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Editors

Models of God and Alternative Ultimate Realities

 Springer

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*To my parents, James and Jean,
for a lifetime of encouragement
and love.*

Jeanine Diller

*To the deepest, clearest and most
beloved sources of inspiration:
My late son, Yehoraz, my late
father, Shimeon, and my late
forefathers, as well as my wife,
Naomi, and my children Shirith
and Avshalom.*

Asa Kasher

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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).¹ 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.

¹ For a representative standard account, see Morris (1991, pp. 35–40). It is noteworthy that *all* the essays included in Morris’s (1987) collection defend some aspect of SAM.

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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"² 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.³
- 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 erosiac desire (meaning lack-seeking-fulfillment, or "eros" in Anders Nygren's sense)⁴;
- 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 time⁵).

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 Pincock 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 Socinus (pp. 225–227), Schelling (pp. 233–234), who influenced Kierkegaard and Berdyaev, and Alfred North Whitehead (pp. 273–277).

⁴ See Levinas (1969, 1996). Also see the comparisons in Westphal (2008). For development of Nygren's notion of erosiac desire, see Soble (1990, ch. 1). Also see Davenport (2007a, ch. 4).

⁵ See Otto (1950) and Eliade (1969, 1959, 1971, esp. chs. 3 and 5).

Rather than comment in detail on the non-Anselmian traditions and figures listed above, this paper will briefly outline the main elements of the new existential model (NEM), along with their relation to (1) and (2), and explain how this account of God diverges from the picture given by perfect being theology on many (though not every) traditional attribute. When thus developed, the elements of NEM fit well together to form a coherent rival to the Anselmian picture. This possibility has not been sufficiently appreciated in recent philosophy of religion, because the various thinkers who developed parts of NEM worked separately. But when their ideas are put together, they present a more powerful alternative to SAM that undercuts Tom Morris's claim that perfect being theology captures "the most majestic conception of God imaginable" and has an "intuitive and integrative force" that is "without parallel."⁶ On the contrary, NEM provides a more majestic conception with at least as much intuitive appeal and integrative force.

Seven Aspects of God or Divine Reality on the New Existential Model

God as Ground and Creator

It is easiest to begin with an aspect of divinity that is not always considered an essential attribute, since it is metaphysically contingent according to most versions of SAM.⁷ However, the new existential account recognizes that all original conceptions of the "sacred" or "divine" in human history begin with the idea of an ultimate genesis or source of reality.⁸ Within biblical monotheism, this idea develops into the more radical notion of God as *creator ex nihilo*, rather than God as the forming principle of formless stuff (or prime material). This new conception of divine creativity involves more than hylomorphic ordering: matter itself arises from cosmic power, and non-being is a radical nothing rather than mere chaos or formlessness.⁹ Thus being is not a property that forms an entity or makes it intelligible; instead it is a radical relation to the sacred source. There is an inherent tension in this idea: for it makes the created being more radically derivative, yet also more radically novel.

⁶ Morris (1991, p. 43). 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 "genuine religions proclaim an absolute reality as the centerpiece 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 mythology 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 (leeway¹⁰), 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."¹¹ In other words, we are not just a psycho-physical synthesis; our volition is freed to operate on that 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 dependence 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 *desirer* of reality that determines our telos.¹² 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.¹³ But as Brian Bates notes, this is not a "simple fate" or a "fixed future;"¹⁴ 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 archē that preserves justice over the course of time according to the Anaximander Fragment. Wyrd is closely associated with other

¹⁰ I regularly refer to "leeway-liberty" to distinguish this kind of libertarian freedom from source-control or ultimate origination, though the two are often closely connected.

¹¹ Kierkegaard (1980, p. 16 [XI 130]). For an explanation, see Davenport (2013).

¹² As Sproul says, cosmogonic myths "assert that the structure of the absolute pervades the relative: the Holy is the *ground* of being" and its ways "should also be understood as the *goal* of being, indications of what we should become" (1979, p. 23).

¹³ See David Wright (1957, p. 17).

¹⁴ Bates (2003, p. 76); Bates notes the similarities to the "Great Tao."

symbols of the divine, such as the cosmic "Wýrm" 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 "weoðan," the verb for "being,"¹⁵ 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.¹⁶

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.¹⁷ This idea of divinity as Pan-Appropriation is found in cosmogonic myths across the world (see Eliade¹⁸). This dimension of Ereignis or appropriation of being is what makes the divine a *mysterium tremendum* in pre-monotheistic religions (see Rudolph Otto),¹⁹ and it becomes eschatological purpose in monotheistic faiths.²⁰ 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.²¹

¹⁵ See Alexander (1977, p. 22). For more examples of "Wierd," see the fragmentary poem, "The Ruin," along with "The Wanderer" and "The Seafarer" in Alexander (1977).

¹⁶ See "The Wanderer" in Alexander (1977, p. 73). Compare similar usages in "The Ruin" (p. 28).

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.

¹⁸ Mircea Eliade (1991, 1988, 1985, 1979).

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 perilous figure who represents both the sacred power of life and judgment of human virtue in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

²¹ See J.R.R. Tolkien's lecture "On Fairy-Stories," in Tolkien (1964, 1975, 1983). Compare the contrast between archangelic Valar subcreating parts of the universe either unpossessively or more possessively in Tolkien (1977), *Valequnta* and *Quenta Silmarillion* chs. 1–2.

Thus instead of a single attribute, NEM includes four related sub-attributes under the cosmogenic side of the divine:

- A. *God as the necessary being* and ground of contingent reality. This includes the traditional idea of God as origin and metaphysical foundation in cosmological arguments (on this point, NEM agrees with classical western theism).
 - B. God as free creator *ex nihilo*, who expresses God's nature in creating a world and creatures that are more than a mere extension or aspect of God's being.
 - C. "*Wierd*," *Destiny*: the divine as absolute Owner or rightful Appropriator of all beings, ruling out absolute ownership by creatures.
 - D. *Alterogenesis*: Only God has the power to create *alterity*, i.e. beings whose character is radically *independent* of their creator, since they respond freely to their source.²²
- (i) God is the paradoxical source of beings who are derivatively *autonomous* (Kierkegaard, Emmanuel Levinas²³); they exercise leeway-liberty, partially fashioning themselves, subcreating in God's image, and can even separate finally from God.
 - (ii) The alterity of created persons makes them unappropriable by each other: none can rightfully own or destine others. This free uniqueness is the *imago dei* and ground of agapic duties.
 - (iii) By contrast, thing we make cannot attain alterity from us: they remain expressions or extensions of ourselves. Yet in our lesser way, we can also make beauty for its own sake, without possessiveness.

These components together form the 'existential conception of cosmogenic divinity.' As we will see, the final component of alterogenesis as a divine attribute is central to the rest of NEM. It explains the idea that creating free wills whose choices exhibit finite *aseity*²⁴ is a divine perfection: aseity is important not only because the moral agency it makes possible has unparalleled intrinsic metaphysical value, but also because through it, created persons *share* a finite image of God's being as self-donating love. The greatest possible being is that which can *create beings who in turn are creative*, able to add genuine novelty to reality, to shape their own identity, and to give themselves to others.²⁵

²² See Davenport (2007a, ch. 9) and Davenport (2002).

²³ See Levinas (1969): "... the idea of creation *ex nihilo* expresses a multiplicity not united into a totality; the creature is an existence which indeed does depend on another, but not as a part ... Creation leaves to the creature a trace of dependence, but it is an unparalleled dependence: the dependent being draws from this exceptional dependence, from this relationship, its very independence, its exteriority to the system" (pp. 104–105); compare p. 218.

²⁴ I take this term from Katherine Rogers' work on Anselm, Rogers (2008). In this context, "aseity" means that choices originate from the created agent and add something new to being, thus mirroring divine aseity – not that the agent exists from herself or exists necessarily.

²⁵ See Marcel (1964, p. 53). Karl Jaspers follows Kierkegaard's teaching in *Sickness Unto Death* so closely that he says we discover the reality of our creator precisely in our freedom: see Jaspers (1954, p. 45).

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.²⁶ Open theism tends to connect divine agape with rejecting control of persons and valuing freely given devotion above all else.²⁷ 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.²⁸ While God does not desire anything in the erosiac 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-erosiac type of motivation directly generated by the agent in response to actual or potential values as grounds.²⁹

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."³⁰ 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."³¹ This conception of God thus incorporates the negative aspect of cosmogenic 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

²⁶ See Nygren (1982). Though Nygren is not an open theist, his emphasis on God's agapic love is important for NEM.

²⁷ See Rice et al. (1994, p. 40).

²⁸ Ibid, pp. 34–38.

²⁹ See Davenport (2007a, chs. 5, 9, and 14).

³⁰ Martin Buber (1970, Part II, p. 113).

³¹ Ibid, Part III, p. 123. It is also implicit in Buber's descriptions that God does not objectify or apprehend anything else as a mere "It," despite God's right of ownership.

free turning to it.³² God is the only infinite You who can be in exclusive relation with all persons at once.³³ 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.³⁴

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 inferable neither from natural theology or classical perfect being theology: the distinguishing mark of the divine is not simply cosmogonic power and creativity, or even pure 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 a hereafter.³⁵ 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.³⁶ 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* E that is not rejected or transcended as a moral imperative: the agent must continue to recognize this ideal. [Abraham must love Isaac with his whole soul].
- (B) *An obstacle* O 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 E, the agent accepts that E is humanly unattainable because of O: E is accessible to his agency only as an ideal in atemporal eternity. Thus the agent either

³² Ibid, Part II, p. 102, p. 108. Yet the Wierd remains in Buber's conception of God. For example, Buber 1958, he describes God's name as given to Moses as meaning not only the one who exists always, but also the one who cannot be conjured (pp. 52–53).

³³ Buber (1970, Part III, p. 127).

³⁴ Ibid, Part III, p. 130.

³⁵ See Davenport (1996) for a general account of eschatological faith.

³⁶ See Davenport (2008c) for an analysis of *Fear and Trembling*. See Davenport (2008a) for an analysis of faith in the *Postscript*; and Davenport (2008b) for a defense of Kierkegaard against critiques by Levinas and Derrida (1993).

stops actively pursuing E by his own endeavors, or pursues it as a pure expression of principle without any hope of thereby realizing E. [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 E will be actualized by divine power within the created order of existence – either *within time*, or in *the hereafter* as 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 unintelligible 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”³⁷].

On this existential conception, not only human faith but also its 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*.³⁸ That limit of religion within pure reason is part of Kierkegaard's response to Kant.³⁹ This is not to say that God's eschatological function can play no role in philosophical argument. John Hick's notion of “eschatological verification”⁴⁰ draws on such a soteriological conception of God to defend the meaningfulness of religious claims against positivist reductions.⁴¹

This distinctive eschatological 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

³⁷ Kierkegaard (1983, p. 36 [III 87]).

³⁸ 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 enriched or fuller in the hereafter is not part of classical perfect being theology, though it is found in mythology: see van der Leeuw (1957).

³⁹ 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).

⁴⁰ See Hick (1960, 1977). However, Hick does not thematize the temporal distinction between here and hereafter; on this issue, see Davenport (2002).

⁴¹ 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.⁴³ (1) Such a processive conception of perfection is implicit in the idea of the divine as Wielder 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 altergenesis, 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,

⁴² We could add “to the greatest degree possible,” but it is not clear that we can define any unique 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.

⁴³ See William Craig (2001a, p. 133). Craig argues for an omnitemporal God (existing at all times).

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 on 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 pre-creation 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 “impassibility” 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 *erosiac* 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.

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."⁴⁶ 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.⁴⁷ 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 necessity⁴⁸; 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 Eleatics 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 eternalists 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).⁴⁹

Limited Foreknowledge and Anti-Molinism

This position on God's processive 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 have being in a timeless,

⁴⁶ See Craig (2001b, p. 24). Higher time in my sense also has nothing to do with the extra dimension of physical time postulated in some recent versions of string theory.

⁴⁷ Though details are beyond the scope of this essay, I believe this view is better than Craig's idea that God's life has "two phases," one timeless and one omnitemporal (with creation), "that are not related to each other as earlier and later" (Ibid, p. 235). For then creation cannot be an action (in any familiar sense); there is no development in God; and no adequate way to fit the hereafter into the picture (would it be a third phase in no time-like relation to others?). See also Talbot 1992.

⁴⁸ See Linda Zagzebski's groundbreaking paper "Omniscience and the Arrow of Time," *Faith and Philosophy* 19 no. 4 (Oct. 2002): 503–519, in which she defends causal asymmetry from certain dilemmas.

⁴⁹ I take the position sketched here to be very similar to the view defended in Pinmock (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).

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).⁵⁰ 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).⁵¹ Of course, the thesis that leeway-liberty is needed requires significant defense,⁵² as does the further thesis that leeway-liberty is incompatible with omniscient foreknowledge,⁵³ but both these theses have received extensive recent defense and remain viable.

Rather than trying 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 choices⁵⁴ 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

⁵⁰ 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 being.

⁵¹ For a review of some of the recent literature, see Davenport (2006).

⁵² See Hasker redefinition of omniscience and defense of "free will theism" against Molinism in Hasker (1994).

⁵³ See Davenport (2007b) and Hasker (1994, pp. 147).

⁵⁴ When Plantinga implicitly invokes Molinist haecceities 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 haecceities 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.

Adams) that there are no plausible truthmakers for subjunctive conditionals of freedom in many cases (especially for possible persons who are never actual).⁵⁵ 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 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 a 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 aseity 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

⁵⁵ See Hasker (1989, ch. 2). Hasker (1995), Adams (1991), and Zimmerman (2009). Contrast Flint (2006).

theists: if it were true, then human agents would be responsible for choices that follow necessarily from a set of truths over which *they have no actual control* in time – truths that, while not holding in all possible worlds in which they exist (since choices contrary to their Molinist conditionals are *logically* possible), nevertheless have a kind of truth that is H-prior to the temporal existence in which leeway-control can operate. The synthetic necessity of future choices according to Molinism is very similar to the temporal necessity that would result if these choices had been determined in the past of our universe long before their birth. This point is obscured when Molinism is introduced into an eternalist framework with God conceived according to SAM, but it becomes clear when libertarian intuitions are considered in the NEM framework incorporating ideas from process theology and panentheism.

Risk-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.⁵⁶ 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-coordination, which is exactly why the results add something to God's being that was not already nascent in the divine mind. Through relation with such radical creation, God develops, surpassing any alleged maximal greatness as a static state. NEM thus 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.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ The best statement of this view is perhaps in Jonathan Edwards' work. For a contemporary statement, see John Feinberg (1986).

⁵⁷ 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.⁵⁸ 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 foreclosing others: instead of Plantinga's Molinist version of the free will defense, we have a free will defense that emphasizes the need for divine risk if moral freedom is to matter. In conclusion, I wish briefly to explore how NEM might be extended to address natural evil by connecting moral freedom and creaturely aseity with a physical order involving strong laws of nature (not mere regularities) that are nevertheless indeterministic and open to input from creaturely agent-causation.

In discussions of the problem of evil, beyond free will defenses, soul-making theodicies, and wholistic theodicies (emphasizing overall goodness that requires value-contrasts and complex goods arising from response to evils),⁵⁹ there is a less well-recognized 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).⁶⁰ 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,

⁵⁸ Compare Sanders (2007). The difference between my approach and those of Pincock and Sanders is that I do not make arguments for NEM based on biblical texts; instead, I argue that NEM coherently combines several ideas found within the religious existential and personalist traditions in philosophy, broadly construed. But of course these traditions are strongly influenced by Kierkegaard, who was a profoundly biblical thinker.

⁵⁹ For example, in *Evil and the God of Love*, John Hick famously draws a "soul-making theodicy" from St. Irenaeus and Leibniz famously develops the wholistic approach in his *Theodicy*. Peter van Inwagen explains why these two approaches are existentially unsatisfying in his chapter on "The Global Argument from Evil;" see van Inwagen (2006), Lecture 4.

⁶⁰ Van Inwagen calls his version of this idea an "anti-irregularity" argument (van Inwagen (2006), pp. 114–120). But this label could mislead someone into thinking that mere Humean regularity is enough to avoid the defect of "massive irregularity" in the order of nature, when strong laws are needed to avoid this (for otherwise the regularity we experience is an accident, not an essential property of our universe). The idea of a defense from the need for natural order comes up occasionally in Swinburn 1998, though most of his theodicy is of the soul-making type (see ch. 9). The importance of natural order is also mentioned in C.S. Lewis's *The Problem of Pain* (see ch. 2) though he also mostly focuses on soul-making. A novelist who has explored the natural order defense is Stephen Donaldson in his existential fantasy trilogies, *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant*. In Donaldson's version, for choice to be meaningful, God must create a universe that would be destroyed if its laws were too severely violated.

nor temporally determined by total divine foreknowledge. For the choices of persons within it to matter, this matrix of co-existence must exhibit a high degree of order and predictability in which significant harms can be caused and prevented (consequences and risks are thus genuine). Notice that it fits with NEM to envision such a natural order as largely independent of direct divine intervention: this constitutes its basic alterity. Even if God must continually keep this natural order in being, that divine activity does not determine each contrastive fact as it unfolds internally (like keeping the movie projector on, rather than editing or selecting each successive image). As van Inwagen has suggested, it may be that in such a natural order, the only way for a diversity of life-forms to develop is through an indeterministic evolutionary process.⁶¹ If so, then God accepts the risk that the process of evolution will lead to natural evils that are not preventable by pre-design.

In my judgment, such a picture has a better chance of meeting the challenge of natural evil than defenses relying mainly on complex or higher-order goods as completely counter-balancing or justifying the natural evils involved in our biological order. For a natural order defense more directly addresses the reality of animal suffering (now and in evolutionary history) and offers a hypothesis for why life takes the form it does that integrates evolution with a divine design. If this is right, then the openness of NEM to a natural order defense is among its strengths. However, NEM adds to any such defense the eschatological idea that the universe will not always remain as it is now⁶² – that in the hereafter it can be transformed in ways that may compensate for the natural evils that were necessary to a universe in which intelligent animals can both evolve and experience sufficient order for their choices to be morally significant. This combination promises a different kind of response to the problem of evil than those which have received most attention in classical western theology. In sum then, the existential conception of God sketched here has a number of advantages over more traditional perfect being models, and needs to be considered as a serious rival. Open theism, process theism, and panentheistic proposals can profitably be viewed as aspects of this embracing existential account, or as parts of a larger anti-Platonic tradition that can be adjusted to from a single coherent framework.

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⁶¹ Van Inwagen (2006), pp. 118–120.

⁶² 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.

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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.

¹ This question is explored in much greater detail than I can manage here in Maxwell (2010).

² See 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*.

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