

BOOK REVIEWS

Philosophical Essays Against Open Theism, edited by Benjamin H. Arbour. Routledge, 2019. Pp. vii + 217. \$140 (hardback).

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This book brings together eleven essays critical of various features of open theism. It begins with a helpful introduction by the editor. Arbour explains that “what unites all open theists is the affirmation that the future is *epistemically open* for God” (7, italics in original). As a result, God does not have definite knowledge of the future. Important differences within open theism can be found in whether propositions concerning future contingents have truth values or not. Some hold that they do, but God cannot know them. God is limited in his knowledge. Others reject the idea that propositions concerning future contingents have truth values. On this view, God knows all truths. Within each of these views, of course, there are nuances. Some who hold that propositions concerning future contingents have truth values also hold that all such propositions that use terms such as “will” or “will not” are false. Others reject bivalence concerning these propositions. This section of the introduction provides a clear structure to categorize the variety of arguments in this area.

The book is divided into three sections. The first part, “Open Theism and the Metaphysics of Time,” includes three essays. Eleonore Stump leads off with “The Openness of God: Eternity and Free Will” in which she clarifies and applies the traditional understanding of God’s eternity. The fact that God has eternal knowledge of a person’s free choice (which occurs at some time) does not render that choice any less contingent than it would be on open theism. She writes: “On the doctrine of eternity, the logical dependence of God’s knowledge on the events known does not rule out the causal dependence of those events on God’s acts, and those acts are included in God’s knowledge” (34). This essay is followed by Sandra Visser’s “God’s Knowledge of an Unreal Future.” She argues that, given presentism, the best view of God’s knowledge will be some kind of compatibilism or “an open theism that is very constrained indeed” (43). The constraints involve the fact that God chose to create creatures such that



their free choices were open. Thus, propositions describing these choices have no truth value until the choices are made. In choosing to create in this way, God chooses to limit his knowledge in light of his other aims. Given this view, "God will have to know enough about the future so that he can be sure that nothing will go irredeemably wrong" (42). The third essay is Benjamin Arbour's "A Few Worries about the Systematic Metaphysics of Open Future Open Theism." Arbour argues that if Open Future Open Theism is true, there is no actual world. A possible world is often taken to be a complete history of that world. Any world with an open future has no complete history. The concrete universe, on open theism, has no complete history. Thus, the concrete universe is not the actual world. Arbour concludes that Open Future Open Theism requires a significant revision of our modal concepts.

The second part, "Open Theism and Other Philosophical Issues," includes David Alexander's "Open Theism and Origins Essentialism: A New Argument Against Open Theism." Alexander argues that Origins Essentialism holds that the causal history of an event is essential to it. Suppose there is some future event that God can know. If the causal history of that object includes the free actions of creatures, then those free actions also can be known by God. Furthermore, God can know them even when they are future to God. Paul Helm, in "The 'Openness' in Compatibilism," argues that "compatibilism can furnish us with all the openness we need" (84). This openness is not due to the metaphysical indeterminacy of future free actions, for they are not indeterminate. Rather, it is due to their epistemic indeterminacy. Katherin A. Rogers's "Foreknowledge, Freedom, and Vicious Circles: Anselm vs. Open Theism," continues her project of explicating and defending Anselmian theism. She engages David Hunt's worries over explanatory loops in various views of divine foreknowledge. An explanatory loop occurs when God's decisions at a time influence what occurs in the future, but what occurs in the future shapes his decisions. There must be some explanatory loops, she argues, because of divine prophecy. The key is to show that such loops are not vicious. On Anselm's view, God is the primary cause of all things. Thus, "if the problem of vicious circularity has to do with explaining how and why things exist, then I believe that *vicious* circularity is avoided" (107, emphasis in original). Robert B. Stewart's argument in "On Open Theism Either God Has False Beliefs, or I Can Know Something that God Cannot" is exactly as the title suggests. Stewart claims that he can know that his wife will love him tomorrow, despite the fact that this fact is the result of a future free action. That he knows this fact is clear from any reasonable analysis of knowledge. He believes his wife will love him. It is true, and he has sufficient justification. God, however, cannot form the belief that Stewart's wife will love him because there are possible worlds in which it turns out to be false. If it is possible that God have a false belief, then he is not essentially omniscient.

The final section, "Open Theism and Other Issues in Philosophical Theology," opens with "'May It Have Happened, Lord!': Open Theism and Past-Directed Prayers" by James N. Anderson. Anderson argues that prayers for the past are legitimate as long as the one praying does not know how the event in question turned out. These past directed prayers can be answered by God only if God knows that the prayers will occur, and he knows this fact in time to answer them. Anderson uses the example of praying for a friend's interview after the interview took place. If God knows the future free act of praying, he can answer the prayer by shaping how the interview goes. If God cannot know future free action, he cannot answer such prayers. This essay, if I may offer a brief personal digression, was greatly encouraging to me. The week I read it, one of the friends that frequented the homeless ministry of our church died of an overdose. Although a member of our church had had several conversations about the gospel with Lucas, we do not know if he responded. I found myself praying with renewed confidence that he will have responded to God's gracious offer.

The final three papers take up various issues concerning the problem of evil. First is Greg Welty, "Open Theism, Risk-Taking, and the Problem of Evil." Welty argues that various alleged advantages of open theism regarding the problem of evil actually do not amount to much. This conclusion undermines some of the major motivation many have for embracing openness. Next, Ken Perszyk, in "Open Theism and the Soteriological Problem of Evil," discusses the particular challenges of those who do not hear the good news in this life and of eternal judgment. As far as hell is concerned, he argues that the open view has serious challenges. It is reckless for God to create people when he does not know their destiny. Some thinkers are happy to adopt some form of universalism as a result. The open theist fares no better on universalism, if that view is taken to involve the free response of creatures. God cannot know that anyone will freely respond to his grace, let alone that everyone will. Keith Wyma, in "Jesus Didn't Die for *Your* Sins: Open Theism, Atonement, and the Pastoral Problem of Evil," argues that on the openness view God does not know what human beings will be actual in the relatively distant future. Thus, at the time of the death of Jesus, he did not know that we would exist. If he did not know that we will exist, how can he have made his sacrifice *for* each of us? At best, Jesus died for whatever human beings would exist. This view minimizes the resources of the gospel for the pastoral problem of evil. There is little comfort for a person in the midst of suffering in the view that Jesus loved and died for people in general, but did not even know her. When I am suffering, I need a sense that God knows me and had me in mind in his sacrifice. The open theist cannot deliver this basic comfort.

Although each essay warrants deeper critical engagement, I wish to comment in more detail on two in particular. David Alexander's "Open Theism and Origins Essentialism: A New Argument Against Open

Theism," as the title claims, does present a new argument. Starting from the claim that God can know of a future determined event, Alexander argues that God will be able to know some future free actions. Alexander begins with what Jonathan Kvanvig has called the "Asymmetry Thesis." The asymmetry is that propositions describing future events that are determined by the past or present have determinate truth value while those not determined do not. The next assumption in the argument is Origins Essentialism. For any event, items in the casual ancestry of that event are essential to it. Alexander states his argument as follows:

1. There is some future event F determined by the past and present, and God knows F.
2. For any event E, the causal ancestry of E is essential to the identity of E.
3. If something x is essential to the identity of something else y, then y implies x.
4. Hence, the identity of E implies the causal ancestry of E.
5. If God knows E, then God knows whatever E implies.
6. Hence, God knows whatever F implies.
7. There are future free actions in the causal ancestry of F.
8. Hence, God knows future free actions. (76)

The first premise is complex. It is really the conjunct of three claims. The first claim is that, if a proposition is true, God knows it. The second is, as Alexander mentions, the first part of the asymmetry thesis. Future events that are determined have a determinate truth value. The third is that there is at least one event of this kind. None of these conjuncts is especially problematic. From premises 1 through 6, the argument unfolds without a hitch. Once we get to premise 7, however, there is room for the open theist to object. This statement, she will protest, is incompatible with 1. If there are future free actions in the causal ancestry of an event, that event is not determined. This objection is a matter of the nature of libertarian freedom. Any event that is causally downstream from a libertarian free choice is itself undetermined. The argument, although interesting, turns out to beg the question. No open theist will be concerned about it.

Another essay that deserves comment is Greg Welty's chapter, "Open Theism, Risk-Taking, and the Problem of Evil." The problem of evil is one of the main issues that motivates open theism. In light of this fact, Welty compares what he calls "risk-free" views of providence with "risk-taking" views in light of how they face the problem of evil. Risk-free views include theological determinism and Molinism. Risk-taking views include open theism and incremental simple foreknowledge. Four aspects of the problem of evil are dealt with in turn. They are: gratuitous evil, meticulous providence, moral motivation, and the morality of risk-taking. In each of these areas, Welty argues that open theism has no advantage over risk

free accounts of providence. Welty's treatment of these issues is thought-provoking. I can give only the highlights here.

The open theist holds that God allows gratuitous evil because God does not know which particular evils will result from human freedom. God allows these kinds of evils to happen because libertarian freedom is a great good. But God does not have a specific reason to allow each specific case of an evil choice. Welty argues that God's general policy of not interfering with evils may be justified by the great good of freedom. For each case of evil, however, one can ask if "God's following his general policy of nonintervention *in this case* was necessary to maximize opportunities for great goods" (143, emphasis in original). What requires a justifying reason, then, is the *application* of the general policy in any particular case. As a result, Welty argues that no evil turns out to be actually gratuitous. God refrains from interfering only if he has a justifying reason to follow his general policy rather than to suspend it.

Meticulous providence is the claim that every event that occurs does so only because God ordains that it occurs. Welty employs the term "meticulish providence" in which every event that occurs does so because God made a deliberate choice to permit it to occur. Open theism holds that God's providence is meticulish, but not meticulous. Welty observes that even on meticulish providence, God can choose to intervene in time to prevent all evils. I have referred to the possibility of God's timely intervention as the "heart attack" objection. In 1939, for example, God had learned enough about the likely results of the present trends in Nazi Germany to intervene in indiscernible ways to give Hitler a heart attack. That he did not do so was because, in Welty's words, "he makes the call that the risk of permitting the choice outweighs the bad effects of intervention" (147–148). Thus, open theism is in the same situation as meticulous views of providence.

Welty turns to a third alleged advantage of open theism. Some open theists allege that if God executes meticulous providence, then he allows each event because the world will be better if he does so. If I am contemplating whether to act to prevent a particular evil that I can prevent, I get stopped in my tracks. If I do not prevent the evil, the world will be better. Surely, it would be wrong of me to intervene. Welty offers a quick and decisive response. The open theist, he thinks, ignores another truth that is an implication of meticulous providence. Not only is it the case that the world will be better if I do *not* prevent the evil, it is also true that the world will be better if I *do* prevent the evil. God's meticulous providence guarantees that he will bring good out of whatever choices we make. It does not ground the following judgment: If I do not prevent the evil, the world will be better *than it would be if I do prevent it*. Given that we are commanded to intervene to help our neighbors, we have all the moral motivation we need.

Finally, Welty turns his attention to whether risky providence itself is justified. Here he argues not that open theism does not fare better than

risk-free versions of providence, but that it does worse. One central issue concerning the morality of risk is how the risk is distributed among those involved in the event. Welty points out that whatever the risks are that God takes, he does not suffer from them the way human beings often do. Welty asks a series of questions such as, "Will [God] perish due to lack of food, water, shelter, and good health? No." This one question is enough to see that for all the talk of God's risks, on open theism, it is the creatures that are most vulnerable. There is at least a *prima facie* case that God is more morally responsible if he adopts risky providence by creating a world with an open future than if he maintains a risk-free providence.

Welty's essay is simply excellent. His treatment of these themes is very careful. He draws on the writings of open theists as he lays out the details of the four relevant aspects of the problem of evil. In addition, he raises relevant objections to his assessments and answers them. This chapter will provide impetus for continued work for years to come.

In a short review, I can do no more than gesture at the contents of this book. Many of the essays warrant a deeper look. The collection as a whole has several strengths that are worth mentioning. First, the papers vary widely in topic and in philosophical perspective. They range over several metaphysical issues as well as issues more central to philosophical theology. The collection demonstrates that issues related to divine foreknowledge touch a wider variety of the different fields within philosophy than might be expected. The authors also vary in their philosophical commitments. Some are compatibilists and some are libertarians. Some are atemporalists and some hold that God is temporal. This diversity strengthens the collection. Third, the quality of each essay is very good. Both open theists and critics of open theism will find much to think about. I highly recommend this work.

Petitionary Prayer: A Philosophical Investigation, by Scott Davison. Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp. vi + 189. \$75.00 (hardcover).

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Scott Davison orients his investigation of petitionary prayer around the following pair of questions: "Assuming that the God of traditional theism exists, is it reasonable to think that God answers specific petitionary prayers? Or are those prayers pointless in the sense that they do not influence God's action?" (7–8). Davison begins by admitting that he originally planned to argue that the answers to those questions are no and yes,

