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ON DIVINE AMBIVALENCE: OPEN THEISM AND THE PROBLEM OF PARTICULAR EVILS

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Throughout the history of the Christian Church, orthodox theologians have claimed that God is an omniscient being who has exhaustive knowledge of the whole scope of cosmic history. God's knowledge is exhaustive, they argue, because he knows all true propositions about everything that has been, is, and will be, and he does so in a manner that extends to the minutiae of past, present, and future reality. But if it is indeed true that God knows everything there is to know about the whole scope of cosmic history, then how are we to conceive of the relationship between divine omniscience and human freedom? Must we conclude that we are less than genuinely free because God knows everything there is to know about what has been, is, and will be—including the future free decisions of his creatures? Or, must we rather acknowledge that God is less than exhaustively omniscient because we in fact are significantly free?

Whereas orthodox theologians have historically maintained that the perceived tension between divine omniscience and human freedom can be satisfactorily explained by conceiving of omniscience in any one of several ways that neither undermine the authenticity of human freedom nor compromise the scope of God's sovereign knowledge,[1] contemporary postconservative theologians would have us believe that such conceptions no longer pass muster. New interpretations of the relationship between divine omniscience and human freedom are in order, they argue, not only because classical interpretations are lacking in exegetical sophistication, but also because traditional interpretations are no longer palatable to philosophically astute theologians living at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

How, then, do these theologians suppose that we should conceive of the relationship between divine omniscience and human freedom? Should we resolve the apparent tension by suggesting that we are free but God is less

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[1] For an overview of the various ways in which the relationship between divine omniscience and human freedom can be conceived, see John Sanders, "Mapping the Terrain of Divine Providence," Wheaton Philosophy Conference, October 27, 2000; William Hasker, "A Philosophical Perspective," in Clark Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994) 126–54; William C. Davis, "Does God Know the Future? A Closer Look at the Contemporary Evangelical Debate," *Modern Reformation* 8/5 (September/October 1999) 20–25; *idem*, "Does God Know the Future via 'Middle Knowledge'?" *Modern Reformation* 8/5 (September/October 1999) 24–25.

than exhaustively omniscient? Or, should we rather conclude that God in fact is exhaustively omniscient but our freedom is a mere illusion? This essay examines and critiques the resolution to these questions that is proposed by the school of thought known as Open Theism, and it does so through an analysis of selected works by Gregory Boyd, one of Open Theism's most articulate defenders. It suggests, in short, that the openness program is "deeply flawed"[2] not only because it is essentially incoherent, but, more importantly, because it undermines the believer's confidence in precisely that which it purports to champion, namely the love of God for his people.

I. THE OMNISCIENCE OF GOD AND HUMAN FREEDOM: THE OPENNESS SOLUTION

Open theists insist that the perceived tension between the omniscience of God and the freedom of man can be resolved only by redefining the precise nature of God's omniscience. Genuine human freedom and the omniscience of God can be reconciled, they argue, only when we acknowledge that there are some things that even an omniscient God simply cannot know. While God *can* know all true propositions about the past and present and can, on the basis of that knowledge and his knowledge of his own future activity, know a good deal about future reality, his omniscience *does not extend* to the details of future reality in an exhaustive fashion. Why? The following quotation by Gregory Boyd articulates the typical answer. "In the Christian view God knows all reality—everything there is to know. But," Boyd argues,

> to assume He knows ahead of time how every person is going to freely act assumes that each person's free activity is already there to know—even before he freely does it! But it's not. If we have been given freedom, we create the reality of our decisions by making them. And until we make them, they don't exist. Thus, in my view at least, there simply isn't anything to know until we make it there to know. So God can't foreknow the good or bad decisions of the people He creates until He creates these people and they, in turn, create their decisions.[3]

Since the future is composed in part of possibilities having to do with the free decisions of responsible moral agents, openness theologians conclude that God's knowledge cannot extend to the minute details of future reality simply because the free decisions yet to be made do not constitute a part of what can be known presently. Like square circles or two-sided triangles,

[2] Bruce A. Ware, *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000) 26.

[3] Gregory A. Boyd and Edward K. Boyd, *Letters from a Skeptic* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1994) 30; Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000) 16–17. See also Clark Pinnock, "Systematic Theology," in Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God* 123; William Hasker, *God, Time, and Knowledge* (Cornell Studies in the Philosophy of Religion; Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989) 73–74, 188–205; David Basinger, *The Case for Freewill Theism: A Philosophical Assessment* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996) 39–40; John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998) 194–200.

future free decisions cannot be known because they simply do not exist; they do not constitute a part of knowable reality.

But how can openness theologians justify such assertions? Why do they suppose, in other words, that it is logically impossible for God's knowledge to extend to the future free decisions of responsible moral agents? They do so, in short, for two reasons. In the first place, they are convinced that a literal reading of Scripture leaves them with no other alternative. In an article published in the *Clarion*, the student newspaper of Bethel College and Seminary, Boyd writes:

> The belief of mine which has caused such a stir is called "the Open view of God," though I prefer to call it "the Open view of the future." In a word, this view states that the future is not entirely settled. It partly consists of open possibilities. Since God knows reality perfectly, He knows the future perfectly, *just as it is*; partly as settled, partly as open. So, some things about the future are a "maybe," not a "certainty," even to God.
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> Why do I believe this? Because I simply can't make sense of the Bible without it. Yes, the Bible clearly reveals that God is certain of many things that are going to take place ahead of time. But the Bible also reveals that some things about the future are open possibilities, even to God.[4]

In the first place, then, openness theologians deny the exhaustive foreknowledge of God because they are convinced that faithfulness to Scripture demands it. They do so, in the second place, for philosophical reasons. They are persuaded that their resolution of the perceived tension between divine omniscience and human freedom is more satisfying philosophically than are classical resolutions. Why? To begin with, openness theologians believe, much like Aristotle before them,[5] that if the propositions that God believes about the future have truth-value—if, in other words, the propositions that God believes about the future convey *what will and indeed must certainly happen*—then the consequence of that knowledge is *fatalism*. The consequence, in other words, *is that human beings are reduced to robots that lack*

[4] For this article, which was published on October 13, 1999, as well as examples of exegesis by both proponents and opponents of Open Theism, visit the Baptist General Conference web discussion on foreknowledge at *http://www.bgcworld.org/4know/4know.htm.* See also John Piper, "Why the Glory of God is at Stake in the 'Foreknowledge' Debate," *Modern Reformation* 8/5 (September/October 1999) 39–43. For a devastating critique of Boyd's exegesis and interpretive method, see A. B. Caneday, "The Implausible God of Open Theism: A Response to Gregory A. Boyd's *God of the Possible*," *Journal of Biblical Apologetics* 1 (2000) 66–87. Pinnock insists that the open "model" of God is "more biblical" than the traditional model (*The Openness of God* 101–25). See also David Basinger, "Can an Evangelical Christian Justifiably Deny God's Exhaustive Knowledge of the Future?" *Christian Scholar's Review* 25 (1995) 133–45; Richard Rice, "Biblical Support for a New Perspective," in Clark Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God* 11–58. For an incisive response to Rice's contention that " *love* is the first and last word in the biblical portrait of God" (ibid. 18), see Mark R. Talbot, "God's Vocation, Our Vocation," *Modern Reformation* 8/3 (May/June 1999) 15–20. Like Jonathan Edwards before him, Talbot persuasively argues that "God's 'vocation' . . . is to manifest his own glory" (ibid. 19).

[5] Cf. *Aristotle's Categories and Propositions (De Interpretatione)* (trans. Hippocrates G. Apostle; Grinnel, IA: Peripatetic, 1980) 113–17. I am indebted to Ronald Nash for pointing out the connection between Aristotle and Open Theism.

the ability to engage in genuinely free activity.[6] To avoid this conclusion and to preserve the notion that human beings are truly " *self*-determining" agents,[7] openness theologians therefore maintain that propositions about the future *are* neither true nor false, but rather *become* true or false when human beings make free decisions. Since propositions about the future exist only as possibilities until they are actualized through the free agency of autonomous moral agents, openness theologians conclude that it is logically impossible to know such propositions, for such propositions, being neither true nor false, are merely possible objects of knowledge and not the objects of knowledge *per se*. According to Ronald Nash, a forceful critic of Open Theism,

> The relevance of Aristotle's position for resolving the omniscience-human freedom problem should be obvious. If propositions about future, free human actions have no truth value, then they cannot be known by anyone, including an omniscient God. God's inability to know the future should not count against his omniscience, since the power to know is constrained only in cases where there is something to know. But if no propositions about future, free actions can be true, they cannot be the object of knowledge for anyone, including God. God cannot know the future because there is nothing for him to know.[8]

If openness theologians advance a revised interpretation of omniscience because it safeguards a libertarian understanding of human freedom, they do so because it suggests a solution to the problem of evil that they suppose is superior to classical solutions. "In the end," Boyd argues,

> the character of God can remain untarnished in the face of the terrifying dimensions of our experience [of evil] only to the degree that our view of the free, contingent world in between us and God is robust. Only to the extent that we unambiguously affirm that angels and humans have significant power to thwart God's will and inflict suffering on others can we unambiguously affirm the goodness of God in the face of [profound wickedness].[9]

Indeed, openness theologians like Boyd contend that "the solution to the problem of evil" is found in recognizing that evil is simply the unfortunate consequence of free will gone awry.[10] According to Boyd, God rules the

[6] Thus, on the openness view, classical Arminianism is just as susceptible to the charge of fatalism as is Calvinism, a point which seems lost on "irenic" Arminians who are "open to Openness."

[7] Boyd, *God of the Possible* 137.

[8] Ronald Nash, *Life's Ultimate Questions: An Introduction to Philosophy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999) 319. Throughout his writings Boyd is eager to affirm that he is in no way challenging the orthodox commitment to the omniscience of God. God's knowledge, he argues, is "coterminous with reality." What Boyd *is* challenging, however, is "the ontological status of the future in the present." See, for example, Gregory A. Boyd, *God at War: The Bible and Spiritual Conflict* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997) 304, n. 33.

[9] Ibid. 141–42, cf. 290–93.

[10] Boyd, *God of the Possible* 135, 99. Earlier, Boyd qualifies this contention by noting that he does not want to claim "that the open view entirely solves the problem of evil." Indeed, he recognizes that "[m]uch more needs to be said about [the problem of evil] than can be said at present," which presumably he will attempt to do in a more comprehensive fashion in *Satan and the Problem of Evil: Constructing a Warfare Theodicy*, forthcoming from InterVarsity Press. On freewill theism and evil, see also Basinger, *The Case for Freewill Theism* 87–89; Hasker, "A Philosophical

created order through a "sovereignty of love" rather than a "sovereignty of control," and though "the one thing he *really* wants" is for moral agents to freely choose "to participate in his triune love," that participation cannot be controlled or it will be violated and undermined by the control that brings it about.[11]

Thus, God's extending of his love is an inherently risky endeavor, for it can be and often is rejected, and it is in this rejection that the true source of evil finds its genesis. It follows, therefore, that God cannot foreknow the future in an exhaustive fashion not only because such knowledge would undermine the authenticity of human freedom, but more importantly, because it would make God culpable for the apparently gratuitous acts of wickedness that offend our moral sensibilities. Or, to put it differently, "Scripture shows that the future is open to the extent that God has granted humans and angels free will. More particularly, Scripture shows that whatever occurs against God's will was at some point in the past open, for it should not have happened and did not need to happen."[12]

II. THE SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM OF EVIL?

Open Theism's resolution of the perceived tension between divine omniscience and human freedom is certainly satisfying on one level. It guarantees that a fashionable understanding of human freedom will not be compromised, and it then utilizes that understanding to attempt to isolate God from being tarnished by the problem of evil.[13] But can the proposed resolution stand careful scrutiny? In the remainder of this essay I suggest that it cannot. Though I recognize that the following discussion is far from exhaustive, my purpose is simply to suggest that the revision put forward by openness theologians is not necessary either to preserve genuine human freedom or to safeguard God from the problem of evil, and that it actually raises far more serious questions about the character of God than do the traditional interpretations that it claims are less than compelling.

While a number of the more articulate critics of Open Theism have offered helpful philosophical critiques that are relevant, yet somewhat more

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Perspective" 152; *idem*, *God, Time, and Knowledge* 186–205; *idem*, "The Necessity of Gratuitous Evil," *Faith and Philosophy* 9/1 (January 1992) 23–44; *idem*, "Providence and Evil: Three Theories," *Religious Studies* 28 (1992) 101–5; *idem*, "Suffering, Soul Making, and Salvation," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 28/1 (March 1988) 15–19; Michael Peterson, *Evil and the Christian God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982) 102–7, 122–25; Sanders, *The God Who Risks* 251–68; R. K. McGregor Wright, *No Place for Sovereignty: What's Wrong with Freewill Theism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996) 177–203.

[11] Boyd, *God of the Possible* 148, 134.

[12] Ibid. 145.

[13] Millard Erickson argues that on openness terms God is "at least partially and indirectly culpable" for the problem of evil because he chose to limit himself "by creating free human beings" (*The Evangelical Left: Encountering Postconservative Evangelical Theology* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997] 106). See Boyd's response in *God of the Possible* 135–36. This essay builds upon, yet goes beyond, Erickson's critique by suggesting that the problem of evil establishes that the God of Open Theism is in many respects an arbitrary being. Indeed, he could intervene to prevent the pain and suffering that result from particular evils but he does not, not because his non-intervention is governed by a larger purpose, but rather because in the end he just does not want to.

peripheral to the core concerns of this essay,[14] the most incisive critiques focus primarily on two shortcomings of the openness program. In the first place, critics contend that the solution put forward by openness theologians is not necessary to resolve the perceived tension between divine omniscience and human freedom, because it is possible to conceive of human freedom in compatibilist terms. It is possible to conceive of human freedom, in other words, in terms that recognize that God's sovereign knowledge of the future and genuine human freedom are compatible in some significant sense.[15] As such, many critics reject Open Theism because most open theists simply assume what many of the most incisive Christian minds have rejected throughout the history of the Church, namely that genuine human freedom necessitates the autonomy of the will, or what theologians like Charles Hodge call a "power to the contrary."[16]

[14] For example, Ronald Nash notes that while much of Open Theism's opposition to the traditional conception of God's omniscience is based upon the mistaken assumption that traditional conceptions originated from accommodation to Greek thought rather than from painstaking exegesis, the evidence of Open Theism's accommodation to pagan philosophy is rather striking. "The accusations of a Greek influence," Nash argues, "come from people whose rejection of God's perfect knowledge of the future is based on theories borrowed from a Greek thinker, Aristotle" (*Life's Ultimate Questions* 319). See also Stephen J. Wellum, "The Importance of the Nature of Divine Sovereignty for Our View of Scripture," *SBJT* 4/2 (Summer 2000) 76–90; and R. K. McGregor Wright, who suggests that " *To change the attributes [of God] is to change the definition of God*. To change the definition of God is to have a different god entirely. Any two gods are only distinguishable after all, by their contrasting attributes" ("A Brief Response to John Sanders," Wheaton Philosophy Conference, October 27, 2000).

[15] It goes without saying that not all incompatibilists endorse the openness solution. See, for example, Thomas Oden, "The Real Reformers are Traditionalists," *Christianity Today* 44/2 (February 9, 1998) 46; Robert E. Picirilli, "Foreknowledge, Freedom, and the Future," *JETS* 43 (2000) 259–71; William Lane Craig, "Middle Knowledge, A Calvinist-Arminian Rapprochement?" in *The Grace of God and the Will of Man* (ed. Clark Pinnock; Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1995; 1989) 141–64.

[16] Hodge argues that a "power to the contrary" is an integral component of the theory of freedom known as "the doctrine of contingency." *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989 [1871–73]) 2:282–83. According to Hodge, the doctrine of contingency is sometimes called

> the liberty of indifference; by which is meant, that the will, at the moment of decision, is self-poised among conflicting motives, and decides one way or another, not because of the greater influence of one motive over others, but because it is indifferent or undetermined, able to act in accordance with the weaker against the stronger motive, or even without any motive at all. Sometimes this doctrine is expressed by the phrase, self-determining power of the will. By this it is intended to deny that the will is determined by motives, and to affirm that the reason of its decisions is to be sought in itself. It is a cause and not an effect, and therefore requires nothing out of itself to account for its acts. Sometimes this doctrine is called the power of contrary choice; that is, that in every volition there is and must be power to the contrary. Even supposing all antecedents external and internal to have been precisely the same, the decision might have been the reverse of what it actually was. Contingence is therefore necessary to liberty. This is the essential idea of this theory in all its forms. A contingent event is one which may or may not happen. Contingence, therefore, is opposed not merely to necessity, but also to certainty. If a man may act in opposition to all motives, external and internal, and in despite of all influence which can be exerted on him, short of destroying his liberty, then it must forever remain uncertain how he will act. The advocates of this theory of liberty, therefore, maintain, that the will is independent of reason, of feeling, and of God. There is no middle ground, they say, between contingency (i.e., uncertainty), and fatalism; between the independence of the will and of the agent, and the denial of all free agency.

While many critics would no doubt agree that God *cannot* know future free decisions *if genuine human freedom presupposes moral autonomy*, they nonetheless reject the openness solution because they are convinced that human decisions can be *both* determined and free *in some real sense, though beyond our full explanation*. It is simply not necessary to equate genuine human freedom with a libertarian understanding of the will, they argue, and thus it is wrong for open theists simply to assume that it is.[17]

If the openness program is suspect because it presumes a libertarian understanding of human freedom, it is so also because its distinction between two classes of future events approaches incoherence. Critics contend that the distinction between a future that is partly open (because God cannot know the future free decisions of his creatures) and partly closed (because God in fact knows what he is going to do in the future) cannot be consistently maintained, because it presumes on the one hand what it denies on the other. It presumes, in other words, that God not only can but must know *something* about future human activity, but at the same time it denies that he can in fact know *anything* about future human activity. "How," Nash asks,

> can God know what he is going to do in the future, when God's own future acts are a response to future human free actions that he cannot know? In all of the open theist rhetoric, the fact that there is nothing about the future for God to know has been lost or obscured. The fact that propositions about future contingents have no truth value has been forgotten. The open theist closes the door to divine foreknowledge but then proceeds to act as though God can know things about the future after all. . . . The facts are these: According to open theists, God can have no knowledge about future human contingents. Why? Because any alleged proposition about such human choices possesses no truth value; it can be neither true nor false. God cannot know these things because there is nothing to know. There is something seriously wrong, then, when an open theist begins to suggest that his constraints upon divine knowledge are not as severe as some might think. Either God knows future contingents or he doesn't. If he doesn't, then any part of the future resulting from human free choices is also closed to God. . . . If he knows as few as one future contingent, then the door is open for him to know more; perhaps it is open wide enough for God to know all future contingents. My advice to open theists is please don't cheat and talk in ways that suggest God can know some future contingents.[18]

While the critics of Open Theism have incisively argued that the distinction between two classes of future events is dubious at best, what they have failed to emphasize adequately is that openness theologians are willing to endorse the distinction only because they are confident that God will work in a unilateral or coercive fashion to the extent required for his loving purposes to be realized. God is the Lord of history, openness theologians argue, not only because he is "an infinitely intelligent chess player" who is able "to anticipate *every* possible move and *every* possible combination of moves, together with *every* possible response he might make to each of them,

[17] See, for example, Nash, *Life's Ultimate Questions* 318–25.
[18] Ibid. 320–21.

for *every* possible agent throughout history."[19] He is so, moreover, because he will act unilaterally when necessary, as David Basinger says, in order "to keep things on track."[20] To be sure, the point that Nash makes above still stands, because, before God can *know* exactly what he is going to do in the future, he must of necessity first *know* exactly what he is responding to. (Remember that true knowledge of the future involves more than an awareness of a merely possible occurrence.) Nevertheless, what we must recognize at this point is that openness theologians can affirm the continuity of history and the ultimate triumph of God's purposes only because they are willing to sanction what no consistent compatibilist would ever countenance, namely, that God will accomplish his purposes for the created order in part by acting in ways that violate the freedom of the will, that is, that "override or withdraw freedom of choice."[21] Professor Boyd, for example, has

[19] Boyd, *God of the Possible* 127. Note that Boyd is convinced that his view "is in essence a modification of Molina's view" of "Middle Knowledge," for he agrees with Molina that "God knows all possibilities" ("A Response to John Piper," Baptist General Conference web discussion on foreknowledge, *http://www.bgcworld.org/4know/response.htm*). In a discussion of the relationship between Open Theism and Molinism on Boyd's website (*http://www.gregboyd.org*), Boyd suggests that "the Open view can be accurately labeled 'Neo-Molinism.'" He also suggests that he will develop this view further in his contribution to *Four Views of Divine Foreknowledge*, forthcoming from InterVarsity Press.

[20] David Basinger, "Practical Implications," in Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God* 159; see Basinger's extended discussion of this point in "Can an Evangelical Christian Justifiably Deny God's Exhaustive Knowledge of the Future?" 136–39. In *The Case for Freewill Theism* 32–36, Basinger notes that while "[f]reewill theists believe that God does unilaterally control some things," they nonetheless insist "that God, *as a general rule*, must allow choice to be voluntary in the sense that it is free from coercive divine manipulation." In other words, God, as a general rule, must allow history to unfold without "overrid[ing] or withdraw[ing] freedom of choice" ("Can an Evangelical Christian Justifiably Deny God's Exhaustive Knowledge of the Future?" 138). On the sporadic nature of God's unilateral/coercive involvement in human affairs, see also Hasker, "A Philosophical Perspective" 142; Pinnock, "Systematic Theology" 194, n. 49; Sanders, *The God Who Risks* 257–61.

[21] Basinger, "Can an Evangelical Christian Justifiably Deny God's Exhaustive Knowledge of the Future?" 138. Bruce Ware correctly notes that "[a]t the heart of the openness proposal is the desire to uphold the *real* relationship that exists between God and others" (*God's Lesser Glory* 43). Open theists presume that real relationships are not possible when God deals with individuals in a compatibilistic fashion, for compatibilistic interaction, they argue, compromises genuine reciprocity by negating the freedom of the will. While committed compatibilists would certainly challenge this presumption, note that it is *not* they who have a problem with coercion, but those who insist that significant freedom presupposes the autonomy of the will. Charles Hodge, for example, is by no means guilty of reducing the Spirit's sovereign work in regeneration to what John Sanders calls the "divine rape" of the soul (*The God Who Risks* 238–40), for he insists that regeneration involves a moral change that takes place "in a manner perfectly congruous to the nature of a rational and active being." It takes place, in other words, "without any violence being done to the soul or any of its laws," for the Spirit's activity, "though immediate, is not compulsive," but "'according to reason, and the natural motion of the creature; the understanding proposing and the will embracing; the understanding going before with light, the will following after with love'" ("Regeneration, and the Manner of its Occurrence," *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* 2 [1830] 255–61). In the case of a compatibilist like Hodge, therefore, the Spirit's sovereign activity in regeneration ought not be cited as evidence of what Sanders calls "nonconsensual control" (*The God Who Risks* 238–40), for the supernatural influence by which he works in the elect both to will and to do his good pleasure "[does] the soul no more violence than demonstration does the intellect, or persuasion the heart" ("Regeneration, and the Manner of its Occurrence" 255–61).

> no difficulty affirming that God can and does at times unilaterally intervene and work in a coercive way to bring about a certain state of affairs. I would only add that a) he doesn't do this all the time, and b) he doesn't coercively use persons in violation to the character they have acquired by their choices and then hold these persons morally responsible for what he made them do.[22]

Although there is little doubt that Boyd would object that what he intends by coercion in this context in no way compromises the freedom of the will, it is by no means clear that such an objection could be sustained given his conception of what it means to be significantly free. In *God of the Possible*, Boyd argues that for freedom to be anything more than a robotic "charade," human beings must be "autonomous, self-determining, morally responsible agents."[23] They must possess, in other words, the authentic ability "to choose between . . . possibilities" that really matter, and those choices must not be "pre-settled" in any significant sense.[24] This concern for "authentic self-determining freedom"[25] conveniently evaporates, however, as soon as he begins to discuss how God can foreknow settled aspects of future reality. God can predetermine and thus foreknow some things about the future, he contends, not only because he knows what he is going to do, but more importantly because he can "define" or "set . . . parameters" that exploit the character traits of free yet susceptible moral agents.[26] He can "orchestrate" circumstances, in other words, that "squeeze" or compel individuals into acting in a desired fashion, and on that basis he can know what those individuals will do in the future. Their future activity in such situations is settled.[27]

But lest we mistakenly conclude that God accomplishes his loving purposes by defining parameters that "squeeze" only nameless, faceless moral agents, the case of Peter's denial of Jesus establishes that God's coercive involvement in history extends into the lives of particular individuals. While Boyd suggests that it is possible for moral agents to be genuinely free (i.e. autonomous) even when their freedom is restricted by profound external constraints,[28] his argument quickly breaks down when he factors internal

[22] Boyd, "A Response to John Piper." Note that Boyd is here affirming at least two things that are relevant to the thesis of this essay: (1) that the God of Open Theism does in fact act coercively from time to time to bring about particular states of affairs; and (2) that this coercive activity extends into the lives of particular moral agents. Even on a charitable reading these assertions are difficult to reconcile with what Boyd says elsewhere about the "irrevocable" gift of creaturely freedom. See further the discussion below.

[23] Boyd, *God of the Possible* 134, 136.

[24] Ibid. 122, 126.

[25] Ibid. 123.

[26] Ibid. 34.

[27] Ibid. 35–37. In the discussion that follows I suggest that when we consider God's foreknowledge of moral activity in light of Open Theism's virtual apotheosis of the will, it follows that the God of Open Theism can foreknow such activity either because he in fact can know future contingents, or because he knows how he will force particular moral agents to act or decide in the future. In either case, it would seem that the openness proposal is on rather shaky ground.

[28] Cf. ibid. 33–34, 43. While compatibilists can argue consistently that "freedom is always restricted by parameters set by God and other factors," such consistency is simply not possible for those whose entire theology is based upon the presumption that genuine freedom necessitates the autonomy of something called the "will."

constraints like moral character into the equation. There is, as he explicitly admits in his analysis of Peter's denial of Jesus, such an intimate relationship between moral character and moral activity that when particular individuals are "squeezed" in the right fashion, their behavior is not only "predictable," it is "certain."[29] It is no longer contingent, in other words, but settled because it flows out of the very nature of the acting agent. It is the exploitation of character in this particular sense, then, that is manifest in the case of Peter's "divinely orchestrated lesson."[30] God knew Peter's character "perfectly," "*knew* the effect Jesus' arrest would have on him," and orchestrated "highly pressurized circumstances" that "squeezed" his true character out of him three times.[31] Surprisingly, Boyd gives no indication that Peter could have done anything other than betray Jesus, and for this reason A. B. Caneday's contention that the God of Open Theism is a coercive "fiend" is sound.[32]

[29] Ibid. 33–35. Again, what Boyd affirms here about the certain nature of the relationship between moral character and moral activity is difficult to reconcile with what he says elsewhere about the nature of genuine freedom. See note 32 below.

[30] Ibid. 36.

[31] Ibid. 35–37, emphasis added.

[32] Caneday, "The Implausible God of Open Theism" 73. Lest there be any doubt that there is something fundamentally flawed about Boyd's attempt to link foreknown moral activity to the character of an acting agent, consider what he says about the nature of genuine freedom on his website (*http://www.gregboyd.org*). Towards the end of a discussion thread dealing with the ontological status of "subjunctive conditional truths," Boyd is challenged by a discussion member who insists that the God of Open Theism is "ignorant of considerable aspects of the human will." "God," the challenger argues, "can have complete, exhaustive knowledge of a person's . . . —biological makeup—psychological makeup—historical background (including FULL family tree type stuff and all previous experiences and mental states of the person)—emotional makeup—spiritual makeup—mental capacity—internal interplay between makeups—limitations with respect to all the makeups—reactivity to various stimuli in any given environment, integrating the aforementioned criteria, etc. . . . —and yet, unexplainably, that same person may make a decision that God could NEVER effectively predict would happen with 100% accuracy." Boyd's response is telling, for it points to the depth of his commitment to libertarian freedom and thereby to the insurmountable difficulty he faces in attempting to link fore*known* yet *free* moral activity to the character of an acting agent: "Yep [with certain qualifications—irrelevant for right now] . . . There's this little thing called FREE WILL. What it means is, given all circumstances (just as you delineated them] (*sic*) the agent could do otherwise." But if it is indeed true that the autonomy of the will *precludes* a certain relationship between moral character and moral activity, and if it is therefore true that "in knowing free agents God knows what they may POSSIBLY choose, not what they WILL CERTAINLY choose" (see the thread entitled, "Can a Person Be Free Who Can't Do Other Than They Do?"), then how can open theists like Boyd talk about the moral activity of particular individuals as being fore*known* by God? Perhaps it is this quandary that leads Open Theists to sanction—maybe even welcome—coercion, which they then justify in one of two different ways: either by appealing to the sporadic nature of God's unilateral activity, that is, by arguing that God does not intervene coercively "all the time" (Boyd, "A Response to John Piper"), or "habitually" (Sanders, *The God Who Risks* 258), but only "occasionally" (Basinger, *The Case for Freewill Theism* 34; see Steven R. Tracy's incisive discussion of this point, "Theodicy, Eschatology, and the Open View of God," paper presented at the 51st annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Danvers, Massachusetts, November 17–19, 1999, 14–21), or by insisting that "God does not orchestrate that good people carry out evil deeds. He simply specifies parameters around *the way* people act out the good or evil character they have already chosen for themselves" (Boyd, *God of the Possible* 38). But if human beings possess the kind of freedom described above, surely this second contention is highly suspect, unless, of orchestration envisioned

What, then, are we to make of the willingness of openness theologians like Boyd to sanction the coercive activity of God in the lives of particular moral agents? Does their toleration of divine coercion present any serious difficulties for the rest of the openness program? In addition to undermining their stated concern for "genuine human freedom," it does, I would argue, for at least three reasons.[33] In the first place, it demonstrates that the foundational convictions of Open Theism cannot be consistently applied to the analysis of the flow of history. Openness theologians would have us believe that the future is open to God as well as to human beings because the "ultimate purpose [of God] includes having free agents" whose freedom is "irrevocable."[34] If nothing else, their willingness to allow for God to work in a coercive fashion jettisons the coherence of the openness program, for it establishes that God cannot accomplish his ultimate purpose without violating a significant component of that purpose. Since God can accomplish his goals only by revoking the autonomy of the will, it follows that not only is Open Theism's distinction between two classes of future events hopelessly conflicted, but at an even more foundational level the God of Open Theism is as well.

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goes well beyond that espoused even by less than consistent compatibilists. On this point, see note 37.

Please note that the compatibilists do *not* concede that God is working in a coercive fashion when he moves individuals to act by moving with, rather than against, their character. Also note that compatibilists do *not* believe that God accomplishes his sovereign purposes by moving against, rather than with, the character of the acting agent. Finally, please note that compatibilists do *not* deny that human beings make free decisions, that these decisions really matter, and that they are responsible for the decisions they make. What they deny is the notion that freedom necessitates the autonomy of the will. In this regard, note the distinction that compatibilists make between "self-determination" and the "self-determination of the will"; they affirm that moral agents are self-determining, but deny that the "will" itself (as if the "will" were a faculty that can operate in isolation from the "whole man") is self-determining. See, for example, Hodge, *Systematic Theology* 2:294–95. Whereas Boyd talks about *self*-determination, what he clearly has in mind is the self-determination of the "will." This is why God's reign of love is risky; not because agents are free, but because the "will" itself is free. See, for example, *God of the Possible* 111, 134–35. Obviously, percolating beneath the debate over Open Theism is a whole host of concerns that relate to the issue of free will, all of which are of critical importance to evangelical theology. In this respect, the current debate in the evangelical camp over Open Theism is very similar to the debate in the nineteenth century between Old and New School Presbyterians over the precise nature of imputation. In both cases, controversy over an issue that some regard as peripheral is informed by doctrinal differences that get to the heart of what it means to be an evangelical. On the dispute between Old and New School Presbyterians in the nineteenth century, see David Wells, "Charles Hodge," in David Wells, ed., *The Princeton Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989) 39–62; George Marsden, *The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970).

[33] Note that these points both echo and build upon the conclusions of scholars who are troubled by the apparently arbitrary nature of the God of Open Theism's unilateral activity in human affairs, particularly as this activity relates to moral evil and human suffering. See especially Tracy, "Theodicy, Eschatology, and the Open View of God" 13–29; Edward Wierenga, Review of *The Openness of God* by Clark Pinnock et al., in *Faith and Philosophy* 14/2 (1997) 248–52. See also Ware, *God's Lesser Glory* 207–11; Erickson, *The Evangelical Left* 105–6; Alfred J. Freddoso, Review of *God, Time, and Knowledge* by William Hasker, in *Faith and Philosophy* 10/1 (1993) 105–6.

[34] Boyd, *Letters from a Skeptic* 47.

In the second place, their willingness to allow for God to act in a coercive fashion undermines their contention that the debate over Open Theism is about the content of reality rather than about the omniscience of God. According to Boyd,

> If God does not foreknow future free actions, it is not because his knowledge of the future is in any sense incomplete. It's because there is, in this view, *nothing definite there for God to know!* His lack of definite foreknowledge of future free actions limits him no more than does the fact that, say, he does not know that there is a monkey sitting next to me right now. As a matter of fact, there is no monkey sitting next to me, so it's hardly ascribing ignorance to God to insist that he doesn't know one is there. In just the same way, one is not ascribing ignorance to God by insisting that he doesn't foreknow future free actions if indeed free actions do not exist to be known until free agents create them.[35]

But as we have already seen, the God of Open Theism does in fact know what particular moral agents will do in the future, for he *knew* that Peter would betray Jesus if his character was "squeezed" in the correct fashion. God, Boyd tells us, "saw past Peter's false bravado and *knew* the effect Jesus' arrest would have on him."[36] Either Boyd must concede that Peter was really not free not to sin (in which case God forced Peter to sin), or he must acknowledge that the "God of the possible" can know what he contends it is logically impossible to know, namely the future free decisions of responsible moral agents. Perhaps the God of Open Theism bears a closer resemblance to a caricature of the God of traditional Christian theism than Boyd would care to admit, or there is a monkey sitting next to him after all.[37]

[35] Boyd, *God of the Possible* 16–17.

[36] Ibid. 36, emphasis added. Note that it really does not matter if God fore*knew* what Peter would do a nanosecond before it happened or from before the foundation of the world. What does matter is that God is depicted as *knowing* future free acts as opposed to mere possibilities. Ware correctly notes that for God to predict Peter's denial of Jesus he needed to fore*know* not a single sinful act, but "a multitude of free human choices and actions" (*God's Lesser Glory* 127–30). Given what Boyd says about the nature of genuine freedom in note 32, is it possible that God is being depicted as knowing not future free acts, but future coerced acts?

[37] If the objection is raised that what was *known* by God was not the specific denial but the more general cowardice that followed the arrest of Jesus, even that could not be foreknown if human beings in fact are as autonomous as the discussion in note 32 suggests. Some Open theists, retreating to what they take to be a form of compatibilism, might therefore suggest that God *knew* what Peter would do before he did it simply because he (i.e. God) *knew* that Peter would not be acting freely and responsibly. God *knew* what Peter would do, in other words, because he *knew* that he would orchestrate circumstances that would override the freedom of Peter's will and *make* him betray Jesus (presumably to make some greater good possible). While the critic might respond that such an argument would undermine the foundational assumptions of the openness program (see, for example, Ware, *God's Lesser Glory* 178, n. 1, as well as the argument I am trying to make in the body of this essay), open theists like Boyd apparently do not share this concern, for this is precisely the kind of argument that he appears to make in his remarkable discussion of Gen 45:5 and 50:20 (see *http://www.gregboyd.org*). Of this passage, Boyd argues that he is "largely in agreement" with compatibilists who "argue that these texts illustrate that God ordains evil actions for greater good." The passage "seems to indicate," he concedes, "that God intentionally orchestrated the evil intentions of the brothers in order to get Joseph into Egypt."

Finally and most importantly, the willingness of openness theologians to sanction coercion is problematic, because it makes it much more difficult to rescue God from being tarnished by the problem of evil. Why? Let us consider Boyd's treatment of Hitler and the Holocaust for an answer. In *God of the Possible*, Boyd sets up the problem of evil and the resolution proposed by Open Theism by revisiting a question that he addressed in one of his earliest works, *Letters from a Skeptic.*[38]

> A number of years ago, my agnostic father and I were conversing by letter about the problem of how an all-good, all-powerful God could allow nightmarish suffering to occur in his creation. In one correspondence, my father asked me why God would allow Adolf Hitler to be born if he foreknew that this man would massacre millions of Jews. It was a very good question. The only response I could offer then, and the only response I continue to offer now, is that this was not foreknown as a certainty at the time God created Hitler. . . . If you claim that God foreknew exactly what Hitler would do and created him anyway, it's hard to avoid the conclusion that the world must somehow be better with Hitler than without him. Think about it. If God is all good and thus always does what is best, and if God knew exactly what Hitler would do when he created him, we must conclude that God believed that allowing Hitler's massacre of the Jews (and many others) was preferable to his not allowing it. If you accept the premises that God is all good and that he possesses exhaustively settled foreknowledge, the conclusion is difficult to avoid.[39]

While Boyd acknowledges that "the classical theology of the church has not shied away from this conclusion," he makes it clear that it is a conclusion he cannot endorse because it places the onus for evil on God rather than on

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But while Boyd agrees with compatibilists "that this text shows that God *may decide* to orchestrate evil actions according to his sovereign will, [he] den[ies] that this passage supports the conclusion that *all* evil actions occur in accordance with God's eternal, sovereign will." Why? Of the three reasons that Boyd cites in his web discussion, the second is most relevant to the question of who is responsible and therefore culpable for evil actions that God sovereignly ordains. If we take Gen 45:5 and 50:20 as evidence of how God always operates, Boyd argues,

> we must accept the consequence that this passage always minimizes the responsibility of human agents. For this is the conclusion Joseph himself draws from his observation that God was using his brothers to send him to Egypt. "Do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves," he tells them, "for God sent me . . . " If this is in fact how God always operates—if God is involved in each kidnapping and murder the way he was involved in the activity of Joseph (*sic*) brothers—we must be willing to console every murderer and kidnapper with Joseph's words: "Do not be distressed, or angry with yourself . . . for God kidnapped and murdered your victim." We can't universalize the mode of God's operation in this passage without also universalizing its implication for human responsibility.

When we consider Peter's "divinely orchestrated lesson" in light of this strained caricature of compatibilism (which, amazingly, Boyd endorses), we are, it seems, left with two options, neither of which speak very highly of the openness program: either God *knew* that Peter would deny Jesus because he *knew* a future contingent (which for an open theist is a bit like saying that God can make a square circle), or he *knew* that Peter would deny Jesus because he *knew* that he would remove Peter's self-determining freedom and *make* him deny Jesus (which calls God's sinless perfection into question, given the presumption of libertarian freedom).

[38] Cf. Boyd, *Letters from a Skeptic* 21–48, especially 29–31.

[39] Boyd, *God of the Possible* 98–99.

"the nature of free will."[40] In his thinking, the Open view presents a more promising solution to the problem of evil because it "allows us to say consistently in unequivocal terms that *the ultimate source for all evil* is found in the will of free agents rather than in God."[41] Evil incidents occur, he argues, not because they were ordained by a God of "dubious character" for some ultimately good but mysterious purpose, but rather because "[h]umans and fallen angels can—and do—thwart God's will for their own lives and interfere with God's will for others."[42] Although Boyd acknowledges that the Open view of evil is "scary"—"It's true," he concedes, "that according to the open view things can happen in our lives that God didn't plan or even foreknow with certainty (though he always foreknew they were possible). . . . This, it must be admitted, can for some be a scary thought"—he nonetheless insists that it is more comforting than classical views not only because it declares that God is an "unambiguously loving" being who is able to bring "a redemptive purpose" out of even the vilest of circumstances, but more importantly because it affirms that God can anticipate evil and do something about it.[43] What can he do? Among other things, he "can be trusted to inspire us to avoid certain future possibilities he sees coming."[44] He can, in other words, "sovereignly alter what otherwise would come to pass" by working with us "to truly change what *might* have been into what *should* be."[45] "Only if God is the God of what *might be* and not only the God of what *will be*," he insists, "can we trust him to steer us away from what *should not be* and in the direction of what *should be*."[46]

But if it is indeed true that "the 'God of the possible' is prepared for and capable of responding to every contingency, however improbable, that might arise,"[47] and if it is also true that God reserves the right to coerce the wills of created agents when the coercion of those wills is necessary to bring about states of affairs that he really wants to bring about, then how can we rescue God from the problem of evil when the prevention of evil is within his power and there is sufficient precedent for his unilateral activity?[48]

[40] Ibid. 99.

[41] Ibid. 102, emphasis added. It is not immediately clear how this statement can be reconciled with Boyd's comments on Gen 45:5 and 50:20 (see *http://www.gregboyd.org*).

[42] Boyd, *God of the Possible* 156, 147.

[43] Ibid. 153, 155, 152.

[44] Ibid. 152.

[45] Ibid. 152, 18.

[46] Ibid. 153.

[47] Ibid. 169.

[48] Note that Boyd himself recognizes that this is a significant question, which presumably is why he talks about God's ability to revoke freedom as if it were something that approaches a metaphysical impossibility. In a web discussion pertaining to the relationship between human freedom and his warfare worldview (cf. *http://www.gregboyd.org*), Boyd insists that

> freedom must, within limits, be irrevocable. If God truly GIVES creatures self-determination, he can't unilaterally revoke it when it's going to be misused. This is controversial, but I think it is necessary to render intelligible the warfare worldview of Scripture. It means that, given the kind of world God sovereignly choose (*sic*) to create, he can't now do anything he wants, any time he wants. He has limited himself. If God could do anything he wanted, any time he wanted, we'd have to accept that the ultimate reason why anything occurs—including child kidnappings and rapes—is because God specifically willed not to stop it.

Take the example of the Holocaust. If God in fact knew "from all eternity"[49] that the Holocaust would become reality if particular states of affairs were actualized at significant points in the outworking of history, then why did he not work his providential wonders at those moments to prevent the Holocaust from becoming reality, especially when the horrors of the Holocaust would in no way advance the realization of his loving purposes? Why, for example, did God allow the German high command to appoint Alexander von Kluck to the generalship of the German First Army just prior to the

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But why should we not accept this conclusion when God's inability to revoke freedom is not absolute, but only "within limits" (in which case it's not a "cannot," but a "can"), and when Boyd himself insists that "God *can and does at times unilaterally intervene and work in a coercive way to bring about a certain state of affairs*"? (Boyd, "A Response to John Piper," emphasis added). If it is indeed true that the God of the possible is willing to intervene coercively in human history in order to accomplish his purposes, and if it is therefore true that he is willing to violate what Boyd calls the "covenant of non-coercion," or "covenant of non-intervention" that he enters into whenever he gives creatures the gift of freedom, then can we really say that "God is always doing everything possible to curb evil" when what he is doing falls short of unilateral/coercive activity? If we cannot, and we cannot if "the cause of justice" is not being advanced in the world in every particular instance (no matter how small or apparently inconsequential it might seem at present), then why can we not? The question begs for a fuller discussion of the "limits" that God has placed on creaturely freedom. When, in fact, are the "outer limits" of freedom's potential for good and evil transgressed, and when is God's unilateral/coercive involvement in human history therefore justified? While the God of the possible could certainly know when those "limits" were being violated by particular evils in the present (and thus intervene accordingly), he simply could not *know* which particular evils would lead to "limit transgressing" consequences in the future without more than just an awareness of future possibilities. After all, the consequences of *any* particular evil that is occurring in the present could, given the right circumstances in some possible world, snowball into a state of affairs that itself transgresses the "limits" of freedom's potential for good (cf. note 19 above and note 57 below). But if that is the case, then how does the God of the possible distinguish between one potentially "limit transgressing" evil and another? In the absence of an infallible "filtering mechanism" (which requires, I would argue, significant knowledge of future contingents), we can only conclude that when it comes to particular evils, the God of the possible intervenes in one case and not in another because he is an ambivalent and arbitrary warrior whose unilateral combat is informed by nothing more than the tentative, perhaps even faltering pursuit of a risky utilitarian end (the sharing of divine love with as many libertarianly-free moral agents as possible). For while some particular evils are apparently sufficiently "limit transgressing" to warrant unilateral intervention, other evils, like many child kidnappings and rapes, are not. Neither were those that led to the Holocaust, nor was the Holocaust itself. But if these kinds of evils or the potential consequences of these evils are not sufficiently egregious to warrant unilateral intervention, then what in the world could be? Are we *really* to believe that God has intervened in the past *only* when particular evils were in the process of surpassing the wickedness of things even more egregious than child kidnappings and rapes, or the events that led to the Cultural Revolution, or the Cultural Revolution itself? Or, could we say that God has intervened and continues to intervene in less extreme circumstances because he *knows* that the future consequences of these circumstances will surpass the "limits" of freedom's potential for good? If we *cannot* say this, then why would God *ever* violate the covenant that he has established with free moral agents when the circumstances that he is intervening in are less egregious than child kidnappings and rapes, to say nothing of the events that led to Stalin's Great Terror, or the Great Terror itself? If we *can* say this—and do we not have to say something like it if we are to rescue the God of the possible from being completely arbitrary—then how could God *know* that his intervention in these circumstances would be justified by future states of affairs? (See also Boyd's comments on the discussion thread, "Doc, what about Hitler?" *http://www.gregboyd.org*.) I want to thank Dwayne Polk for his insightful comments on this point.

[49] Boyd, *God of the Possible* 127.

outbreak of the First World War? According to political philosopher Frances Fukuyama, who argues that "[t]he great events that shape our time often spring from very small causes that one could easily imagine having happened differently," it was von Kluck's "hapless" leadership in the first battle of Marne (September 1914) that led to the conflict that is now known as World War I.[50] Had the German First Army been commanded by a different general, or had von Kluck attempted to take Paris by sweeping around the French left rather than around the French right, it is entirely possible, Fukuyama contends, that the history of the twentieth century would have unfolded in a radically different fashion. It is within the realm of possibility, he argues, that, had the Germans been victorious in the first battle of Marne, the First World War would not have occurred, and the historical circumstances that gave rise to Hitler, National Socialism, and thereby to much of the unfathomable suffering of the twentieth century would never have been actualized. "It is worthwhile thinking through," Fukuyama maintains in what he acknowledges is an ultimately meaningless exercise in historical speculation,

> what might have happened had the Germans won in early September. They most likely would have swept on to Paris by the end of the month, forcing a capitulation by the French government (as happened in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71, and again in May 1940). A quick German victory would have left unimpaired the cultural self-confidence of 19th-century European civilization. The 8.5 million casualties of World War I would not have spawned a radical revolutionary movement in Russia called Bolshevism. With no German humiliation there would have been no occasion for rabble-rousing on the part of an unemployed painter named Adolf Hitler, and therefore no National Socialism. . . . [Moreover,] no Russian Revolution and Nazism means there would have been no World War II, no Holocaust, no Cold War and no Chinese or Vietnamese revolutions. Decolonization and the emergence of the Third World might have taken place much later absent the exhaustion of the British Empire after two world wars and the rise of radical revolutionary movements in Eurasia. And the U.S., which came of age as a great power due to the world wars, may have remained the isolationist paradise fondly remembered by Patrick Buchanan.[51]

So what is the point? It is simply that openness theologians should not presume to have anything approaching a solution to the problem of evil until they have wrestled with the implications of God's alleged willingness to intervene in human history in a unilateral/coercive fashion.[52] If God in fact knows all possibilities exhaustively and eternally, and if God in fact is willing to intervene in human history in a coercive fashion in order to accomplish his purposes, then God could have prevented untold suffering in the twentieth century alone had he merely been inclined to act on a par-

[50] Frances Fukuyama, "It Could Have Been the German Century," *The Wall Street Journal* (December 31, 1999) A10.

[51] Ibid.

[52] William Hasker has the integrity to acknowledge that "some difficulty" for the Open view of evil "still remains so long as we hold that God had the power to intervene to prevent these evils but did not do so" ("A Philosophical Perspective" 198, n. 50).

ticularly fragile fault line of history (which he knew was fragile because of his exhaustive knowledge of all possibilities). Had he simply ensured that a different commander was appointed to the generalship of the German First Army, or had he merely "squeezed" von Kluck into sweeping left rather than right, it is conceivable, at least to political theorists like Fukuyama, that the twentieth century could have been the German and not the American century, a century without the Holocaust, without the torture of little girls by Nazi storm troopers, and without the ethnic and ideological purges of tyrants like Stalin, Mao Tse-tung, and Pol Pot.[53]

Given God's exhaustive and eternal knowledge of all possibilities, and given his willingness to act unilaterally in human affairs when it accords with his purposes, I would therefore suggest that if the problem of evil is a problem for anybody, it is a problem for those who insist that it is acceptable for God to violate the freedom of the will in order to "keep things on track," but who do not seem to appreciate that it is precisely God's alleged willingness to coerce the will when he wants to that makes his reluctance to do so in the cases of the German high command and von Kluck so damning. Not only does his ignorance of future reality empty pain, suffering, and evil of purpose and meaning, but his reluctance to prevent the pain and suffering that he has always known was possible raises questions about the love of God that are far more serious than any of the questions that can be directed against compatibilists. Why? Because when push comes to shove, people suffer in the openness view neither because the free will of wicked agents is "irrevocable," nor because their suffering was ordained for a greater good, but rather because God simply was not inclined to intervene at a particular point in the historical past or present. Like the pampered child whose every move is motivated by the whims of self-interest, he could have intervened to prevent the suffering that breaks his heart but he did not, not because his non-intervention was governed by a larger, albeit mysterious, purpose, but rather because he, well, just did not feel like it.

It follows, therefore, that the God of Open Theism is not only an ambivalent being, but he is an arbitrary being as well, for without "a specific divine purpose for every specific event"[54] —which presupposes what Boyd derisively calls the "cruel" and "ridiculous" notion of an "all-encompassing divine blueprint"[55] —there can be no rhyme or reason to his unilateral activity. Please note that I am not suggesting that the God of Open Theism is universally or globally arbitrary. I recognize that according to the openness view, evil exists (at least in theory) not because God never feels like intervening in human affairs, but rather because his decision to create a universe populated with autonomous agents who have the ability to thwart his loving purposes necessitates that he do nothing to compromise the self-determination of the will. Thus, I recognize that in one sense it really does

[53] Justin Taylor correctly points out that the case of von Kluck satisfies Boyd's two criteria for God's unilateral intervention: (1) it would have been occasional; and (2) it would not have violated von Kluck's character. See Boyd, "A Response to John Piper."

[54] Boyd, *God of the Possible* 99.

[55] For example, see Boyd, *God at War* 43, 302, n. 18.

not matter what God feels like doing, for his non-intervention is required by the nature of the sovereignty that he has chosen to exercise.[56] But the fact remains that the God of Open Theism is willing to intervene coercively in human history to bring about states of affairs that he really wants to bring about, and this fact presents a serious challenge to the Open view of evil. Why? Because it suggests that *particular* evils cannot be accounted for solely by appealing to the free will of wicked moral agents, for the genuine freedom that is presumed to be the ultimate source of evil is precisely what is overridden by the unilateral activity of God when he so desires. What I am suggesting, therefore, is that without an exhaustive plan that determines which particular evils will be tolerated and which ones will not, God's toleration of one particular evil and not another becomes arbitrary. To put it differently, without an "overarching divine purpose" and plan that establishes when his intervening mercies will be extended and when they will be withheld, his extension of those mercies becomes subject to the vicissitudes of the moment, and suffering—that is, the result of the instantaneous decision to withhold intervening mercies—becomes truly pointless.[57] While openness theologians would have us believe that they have a viable solution to the problem of evil in *general*, they in fact can only hope that those who have been traumatized by *particular* evils do not find out that their troubles could have been prevented if God had simply been inclined to act in their case as he often does in others, namely coercively.[58]

[56] Ware correctly notes that "[t]he sense in which the God of open theism is 'unable to intervene' . . . must be understood clearly. For openness proponents, surely God *could* intervene if he wished to violate creaturely freedom. And this is always the case. But the fact that God has chosen to create creaturely libertarian freedom and to respect its use leaves him in a position in which the integrity of that very freedom is jeopardized by his interference with it. The minute God starts to micromanage human affairs by canceling either the exercise or consequences of libertarian freedom in an ad hoc manner, the whole structure of his 'creation project' is imperiled. For this reason, God puts himself in the position where he accepts massive amounts of immoral and despicable, even fully pointless and gratuitous, free creaturely choices (witness the Holocaust, for example) in which he is 'unable to intervene' and still honor the freedom he has bestowed on his creation" (*God's Lesser Glory* 197, n. 3; see also 56, n. 33).

[57] Boyd, *God of the Possible* 153. I have yet to be convinced that "neo-Molinism" can supply the kind of "filtering mechanism" necessary for God's unilateral activity to be anything more than merely arbitrary. After all, how can the God of "neo-Molinism" know which particular evils will lead to "limit transgressing" consequences and which ones will not without real knowledge of more than just future possibilities? Is it not possible that *any* evil, no matter how small or apparently inconsequential, could, given the right circumstances in some possible world, be the ultimate explanation for a future instance of evil so abominable that it makes the Holocaust look like the harmless horseplay of some Prussian choir boys by comparison? If so, then why would God intervene to prevent some particular evils and not others? To put it differently, how could the God of "neo-Molinism" ever know that the consequences of a particular evil would be so intolerable (i.e. "limit transgressing") that his unilateral intervention in that instance would be justified? I look forward to learning how "neo-Molinists" answer these questions.

[58] Note that this is an aspect of God's sovereignty that Boyd apparently did not discuss with Suzanne (ibid. 103–6). A whole new line of questioning would have presented itself to her had she only realized that God could have ensured that her marriage was preserved and her suffering averted if that was the state of affairs that he really wanted to see realized. On pointless evil and suffering, see ibid. 98–103, 135–36, 153–56; Sanders, *The God Who Risks* 262.

III. CONCLUSION

D. A. Carson has wisely counseled that when all is said and done we must acknowledge that there is mystery in the problem of evil. We must acknowledge, in other words, that the problem of evil is beyond our capacity to exhaustively understand because God is beyond our capacity to exhaustively understand. He concludes, therefore, that we must repudiate any attempt to resolve the problem of evil in a manner that either compromises God's nature or undermines his sovereign purpose to work all things—including evil—for the good of his children and the glory of his name.[59] While some with openness leanings will no doubt insist that Carson's counsel is evidence of nothing less than "a piously confused way of thinking,"[60] we must ask what the alternative is. If nothing else, when we consider the pain and suffering that exist in the world in light of the willingness of the God of Open Theism to coerce the will in order to bring about states of affairs that he really wants to bring about, it becomes immediately clear that the God of Open Theism cannot be trusted. For he is little more than a cosmic sugar daddy whose affections are now hot and now cold, but never constant. He wants loving relationships with his creatures and to that end he reigns through a "sovereignty of love" rather than a "sovereignty of control." But in the end his reign is administered only haltingly, for not all of his creatures are the recipients of his intervening mercies. While openness theologians would have us believe that the Open view of evil offers "a psychological, as well as theological, benefit,"[61] those with more traditional inclinations have their doubts. After all, there is nothing particularly reassuring about a being who could prevent the pain and suffering that he claims to hate but he does not prevent either because he is not a good enough chess player, or because he is, at bottom, indifferent to the plight of his creatures.[62]

[59] D. A. Carson, "God, the Bible and Spiritual Warfare: A Review Article," *JETS* 42 (1999) 267–68.

[60] Boyd, *Letters from a Skeptic* 47.

[61] Basinger, "Practical Implications" 171.

[62] I would like to thank Millard Erickson, Ardel Caneday, Justin Taylor, and Dwayne Polk for their valuable comments on significant portions of this essay.