Jeanine Diller • Asa Kasher
Editors

Models of God
and Alternative Ultimate Realities

Springer
Acknowledgements


We are most grateful to all the above authors, editors and publishers for granting us permission to republish.

Contents

Introduction ........................................................................................................... 1
   Jeanine Diller and Asa Kasher

Part I  Conceptual Foundations

Introduction to Conceptual Foundations ................................................................ 13
   James E. Taylor

Modeling Ultimate Reality: God, Consciousness, and Emergence ..................... 19
   Robert Cummings Neville

Symmetry and Asymmetry: Problems and Prospects for Modeling ...................... 35
   Lawrence A. Whitney, LC+

Models of God .................................................................................................. 43
   Ted Peters

Relativizing the Classical Tradition: Hartshorne’s History of God ................. 63
   Donald Wayne Viney

Can We Acquire Knowledge of Ultimate Reality? ............................................. 81
   Michael V. Antony

Part II  Classical Theism

Introduction to Classical Theism ......................................................................... 95
   Thomas Williams

Aristotle on God: Divine Nous as Unmoved Mover .......................................... 101
   R. Michael Olson
Part V  Process Theology

Introduction to Process Theology ............................................. 311
Roland Faber

William James's Argument for a Finite Theism ....................... 323
Jonathan Weidenbaum

Hartshorne's Dipolar Theism and the Mystery of God ............... 333
Donald Wayne Viney

From Models of God to a Model of Gods: How Whiteheadian
Metaphysics Facilitates Western Language Discussion
of Divine Multiplicity ...................................................... 343
Monica A. Coleman

Ultimate Complexity: A Hindu Process Theology .................... 357
Jeffery D. Long

Part VI  Panentheism

Introduction to Panentheism ................................................ 371
Philip Clayton

Nicholas of Cusa's Understanding of Theopany
and the Retrieval of a "New" Model of God ......................... 381
Nancy J. Shaffer

Kant's Moral Panentheism ................................................... 399
Stephen Palmquist

Schelling's Fragile God ....................................................... 411
Klaus Ottmann

Hegelian Panentheism ........................................................ 421
Glenn Alexander Magee

Pelzre on God, Reality and Personality ................................ 431
Jeffery L. Kasser

Karl Rahner on God ........................................................... 441
James J. Basik

Modeling God in One Hindu Context: The Supreme God
in a Medieval South Indian Hymn ..................................... 453
Francis X. Clooney, SJ

Part VII  Ground, Start and End of Being Theologies

Introduction to Ground, Start and End of Being Theologies ...... 473
Jeanine Diller
A New Existential Model of God: A Synthesis of Themes from Kierkegaard, Buber, Levinas, and Open Theism

John Davenport

Introduction

This paper draws together ideas about the nature of God (or the divine) from several sources that regard the dominant western philosophical account of divine attributes (tracing to Plato, Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas) as inadequate. For convenience, I will call the dominant conception of God as the unique exemplifier of a maximal combination of “great-making properties” the “Standard Anselmian model” (SAM).

My goal is not to argue that God as redescribed here exists, but rather to offer a different conception of the God whose existence is more relevant or debatable today. According to major thinkers in the alternative traditions to which I will refer, the personal, creative, temporal, and eschatological aspects of divine reality are not sufficiently articulated in mainstream western accounts of God developed from the idea of unsurpassable metaphysical greatness (sometimes called “perfect being” theology). In particular, the divine attributes of simplicity, impassibility, atemporality or eternity, and governance through total providential design with complete foreknowledge need to be challenged or at least radically reinterpreted — not simply to articulate a conception of God that comes closer to Jerusalem than to Athens, but more broadly, to explain a God whose existence is more believable given the importance of human freedom and the problem of evil, more clearly distinct from metaphysical and ethical principles, and more meaningful for the lives of twenty-first century persons of plural religious backgrounds.

For a representative standard account, see Morris (1991, pp. 35–40). It’s noteworthy that all the essays included in Morris’s (1987) collection defend some aspect of SAM.

J. Davenport
Department of Philosophy, Fordham University, Bronx, NY, USA
E-mail: davenport@fordham.edu

According to the "new existential model" (NEM) outlined here, a better conception of the divine can be developed by synthesizing ideas found in at least six alternative traditions:

- the recent theology of "open theism" with its limited conception of divine foreknowledge;
- older "panentheist" accounts of the relation between God and the created order, which hold that God transcends the world but also includes it, that God develops, is affected, suffers, and experiences joy as well as being eternal, the ultimate cause, the most active being, etc.;
- Søren Kierkegaard's portrayal of temporal freedom and faith; related themes in Heidegger;
- Emmanuel Levinas's account of alterity and creation ex nihilo as transcending erosive desire (meaning lack-seeking-fulfillment, or "eros" in Anders Nygren's sense);
- Process theology as a source for a non-Platonic, dynamic conception of perfection;
- insights from the non-reductive strands of comparative mythological studies (especially the mythographies of Rudolph Otto and Mircea Eliade, who interpret the holy or sacred as a numinous, perilous, pan-appropriation of all being that transcends yet enters into time).

With the exception of the last, these sources develop a more "personalist" conception of God than SAM allows; although SAM accounts distinguish their God from Plato's Form of the Good and Spinoza's One by insisting that God is a personal agent who is distinct from creation, it seems that "personhood" is not their focus, since it is not explained by typical sets of greatness-making properties. My goal is to show that the main ideas in the alternative sources which distinguish their views from Anselmian models of divine attributes can be combined and made mutually reinforcing if we start from two fundamental points that characterize broadly existential conceptions of the divine:

1. A process-conception of perfection that differs radically from the traditional static conception;
2. An eschatological significance not deducible from any attributes posited in natural theology (or the parts of perfect being theology not generally considered to depend on revelation).

---

2 See essays in Pinnock et al. (1994). A number of attacks on Open Theism have also been published; in particular, see Bruce Ware's work, and House (2000).
---

3 See the Introduction to Hartshorne and William Reese (1976), which equates panentheism with the "dipolar" approach that recognizes God as passive as well as active, temporal as well as eternal, complex as well as simple, immanent as well as transcendent, etc. (pp. 3–5). Compare their discussions of Socinian (pp. 225–227), Schelling (pp. 233–234), who influenced Kierkegaard and Berydyek and Alfred North Whitehead (pp. 273–277).


---

6 Morris (1991, p. 45). Morris should have considered the detailed counterarguments to the intuitions on which he relies given by Hartshorne and Reese (1976).

---

7 Morris argues that the Anselmian approach entails that God is the "absolute source" of all else (1991, p. 45), but this still less than conceiving God as a personal agent who freely creates ex nihilo.

---

8 As Barbara Sproul says, all cultures regard their creation myths as "the most sacred for these myths are the ground on which all later myths stand" — see Sproul (1979, p. 3). She adds that "geniune religions proclaim an absolute reality as the centerpoint of their structure" (p. 6), an ineffable reality whose essence is unknowable, but which sanctifies everything that comes from it (pp. 19–20).

---

9 The ubiquity of the hylomorphic conception of creation in archaic mythography across the world is shown Eliade's work, e.g. Eliade (1971).
This is especially important when God is conceived as creator of finite persons with free will: for the new notion of existence provides precedent for the idea that personhood is more than a substantial form imposed on matter, and thus that the distinctness of a person is more than material individuation in space-time of a species-kind: although human persons are embodied animals, instances of evolved kinds, personhood is not animality. Since personhood is not a natural kind, the fact that a particular member of some species is also a person cannot have a purely naturalistic explanation. This makes possible a non-fungible value in each individual that is related to their uniqueness and freedom, and which can be the object of agapic regard. If creation ex nihilo is a free divine act, then its liberty reflects the nature of personhood, and thus of human persons created in the divine “image.” This includes not just alternative-possibilities freedom (leeway), but also freedom to transcend erosiac desire in agapic love. Thus we can will goods beyond our own flourishing and give freely in turn. Still, things we make are not as independent of us, since God’s creative power is distinguished by God’s ability to create free wills, to originate radically new beings who can exercise their own derivative authority and turn away from their maker’s purposes. Kierkegaard’s authoritative pseudonym “Anti-Climacus” writes that despair is possible for human persons because of the freedom (in which the synthesis of mind and body) relates itself to itself, inasmuch as God, who constituted man a relation, releases it from his hand—that is, inasmuch as the relation relates itself to itself.” In other words, we are not just a psycho-physical synthesis; our volition is freed to operate on the synthesis and thereby generate a “self.” This capacity reflects the radical novelty in divine creativity; by human choice, something new enters being.

The other side of cosmogonic power, however, is the dependance of what is created. In pre-biblical mythology, we always find the cosmogonic source portrayed not as an abstract principle of being (as in later rationalist accounts of divine emanations) but as the absolute owner and thus rightful destined reality that determines our telos. For example, in northern European mythologies, the ultimate divine reality behind the gods is the “Wierd” or “Wyrd,” a pregnant word that refers to an incomprehensible transcendent director, fate, “what comes to pass,” or the way of things. But as Brian Bates notes, this is not a “simple fate” or a “fixed future;” rather “Wyrd was the inexorable deeply embedded evolution of the world.” It includes the idea that the creative source of reality orders its unfolding, much as in the concept of Dao, or the arché that preserves justice over the course of time according to the Anaximander Fragment. Wyrd is closely associated with other symbols of the divine, such as the cosmic “Wyrm” or uroborus dragon that holds reality together, the cosmic tree or axis mundi, and the three Fates who sit in Hel at the root of this tree, spinning the thread of time. “Wierd” is related to “weothan,” the verb for “being,” and in old English poetry, its power governs the end of all things as well, drawing them back to it:

In earth-realm, all is crossed;  
Wierd’s will change the world;  
Wealth is lent to us, friends are lent us;  
Man is lent, kin is lent  
All this earth’s frame shall stand empty.”

On this archaic view, all just possession (i) derives from God, (ii) is temporary and provisional, and (iii) our property, life, and even our works are owed back to God in the end. This idea of divinity as Pan-Appropriation is found in the cosmogonic myths across the world (see Eliade). This dimension of Ereignis or appropriation of being is what makes the divine a mysterium tremendum in pre-monotheistic religions (see Rudolph Otto). and it becomes eschatological purpose in monotheistic faiths. However, this aspect of divinity is compatible with biblically inspired conceptions of human freedom: in archaic mythology, fate and free choice work together. This combination is lost in SAM conceptions emphasizing complete divine providential control and foreknowledge as aspects of maximal sovereignty and omniscience. But in biblical traditions, the combination can be found in the paradox of creation ex nihilo: while the divine has the sole right to own and destine created persons, it gives up absolute control to make us free. Created persons mirror this paradox at one remove: we are naturally creative beings who express themselves in making, but our children cannot be our possessions, and we cannot lay any absolute claim to our works. This idea has been developed by Tolkien in his conception of “subcreative” art as part of the human telos. In his view, making art and works of beauty is among the basic expressions of our nature, but we must accept that we are only co-creators and offer our creations back to the divine source.

---

17 In Norse and German mythology, this idea is most clearly illustrated in the motif of misappropriation of a piece of gold from nature (e.g. from a river or deep underground source) which then becomes cursed until it is returned.
19 Otto (1950); also see Davenport (1999).
20 At the intersection of ‘pagan’ and Christian thought, one finds fairy tales that combine symbols of the Wyrd with eschatological judgment; for example, consider the petrified figure who represents both the sacred power of life and justice of human virtue in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.
God as Perfect Agapic Love

As this sketch of alterogenesis suggests, the existential conception of God's creativity coheres with the idea that the core of agapic generosity is to value intrinsically what is other than self as distinct or alterior, to value its freedom, novelty, and difference from one's own being. The greatest possible expression of such pure generosity would then be to create beings that have alterity in relation to their creator because of their freedom, i.e. to create persons. This paradoxical accomplishment is the expression of ultimate personhood and absolute love. God is not a metaphysical principle or form, but rather absolute personality, whose basic relation to everything else is agapic love that is free from lack or need and that creates purely for the good of what is created. Open theism tends to connect divine agape with rejecting control of persons and valuing freely given devotion above all else. Moreover, open theists have argued that, given God's nature as perfect love or the permanent offer of relation, God is not impassible (at least in the standard Anselmian sense - more on this below); God motivates Godself, acts on these loving motives, and even reacts to the decisions of human persons. While God does not desire anything in the erosic sense, God wills goods in creating contingent beings, in sustaining the universe, and in preparing the hereafter. "Willing" in this sense, which includes agapic love as a volitional state, is a non-erosic type of motivation directly generated by the agent in response to actual or potential values as grounds.

The personalist and religious-existential genres have supported this agapic view in even more radical forms. For example, Martin Buber conceives God not as the ontological ground of the being of entities but as the personal basis for non-objectifying relations who enters into time and history. To Buber, God is the ultimate Thou (Du) who is absolutely different from things or objects and whose nature distinguishes the personal (You) from the realm of objects (It). This "actuality" that makes possible direct contact with the other person as alterior, is something we cannot "appropriate." While humans are only partly personal beings, since we are also possessive egos (the "I" of I-You versus the "I" of I-It), God is the "eternal You," the "You" that in accordance with its nature cannot become an "It." This conception of God thus incorporates the negative aspect of cosmogonic ownership (absolute unappropriability) into the agapic framework that emphasizes God's pure self-giving: the power of destiny becomes a call to relation and vocation that awaits each person's
free turning to it. God is the only infinite You who can be in exclusive relation with all persons at once. Moreover, on Buber's conception, God creates human persons to participate in creation themselves, and thus to be in free relation with God and with one another, rather than to live as modes of a divine totality.

**God as the Source of Eschatological Possibilities**

Some defenders of SAM have tried to infer from the abstract idea of a perfect being God's personality, creativity, and love. But the heart of the new existential model lies in a revelation that is ineradicable from natural theology or classical perfect being theology: the distinguishing mark of the divine is not simply cosmogenic power and creativity, or even love, but rather the promise of salvation for individuals and possibly the perfection of the whole created order, i.e. the actualization of an ethically ideal state of affairs by divine power in time, or in the hereafter. This idea is the core of Kierkegaard's conception of the God who is the object of religious faith, which is a direct, singular relation of trust in God as the source of eschatological possibilities that are revealed in divine promises; only through divine action are eschatological goods possible. Existential faith thus consists in a kind of eschatological hope that cannot be justified on the basis of natural knowledge; it is not simply belief in a God who grounds such hope, but absolute trust in God to make one's life, effort, and suffering meaningful. In Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, Abraham's situation involves the following six elements:

(A) An agapic ethical ideal: The agent must not reject or transcend as a moral imperative: the agent must continue to recognize this ideal. [Abraham must love Isaac with his whole soul].

(B) An obstacle: To the ethical ideal: some misfortune, problem, or set of circumstances make it practically impossible for the agent to secure his ethical ideal by his own effort [in this unusual case, the obstacle is God's mysterious and terrible command to give Isaac back].

(C) Infinite resignation: having concentrated his entire identity in commitment to the other, the agent accepts that the ideal is unattainable because of the other's: the agent is accessible to his agency only as an ideal in atemporal eternity. Thus the agent either stops actively pursuing the ideal by his own endeavors, or pursues it as a pure expression of principle without any hope of thereby realizing it. [Abraham continues to love Isaac despite accepting that he cannot save Isaac if God demands him].

(D) An eschatological promise (from God or God's prophets) that the ideal is to be actualized by divine power within the created order of existence—either within time, or in the hereafter—thereby securing a new temporal series (rather than as a Platonic *aeternitas*). [In Abraham's case, God has promised to him that Isaac will become the father of a holy nation to bring the Word to all peoples].

(E) The absurd: the content of the eschatological promise, which is only eschatologically possible given O and thus appears unattainable outside of faith. [For Abraham, the absurd is that Isaac will survive to fulfill his promised role, despite being demanded for sacrifice].

(F) Faith in the "existential" sense is defined in terms of the prior elements: the agent wills E in infinite resignation, yet trusts entirely in the eschatological promise, stakes her identity on the trust that E will be actualized by God. ["Even in the moment when the knife gleamed," Abraham believed that he would get Isaac back "by virtue of the absurd"].

On this existential conception, not only a human being but also the divine object is distinguished from the source of reality and the ground of ethical norms by its eschatological role: God is the being who makes eschatological promises and brings them to fruition. This clearly transcends anything in SAM: from maximal power and maximal goodness we can infer that God will achieve what is best, but we cannot infer the idea of a final good, or the ways that such a culminating good could be structured. In particular, the idea of a new temporal order in which creation is renewed appears to be sui generis. That limit of religion within pure reason is part of Kierkegaard's response to Kant. This is not to say that God's eschatological function can play no role in philosophical argument. John Hick's notion of "eschatological verification" draws on such a soteriological conception of God to defend the meaningfulness of religious claims against positivist reductions.

This distinctive soteriological conception of divinity helps connect all the other components in NEM. It extends the idea of perfect agapic love to the salvation of individual persons and transformation of the world, since it conceives the hereafter...

---

32 Kierkegaard (1983, p. 36 [III 87]).

33 Note that even if Kant's famous deduction of the highest good from the moral law is convincing, it only yields the idea of endless time to perfect one's will. Similarly, the idea that the divine itself becomes environed or fuller in the hereafter is not part of classical perfect being theology, though it is found in mythology: see van der Leeuw (1957).

34 See Davenport (2002). Compare Hans Küng's argument that faith in God is a "radical and fundamental trust" that cannot be justified in advance by prior deduction or rational proof of its validity: Küng (1981, pp. 572-776).

35 See Hick (1960, 1977). However, Hick does not theorize the temporal distinction between here and hereafter; on this issue, see Davenport (2002).

36 Compare Paul Tillich's discussion of the Holy as "the judgment over everything that is" and as the ultimate dimension in which one "can win or lose his soul" in Tillich (1957), pp. 56 and 84.
as the perfect fulfillment of agapic ideals. It requires a personal God who stands in unique relations to created persons through their faith in God's revealed promises and action in history, which express God's love for them. But it also preserves from the existential conception of cosmogonic creativity the idea that divinity is not merely an ethical principle or exemplar but also a unique kind of power — not "omnipotence" in a generic, logically maximal sense (if a single coherent conception of this can be found), but rather the specific power to own, destine, and fulfill. Yet the paradox of eschatological omnipotence is that the ultimate power is expressed in self-limiting, waiving the right to absolute control by creating alterity, and responding to the free faith of created persons. For the mutual relationships of eschatological trust and grace between created persons and God require an ontological distinction between them that God respects and values. The eschatological conception combines the core of the oldest religions in history, which conceive the divine as the sacred power from which all reality flows, with the axial vision of ethical ideals — justice and universal love: God is the person who promises to remake the original creation in accordance with the goodness that God personifies. Thus NEM incorporates central aspects of panentheistic or dipolar views while adding what they missed or underemphasized — namely the distinctive eschatological function of divinity.

**The Process Conception of Perfection**

Taking these first three attributes seriously requires rejecting the static conception of perfection that comes down from Plato (and perhaps the Upanishads), which is the basis for the Anselmian conception of "maximal greatness" and thus all the divine attributes according to SAM. According to NEM, perfection should not be conceived as a static state or maximum, but rather as a process of endless growth and qualitative enrichment.\(^{42}\) Such a process has an asymmetry characteristic of a temporal order without being "a less perfect mode of existence" that is transitory, incomplete, or wearing down.\(^{42}\) (1) Such a processive conception of perfection is implicit in the idea of the divine as Wierd or Dao, which is not only the original cosmogonic source but also the purpose revealed in the shape of unfolding history. If we add to this that history is partly shaped by the free decisions of created persons, then through alterogenesis, God becomes qualitatively fuller in the resulting relation with creatures. Perhaps the same goes for the universe itself; to the extent that it has significance independent of God's creative intervention, God's being becomes richer through relation to this created order. (2) Perfect agapic love is precisely the willingness to create alterity, which is possible in its pure form only for God; infinite ontological generosity is the possibility of endless encounter with new entities, new relationships — which is endless expansion or development of being. (3) Similarly, eschatological perfection entails process (though not the converse). It is essential to the concept of a perfect hereafter that cannot be directly created at the beginning of time, since it has to build history (accounts that allow no freedom in created persons face the challenge of explaining why God did not immediately actualize the hereafter rather than creating this universe). And when the eschatological aspect of the divine is distinguished from its cosmogonic function, the perfection of the hereafter cannot be a return to the precreation state: it is a higher state in which divine being itself is advanced through God's union with creation. This is another aspect of eschatological perfection that cannot be deduced from static perfect being theology.

This processive conception of divine perfection provides a coherent way to reject simple notions of divine "impossibility" that go together in SAM with Platonic or Boethian conceptions of divine eternity and simplicity. I have argued elsewhere that Plato's own deduction of divine impassibility in Republic II (from which the later arguments descend) depends on the implicit premise that all motivation is erosic in form, i.e. lack seeking fulfillment or completion.\(^{44}\) Yet Plato himself eventually came to reject that premise, and the agapic form of divine motivation is active rather than passive, volitional rather than appetitive. The agapic aspect of divinity thus leaves open the possibility of a God who responds with care to individual persons and events in time, a God who makes decisions and changes as a result of them, growing in excellence (and thus exhibiting processive perfection). This in turn fits both with leeway-liberty and alterogenesis as divine attributes: God freely creates free creatures and responds to their choices in time.

**Divine Temporality or Higher Time**

As this gloss suggests, the processive conception of perfection requires a different conception of God's relation to temporality. The traditional debate about this aspect of SAM has concerned whether God is "eternal" in the sense of being completely atemporal or whether God is "in" time (views that connect respectively with four-dimensionalist tenseless conceptions of time, and presentist versions of tensed time with a "moving now"). NEM must affirm a tensed conception of time with a moving-now or "A-series,"\(^{45}\) but it reframes the issue significantly because

(a) Physical time (P), as part of the natural order, is created by God in generating the laws of nature: therefore God (at least as creator) cannot be in P-time.
(b) However, since God's being is processive, it comes in stages or an asymmetric order that is like a temporal A-series: this higher time (H) is an uncreated aspect of divine reality itself.

\(^{42}\) We could add "to the greatest degree possible," but it is not clear that we can define any maximum possible growth, enhancement, or enrichment through new relation. It might also be better to have freedom to create more or less. Thus NEM is not committed to the idea that God must create an infinite number of universes or persons.

\(^{44}\) See Davenport, *Will as Commitment and Resolve*, ch. 9, pp. 289–296.

\(^{45}\) See Davenport 2012, ch. 5.
This higher temporality as a divine attribute is not simply the “hyper-time” dimension discussed by Craig and others, “at each of whose moments our entire time dimension exists or not.”\(^4\) For it is a process whose direction embodies divine growth. At least three stages in the asymmetric order of H-time are already implied by other divine attributes listed above on the existential model:

(i) H1: God H-before creating this universe;
(ii) H2: the existence of this universe with its entire physical time-series;
(iii) H3: the hereafter: God and the new creation following the eschaton or end of P-time.

H2 could also have intermediate stages that are correlated with moments of P-time (rather than with the whole P-time dimension) so that God can be said to experience the passage of P-time and know what P-time it is now.\(^5\) On this account, God’s making decisions in response to choices and events in our universe would be H-temporal changes within stage H2. But the resulting development and the forward arrow of H-time do not result from the causal arrow in P-time or correlated arrows of temporal necessity\(^6\); rather, the H-arrow is an essential aspect of God’s being. Here NEM incorporates the Heideggerian idea that Being is essentially temporal (in the A-series sense), the idea covered up by the Electics and their successors (including the originators of SAM). While P-time exists contingently, H-time exists necessarily and constitutes a perspective that transcends P-time. Thus the Boethian eternals and more recent temporalists (e.g. in Open Theism) are each partially right according to NEM: God is not in P-time, but in H-time; and the passage of P-time is real to God (God does not see P-time as a tenseless four-dimensional whole).\(^7\)

**Limited Foreknowledge and Anti-Molinism**

This position on God’s progressive nature supports the sorts of limits to divine foreknowledge and providential planning that Open Theism derives from the freedom and finite alterity of created persons. Since God does not now being in a timeless, static heaven, but is in harmony with created physical time, to the extent that the truth-value of future contingents is undetermined by present and past hard facts, God cannot observe these future states of affairs: they are accessible to God, as to us, only through the unfolding of the process that is ultimately God’s own growing being (though God may be an infinitely better predictor based on available information).\(^8\) The existential model agrees with Open Theism’s primary argument for these limits: to be morally responsible, persons must be free in a leeway-libertarian sense that is incompatible with the temporal necessity resulting from omniscient foreknowledge of their future choices (and NEM is open to the idea that some future contingents lack a precise present truth-value).\(^9\) Of course, the thesis that leeway-liberty is needed requires significant defense,\(^10\) as does the further thesis that leeway-liberty is incompatible with omniscient foreknowledge,\(^11\) but both these theses have received extensive recent defense and remain viable.

Rather than try to review these arguments here, I will briefly argue that the existential conception of created persons with finite aseity in NEM is also incompatible with Molinist subjunctive conditionals about their free choices to which God could look in deciding which “personal essences” to actualize. That there are no such Molinist facts or essences H-before individual agents exist and make choices is one of several propositions involved in the signature existentialist idea that “existence precedes essence.” Similarly, a person is not a Leibnizian monad, nor a Kantian noumenal self whose temporal choices are all made in a single atemporal choice of basic character. The burden of argument is on Molinists to come up with plausible reasons for their view, but the viability of NEM undercuts the idea that divine sovereignty requires kinds of providential control that would be possible only if Molinism is true: thus the basic motivation for this strained metaphysical position is removed.

The existential approach to moral freedom provides additional arguments against Molinism, beyond rightly influential argument (from William Hasker and Robert

---

\(^4\) As this language implies, NEM is probably best developed with a “growing-block” rather than presentist conception of both H-time and P-time. For it would be very strange to say that God’s H-past no longer has been.

\(^5\) For a review of some of the recent literature, see Davenport (2006).

\(^6\) See Hasker redefinition of omniscience and defense of “free will theism” against Molinism in Hasker (1994).

\(^7\) See Davenport (2007b) and Hasker (1994, pp. 147).

\(^8\) When Plantinga implicitly invokes Molinist haeceities in his “Free Will Defense” against the logical problem of evil, H-priority is also implicit. For there has to be an ontological sense in which these personal essences “are” before God makes any choice about which of them to actualize, or they could not constrain God’s choice. Yet since they are supposed to consist in a set of logically contingent facts about what each creatable person would choose to do in different situations. Molinist haeceities are not like mathematical truths holding in all logically possible worlds. Still, they are also transworld truths: within each logically possible world, a different set of facts concerning what some persons would do obtains, but these world-relative conditionals cannot be the Molinist facts, which render some of these possible worlds unactualizable (by making some of their conditionals transworld-false). This paradox can be explained by saying that Molinist conditionals obtain at H1, while the world-relative conditionals are indexed to H2. But this then supports the existential anti-Molinist argument sketched below.

---


\(^10\) I take the position sketched here to be very similar to the view defended in Finnock (2001); compare Sanders (2007). However, the NEM view that God develops and risks need not be based specifically on Christian doctrine, as in Nicholas Wolterstorff’s argument against the Anselmian model; see Wolterstorff (2001).
Adams) that there are no plausible truthmakers for subjunctive conditionals of freedom in many cases (especially for possible persons who are never actual). This argument depends on denying the Molinist response that a createable agent A's merely possible will serves as the truthmaker for the subjunctive conditional saying that if A were in circumstance C at time T, she would choose X among the options open to her (X, Y, Z, etc.). The outline of NEM sketched above clarifies these three further reasons to doubt the plausibility of this Molinist response. First, if Molinism were true, God would not be the genesis of alterity in created persons; the directions of their will would be eternal uncreated facts at H1 (like possibilia though logically contingent) that further constrains what combinations of entities God's omnipotent power can actualize. Second, process theory argues that leeway-liberty makes nothing the case without time-succession; time must really flow for choice to have a medium in which to operate. On this view, no merely possible free will can make true any contingent facts about what it would choose in situations with open options before it exists. Third, if logically possible person's will could serve as truthmaker for her counterfactuals of freedom, they would be incompatible with the control-conditions of moral responsibility. To see this, consider the following sketch of an existential anti-Molinist argument employing the concept of higher time (H):

1. If Molinism is true, then the set of Molinist counterfactuals M about possible person A constrains the states of affairs that God can directly actualize because the contingent facts stated in M obtain H-prior to God creating any persons, including A [otherwise, Molinism would do no theological work].
2. Any set of facts F1 that are H-prior to the determination of H-later states of affairs F2 function as synthetic necessities in relation to F2. For example, if the laws of nature are fixed H-prior to the history of the physical universe at its creation, then they are nomologically necessary throughout that history [the concept of synthetic modal kinds, including temporal modality]
3. Thus Molinist conditionals M about what A would do in various choice-circumstances if A were created make each of these subjunctive truths H-necessary for A [from 1 and 2]
4. But H-necessity is incompatible with the leeway-freedom required for responsibility, just as P-temporal necessity and nomological necessity are incompatible with real leeway power to bring about alternative decisions or intentions [by analogy with libertarian intuitions relative to other kinds of synthetic necessity]
5. But normal human persons meet the freedom-conditions of responsibility and the creation of responsible beings capable of finite agency is among God's perfections [alterogenesis premise]
6. Therefore Molinism is false [4 and 5 entail that 3 is false: reductio of premise 1].

In other words, the set of ideas drawn together in NEM helps clarify exactly why Molinism has seemed so implausible to many persons of biblical faith and other

---

The risk of taking open sovereignty

There have always been some followers of late Augustine who have accepted that classical conceptions of divine sovereignty as control of every detail in the history of the universe are incompatible with human leeway-liberty and make God at least causally responsible for all evil, both moral and natural, even if humans share the responsibility via compatibilist freedom. NEM stands almost on the opposite end of a spectrum of views about divine sovereignty within western theism in general: it says that God's relation to created time and to free creatures within the created temporal order implies that divine sovereignty over creation is exercised neither through total providential control over details of history, nor pre-calculation of which persons to create based on their Molinist sets. Natural determinism, constant miraculous intervention to control all details (as in occasionalism), or pre-established harmony would destroy the moral freedom of personal agents and reduce all creation to a mere extension of God's being—an emanation without alterity.

Instead, God creates so freely that the development of an indeterministic universe and the history wrought by the free choices of its finite persons is alterior to God's direct control and pre-ordination, which is exactly why the results add something to God's being that was not already nascent in the divine mind. Through the natural conditions of creation, God develops, surpassing any alleged maximal greatness as a static state. NEM then implies that God is the ultimate risk-taker, accepting that moral evils may be created by the free choice of finite persons, and perhaps also natural evils that result from indeterminism in the natural order too.54

---

53 See Hasker (2004). This is consistent with divine omnipotence, even on conceptions which insist that an omnipotent being could create a world completely ordered by providence (conceptions that NEM likely rejects). For God might be capable of creating a universe every detail of whose history is solely determined by divine decree but wisely choose not to (Hasker 1994, p. 151).
This is the highest expression of processive perfection. But God's sovereignty is still expressed in what created persons owe to God, both ontologically and ethically: rightful authority is inherently linked to the divine essence, and all other authority is derivative.

Conclusion: NEM and the Problem(s) of Evil

I have only offered a bare sketch of central elements in the new existential model of God, but this should be enough to indicate how this model opens new ways of answering the problems of natural and moral evil, while foreseeing others: instead of Plantinga's Molinist version of the free will defense, we have a free will defense that emphasizes the need for divine, if moral freedom is to matter. In conclusion, I wish briefly to explore how NEM might be extended to address the temporal aspect of natural evil by connecting moral freedom and creaturely activity with a physical order involving strong laws of nature (not mere regularities) that are nevertheless indeterministic and open to input from creaturely agent-creation.

In discussions of the problem of evil, beyond free will defenses, soul-making theodicies, and theistic dualism (emphasizing overall goodness that requires value-contrast and complex goods arising from response to evils), there is less well-known but still long line of proposals that might be called a 'defense from the need for order in nature' (or 'natural order defense' for short). Its central idea is that, for free will and moral responsibility to be real for a plurality of created persons, they must co-exist in a temporal law-governed nexus in which outcomes are not all causally determined by its initial conditions and natural laws,

References


Existential thinkers like Frankl, Berdyaev, and Kierkegaard tend to emphasize only the meaning that can be found in suffering and eschatological hope for a transformation of this meaning, without addressing the problems of natural evil in an evolutionary context. So here again, NEM provides a more complete synthesis.
A New Existential Model of God: A Synthesis of Themes

Taking the Nature of God Seriously

Nicholas Maxwell

Instead of debating the question “Does God exist?”, we should rather, I claim, debate “What is the nature of God?”, it being presumed that God, whatever He or It may be, does exist. Or rather, more accurately, the proper, crucial question is: “What exists that is closest to, and captures the best of what is in, the traditional conception of God?”. In this paper I set out to answer that question.¹

In tackling this question, I make two obvious, modest methodological assumptions. First, any answer to our question must, inevitably, be a conjecture, a hypothesis, which may or may not be true. Our task is to assess the relative merits of rival conjectures about the nature of God.

Second, I assume that reason, though of limitless scope, has only very limited powers. It cannot prove beliefs about the world, about reality, to be true. All it can do, at most, is to establish that some set of factual beliefs is false, because inconsistent. As Karl Popper tirelessly argued, even our best scientific theories cannot be verified or justified; they remain, for ever, conjectures which, at best, can be empirically falsified (or shown to be incompatible with empirical results).²

It is important to acknowledge that reason has only limited powers because, if one does not, it becomes reasonable to hold that reason has its limits, and all sorts of beliefs, including religious ones, are beyond the scope of reason, defy reason, and are legitimately held as articles of irrational faith – even if inconsistent! Interpret the powers of reason more modestly, as helping us to choose, fallibly, between rival conjectures, and no thesis, not even a religious one concerning the nature of God, lies beyond the reach of reason.

¹This question is explored in much greater detail than I can manage here in Maxwell (2010).
²See Popper (1963) or, at a more technical level, Popper (1959). See also these works and Popper (1966), ch. 24 for his defence of critical rationalism – the doctrine that the task of reason is to try to improve conjectures by means of criticism.