

An Open and Relational Theory of Divine Power:
Between Voluntary Divine Self-Limitation
& Divine Limitation by Those External to God
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(this manuscript was meant for oral presentation and does not yet have the footnote references required for a published manuscript; however, the paper may be cited when appropriate)

The problem of evil, the problem of errant and ambiguous divine revelation, and the problem of the unequal distribution of goods – these problems plague theology. Christians and theists of other religious traditions wonder, Why doesn't a powerful and loving God *prevent* these obvious problems?

The solutions typically proposed are unsatisfying to most people. The God in whom many believe would *want* to prevent genuine evil and *have the ability* unilaterally to do so. This God would *want* to reveal what is necessary for salvation and *have the power* to reveal it without error or ambiguity. And this God would *want* goods disseminated to the poor and needy and *have the power* to guarantee this dissemination. And yet, the God in whom many believe fails either to do these inherently good things or fails to prevent the actions and conditions that produce these obvious wrongs. The God in whom many believe seems culpable.

The God in whom many people believe is ultimately responsible for promoting good but also for failing to prevent evils. This dual responsibility is expressed well in

two poems. The first, a well-known 19th century hymn by Cecil F. Alexander, is called “All Things Bright and Beautiful.”

All things bright and beautiful, All creatures great and small,
All things wise and wonderful: The Lord God made them all.
Each little flower that opens, Each little bird that sings,
He made their glowing colors, He made their tiny wings.

As a boy, my father read to me inspiring books by James Herriot, and the titles of these books were drawn from this life-affirming hymn.

I encountered the second poem later in life. It is written with the same cadence, but it appears on Monty Python’s Contractual Obligations album. The poem is titled, “All Things Dull and Ugly.”

All things dull and ugly, All creatures, short and squat,
All things rude and nasty, The Lord God made the lot.
Each little snake that poisons, Each little wasp that stings,
He made their prudish venom, He made their horrid wings.
All things sick and cancerous, All evil great and small,
All things foul and dangerous, The Lord God made them all.

Process theologians have led the way in accounting both for things bright and beautiful and for things dull and ugly. And the process theologians offer coherent solutions to the conceptual aspects of these problems that I identified at the outset.

Process theists affirm divine love while reconceiving divine power. The theories that process thinkers offer propose that God's power is limited in some way.

The particular ways in which process theologians speak of divine limitation vary. Some process thinkers consider God limited by metaphysical laws. In *God, Power, and Evil: A Process Theodicy*, David Ray Griffin concludes that, "the process theodicy that I am presenting here hinges upon the notion that there are metaphysical principles which are beyond even divine decision" (298). One metaphysical law, according to Alfred North Whitehead, is itself the "principle of limitation." And Whitehead claims that God's nature is the primordial exemplification of the proposed metaphysics (PR 522).

Other process thinkers focus upon the ultimacy that Creativity plays in process philosophy. Some regard creativity – or the creative advance – as the basis of God's limitation. In his magnum opus, *Process and Reality*, Whitehead speaks of divine limitation when he says that God is "in the grip of the ultimate metaphysical ground, which is the creative advance into novelty" (PR 349).

Yet a third way that some process thinkers conceive of God's power as limited is to emphasize the social nature of divine power in relation to nondivine others. Charles Hartshorne, for instance, speaks of God's shared power in this way when he argues that "omnipotence, in the only religiously sensible meaning, is the ideal case of power assuming a division of power, the maximal concentration of power that permits distribution of powers among a plurality of beings."ⁱ The logic here is that God's perfect power is best conceived in relationship to beings with some power of their own. God is limited, at least to some degree, by others who possess power of their own vis-à-vis God.

Each of these limitations on divine power – the limitations noted by metaphysical laws, the limitation of creativity, and the limitation of God by nondivine others – overlap. The limited God portrayed by each cannot be held culpable for failing to prevent the problems I identified at the outset.

Process theology's reconceptions of divine power have met significant criticism, however. Some of that criticism arises within the process tradition itself, as process theologians debate among themselves about how best to conceive of God's power. But the most severe criticism comes from those not identifying themselves with process thought. Some of that severe criticism is weak or ill-founded. Some criticism fails to take seriously the issues at play. But other criticism is more significant.

John Polkinghorne, for instance, criticizes process theology for envisioning a God limited by that which is outside Godself. Polkinghorne says that he rejects "process theology's conception of an external metaphysical constraint upon the power of deity." A superior vision of God, says Polkinghorne, should maintain "that nothing imposes conditions on God from the outside" (*Creation as Kenosis*, 96).

The alternative that Polkinghorne and many open theologians propose comes under the umbrella of what might be called "kenosis theology." Kenosis theology typically portrays God's power in such a way as to affirm creaturely freedom while denying that God entirely controls creatures. In agreement with process theists, kenosis theologians affirm that God is limited. But in contrast to process theists, most kenosis theologians suggest that God's limitations are self-imposed. Most contend that God is voluntarily self-limited – either in the past, or in each present moment, or both – so as to grant power and freedom to those whom God creates.

Polkinghorne captures well the sense of voluntary self-limitation when he says that God allows “the created other to be and to act, so that, while all that happens is permitted by God’s general providence, not all that happens is in accordance with God’s will or brought about by divine special providence.” Polkinghorne adds that “such an understanding is basic to theodicy’s disclaimer that God does not will the act of a murderer or the destructive force of an earthquake, but allows both to happen in a world in which divine power is deliberately self-limited to allow causal space for creatures” (102). In sum, God’s limitation maintains divine benevolence by God’s voluntary self-constraint.

The typical kenosis theory based upon God’s voluntary self-limitation does a fairly good job of accounting for why free creatures cause or contribute to the problem of evil, the problem of errant revelation, and the problem of unequal distribution of goods. The typical answer is that free creatures or creaturely conditions are the source of these problems.

But kenosis theory does not provide an adequate conceptual *solution* to these problems. It does not solve them, chiefly because the God *voluntarily* self-limited remains culpable for failing to *prevent* the egregious wrongs of life. It is not enough to say that God does not cause but merely allows these wrongs. A perfectly loving God would *want* to prevent genuine evil, would *want* to reveal the good news of salvation in an error-free and unambiguous way, and would *want* goods distributed to the poor.

I argue that the God who is voluntarily self-limited *ought* to become *un*-self-limited from time to time to prevent the evils that innocent victims endure. This self-limited God *ought* to become *un*-self-limited to reveal inerrantly and unambiguously the

good news of salvation. This voluntarily self-limited God ought to become un-self-limited to see that the poor and needy are cared for. The God who is capable of withdrawing, failing to offer, or vetoing the freedom of evildoers in any moment ought to do so in the name of love. Withdrawing, vetoing, or failing to offer creatures the power for freedom -- if such activity is possible for God -- is at least sometimes the loving thing to do.

At present, many in the open and relational theologies camp feel torn between affirming one of these two theories of divine power. On the one hand, process theologies are attractive, because they overcome the conceptual elements of the problems I've mentioned. Most process theologies suggest that God is limited by metaphysical laws, creativity, or external others. And yet process conceptions of divine limitation leave many theists unsatisfied.

On the other hand, kenosis theories of voluntary divine self-limitation are attractive, because they do not rely upon God's power being qualified by external forces or metaphysical laws. God voluntarily chooses to grant freedom to others. Voluntary kenosis fails, however, to answer well why a voluntarily self-limited God would not occasionally become un-self-limited to right the egregious wrongs that creatures encounter. Voluntary kenosis fails to give an adequate answer to the fundamental conceptual problems that plague theology.

I offer a third possibility. This possibility might be seen as a middle way between voluntary divine self-limitation and God being limited by external forces or individuals. The alternative I suggest is an open and relational theory of divine power different from the typical kenotic God and different from the God essentially limited by metaphysical

laws, creativity, or the social nature of creaturely existence. And yet my alternative retains important notions in both the kenotic and process traditions.

The middle way I offer appeals to the divine nature as the starting point for solving the conceptual problems that plague theology. I regard God's nature as an essential and involuntary aspect of deity. God did not choose God's own nature. Rather, God's nature is a fundamental given; it is part of what, by definition, it means to be God.

God's chief attribute – although not only attribute – is love. Love is an essential property of God. Love's central and essential role in the divine nature is expressed in the three word sentence from the Christian scriptures: "God is love." The relational love of God has been revealed in many ways. Christians typically claim that Jesus of Nazareth most profoundly revealed this God of love.

Love requires relations with others. Love cannot be expressed in absolute isolation; love is inherently relational. Loving actions require sympathetic responses to others with whom the lover possesses relations. And love involves the promotion of well-being to those with whom the lover relates.

If love is an essential divine property and love requires relations, God requires relations with others. Divine loving relatedness is an aspect of the divine essence. Just as God did not voluntarily decide various features of own nature, God does not voluntarily decide to be relational. To relate to others is essential to what it means to be God.

Some Christian theologians agree that relational love is a necessary aspect of the divine essence. But they argue that God only necessarily loves others in the Trinity. Love for creatures, they say, is contingent upon God's altogether voluntary decision to

create and sustain these creatures. Love for others in the Trinity is necessary, while love for creatures is accidental.

By contrast, the open and relational theory I offer claims that God necessarily relates to and loves creatures. God has everlastingly been necessarily related to and loved whatever God has created. No one created thing is everlasting; only the Creator has always existed.ⁱⁱ

To accept my proposal for solving the problems I have mentioned, one may or may not affirm that God is related necessary within the Trinity. For those who consider the notion of Trinitarian relations within the Godhead a crucial element in an adequate doctrine of God, the hypothesis that God relates necessarily with creatures should **not** be seen as a rival or alternate view. One can affirm both that God necessarily relates within the Trinity and that God necessary relates to creatures. But the notion that God essentially relates in love to creatures is not necessarily tied to the idea that members of the Trinity essentially relate with one another. The question of the adequacy of believing in intratrinitarian relations should be decided on other grounds.

I am not claiming that, in order to exist, God *depends* upon relations with creatures. God exists necessarily, which means that God cannot cease to exist. God must exist. But there is no logical problem with affirming both that God necessarily exists and that God has everlastingly been in relation to that which God creates. In fact, I argue that a theological scheme supposing that God necessarily and everlastingly relates to some creaturely world or another that God has created is preferable to a scheme that claims that God's relations to the world are accidental.ⁱⁱⁱ A major reason for my argument derives

from this scheme's helpfulness in solving the conceptual obstacles in the problems that plague theology.

The middle way between some process theologies and typical kenosis theology focuses upon God's essential nature as relational love with creatures. In agreement with kenosis theologians who conceive of God as gifting creation with creation's existence, I suggest that God's moment-by-moment gifting entails empowering and inspiring creatures. All creatures rely upon God's direct, causal call for their existence. God is the giver of the gift that creatures require to live, love, and have their being. And the gifts that God gives derive from God's essence.

A key element in God's gift is the provision of power and freedom to all creatures capable of self-determination. God gives this gift in each moment of each creature's life. We might call this kenotic gifting, "prevenient grace," to use language of Wesleyan theology. God acts first (preveniently) to initiate each moment in a creature's life, and in that prevenient action God provides the power and freedom creatures require. God, whose essence is love, necessarily "self-empties" or "self-offers" in each moment. All creatures are utterly dependent upon God for this multi-faceted gift.

Here, a key component of my open and relational theory of divine power emerges. I am claiming that God's prevenient provision of the power for freedom to every creature capable of self-determination is a provision that derives from God's essence. God's relational love is such that God's empowering of others is fundamental to God's nature. To say it another way, empowering others is part of what it means to be God. Deity cannot overpower creatures, in the sense of failing to offer, withdrawing, or vetoing the freedom God provides. God cannot do so, because this overpowering would

require a violation of God's very essence, which is something that simply cannot be done. Prevenient grace, therefore, is a necessary aspect of deity.

At this point, my solution to the problems mentioned at the outset of the paper should be apparent. The loving God who is essentially related to and who necessarily provides freedom to all creatures is not culpable for failing to prevent the evils that occurs because of free creaturely choices or constraints of existence that have emerged from creaturely actions. The problem of evil, the problem of errant revelation, and the problem of unequal distribution of goods occur because of the actions and nature of free creatures. God cannot be culpable for failing to prevent these problems, because God essentially and lovingly relates to all creatures by providing them power for freedom -- as limited as this freedom may be in less complex creatures. God cannot fail to offer, veto, or override this freedom God necessarily provides, because this activity derives from God's essence. God provides this life-affirming freedom, because God's nature is love, and no external other should be said to limit God. God could no more choose to cease existing than to cease to provide freedom to those with whom God lovingly relates.

This open and relational theology meets Polkinghorne's criterion "that nothing imposes conditions on God from the outside." In my scheme, God is self-limited, in the sense that God's inability to control others entirely is not imposed by external constraints. This inability derives from Godself. But this open and relational theology also fits the vision of divine power that process theists affirm, in the sense that God cannot unilaterally determine others. Therefore, God is not culpable for failing to prevent the problems we have mentioned.

One way to identify my alternative is to label it “*involuntary* divine self-limitation,” as opposed to “*voluntary* divine self-limitation.” This label suggests that God is not limited due either to arbitrary divine choice or external factors. Perhaps a better way to label the alternative I am offering, however, is to call it “essential kenosis.” This label highlights the notion that God’s self-giving love derives from God’s necessary essence or eternal nature. Giving gifts to others – including the power for self-determination – is by definition part of what it means to be a loving and relational God. And a gift-giver whose essence is love cannot do other than give gifts of love.

Whatever label one prefers for this open and relational theology of divine power, I suggest that it adopts the helpful elements of both process and kenotic theologies while overcoming the legitimate objections to typical formulations of divine power in each tradition. This essential kenosis theology overcomes the conceptual problems that plague other theologies by formulating a description of God who, as Charles Wesley poetically put it, is the only One whose nature and name is love.

ⁱ “Is Whitehead’s God the God of Religion?” 220.

ⁱⁱ This alternative admittedly entails various metaphysical consequences, but these consequences arise from the divine essence and are not imposed by outside conditions.

ⁱⁱⁱ If one were to attack the concept of the social Trinity by claiming that the Trinity would fail to exist if one member were to expire, that person would commit the same conceptual error as the error committed by those who claim that the God who necessarily exists would expire should some world or another expire.