattolicesimo romano e forma politica*, Milano, Giuffè 1986, p. 35).

way, the human spirit has done almost everything it could do»<sup>102</sup>. If we say that ‘humans are free and God is omniscient’, we do not say so because this truth can be (completely) spoken, but because it need not be left (wholly) unspoken (to adapt Augustine’s well-known statement<sup>103</sup>).

However, we can contemplate an even more radical position (a *fourth solution*), also linked to the question of the “mystery”, which starts from the observation that the definitions of omniscience and of human freedom are the negation of one another: at this point we would have no escape from a manifest contradiction. Of course, also in this case we would start from the premise – far from obvious, as we have said – of having an exhaustive and shared definition of the terms involved. This being granted, if we insist that the doctrines of omniscience or providence are evidently paradoxical or antinomic (when rigorously defined), in order to “save” theism we would need to resort to a kind of *Hegelian position* – where contradiction is assumed as a moment of a higher re-composition – or to a *dialetheic one*<sup>104</sup>.

This position too differs from DeVito and McNabb’s interpretation of Anderson: Hegel does not state that contradictions are *merely apparent*. They are real and, while included in a higher unity, they are never completely “removed”. The Absolute Spirit and the reality that manifests it include moments of contradictions. This is not just an epistemological question – linked to our cognitive limits – as DeVito and McNabb believe. In Hegel, contradiction is an instrument of reason – and reason is reality (and vice versa) – not an appearance to be eliminated<sup>105</sup>. Hegelianism and dialetheism are different possible ways of accepting the mystery<sup>106</sup>, understood here as *a positive acceptance of contradiction*, as a way of unveiling the divine itself.

Finally, there may be other “solutions” than the four examined here and it would therefore be premature to draw any definitive conclusions. However, we can venture a few general considerations based on these four

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<sup>102</sup> É. Gilson, *Introduzione allo studio di Sant’Agostino*, Marietti, Genova 2014, p. 260 (my translation).

<sup>103</sup> Augustine, *De Trinitate*, V, 9, 10.

<sup>104</sup> F. Mancini, M. Carrara, *Sul dialetheismo. Lezioni padovane di Graham Priest ed altri saggi sul dialetheismo*, Padova University Press, Padova 2021.

<sup>105</sup> It is a controversial issue, but this interpretation of Hegel is at least plausible: see L. Illetterati et al., *Hegel*, Carocci, Roma 2018.

<sup>106</sup> See D. Migliorini, *Trinity and Mystery*, cit.; the question of whether dialetheism is a form of Hegelianism (and vice versa) is debated: see G. Priest, F. Berto, W. Zach, *Dialetheism*, in E.N. Zalta (ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (online), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/dialetheism/> (07\03\2022).



solutions. The first reflection starts from an anecdote that brings up a theoretical and – perhaps – psychological conundrum. During a collegial discussion on the themes addressed in the present essay, it was pointed out that the reference to mystery proposed here is a way of giving up that is difficult to accept. The objection is understandable. One should remember, however, that the present approach to mystery was reached after exploring all the possible rational paths and after considering them unsatisfactory.

The reference to mystery, then, would not create discomfort: the mystery could be the space where theism can still be saved without disappearing into fideism. Moreover, the theme of freedom undermines the consistency of all philosophies, whether they affirm or deny the existence of God. If we remove the possibility of a transcendent and omniscient God, we fall into other, no less problematic forms of determinism (such as a strong form of secular and impersonal providence) or indeterminism – all of which are difficult to reconcile with the human experience of freedom. From this point of view, the question of freedom seems to be a mystery in all philosophies, ancient and modern<sup>107</sup>.

The second reflection is linked to the previous one. Should the lack of scholarly agreement on a given question – after centuries of inconclusive discussions – force us into scepticism? Although this question would require ample space, let us at least provide a few clarifications. First of all, recognizing that no agreement can ever be reached on a given issue (due to the very nature of the object under discussion, for example God) within a specific discipline does not mean allowing scepticism to pervade every area and discipline. Physics and metaphysics, for example, have distinct objects and methods. Metaphysics, unlike physics, could establish the existence of an object whose explanation is “beyond” but not “against” reason, or whose description is inevitably paradoxical (as in Hegelianism and dialetheism) but also the best available. Recognizing the intrinsic limits of our knowledge, a long tradition teaches us, is an antidote to scepticism.

In these last two cases, the task of theology has been precisely to constantly problematize the alleged “rational explanations” of the mysteries of God, with the precise aim of *safeguarding these mysteries* as mysteries. Despite the impossibility of reaching a rational agreement, theological and philosophical analysis still fully have a reason to exist.

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<sup>107</sup> Cf. S. Giametta, *La filosofia di Spinoza e il duello con Schopenhauer e Nietzsche*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2022, pp. 32-37.