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THE FUNCTION OF DIVINE SELF-LIMITATION IN OPEN THEISM: GREAT WALL OR PICKET FENCE?

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Evangelical theologians are dusting off their copies of the Church fathers, Anselm, Aquinas, Scotus, Occam, Luther, Calvin, Arminius, and Molina. Perhaps it is not quite like fourth-century Constantinople where market places, street corners, and barbershops buzzed with discussion about the doctrine of the Trinity. But we are discussing the doctrine of God seriously and with passion—in scholarly and popular journals, in local and national, academic gatherings, and even in churches. We owe this renaissance in part to the controversial proposals of the "openness of God"[1] school of thought or, as I shall refer to it, "open theism." Open theism endeavors to revise the traditional doctrine of God to make it more biblical and of greater contemporary relevance. It fleshes out its intuitions by differentiating itself from the classical doctrine of God and process theism.[2] On the one hand, open theism disputes the traditional doctrines of divine immutability, impassibility, omnipotence, omniscience, aseity, and eternity. On the other hand, it declines process theism's invitation to follow it in rejecting the doctrines of God's unlimited nature and creation from nothing. Open theism dissents from the traditional consensus that God controls all things, but it refuses to give up the belief that God could control all things, if he so chose.

Critics engage open theism on various fronts and do not mince words in their judgments. Open theism, they say: offers us a "diminished God,"[3]

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[1] The term was popularized by the book *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994). I will focus on the authors of this book: Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker and David Basinger. I will also include Gregory Boyd, whose recent books defending open theism have created a stir within evangelical circles, especially among Baptist theologians. Many mainline theologians and philosophers of religion hold similar views: Jürgen Moltmann, Vincent Brümmer, Paul Fiddes, Keith Ward, and others. I will limit myself, however, to theologians who profess to be evangelical.

[2] Clark Pinnock seeks to "revise classical theism in a dynamic direction without falling into Process Theology" ("Systematic Theology," in *The Openness of God* 107). William Hasker speaks of a "third alternative that embodies many of the strengths of both classical and process theism while avoiding their weaknesses" ("A Philosophical Perspective," in *The Openness of God* 140).

[3] Bruce A. Ware, *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of open theism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000).

teaches "fantasy" and "heresy,"[4] undermines a "high view of Scripture,"[5] places "God at risk,"[6] misjudges "the difference between created (finite) being and uncreated (infinite) being,"[7] pictures God as a "transcendence-starved deity,"[8] and bids us trust a "limited God."[9] It appears, however, that critics are still struggling to mount an effective critique. Confessionalist arguments fall flat when directed at a frankly revisionist movement. Biblicists find it difficult to show definitively that open theism departs from the Bible. And those traditionalists who see open theism as heresy may have to wait a while before the contemporary church reaches a consensus on that issue.

I shall not attempt, therefore, to show that open theists' views are biblically unsound, confessionally unfaithful, or heretical.[10] My aim is much more modest, but (I contend) much more likely to produce convincing, even if not definitive, conclusions. In their revised doctrine of God, open theists claim they can hold both that the de facto existence of the world limits God's power and knowledge and that God remains unlimited in his essential nature. They reconcile this apparent contradiction by means of a theory of divine self-limitation. The God who is unlimited by nature limits himself by an act of will, by choosing freely (*ex nihilo*) to create the sort of world that limits God. In assessing this thesis, I shall first describe briefly but (I trust) fairly open theists' portrait of God. Second, I shall dispute open theists' central claim by showing that the theory of divine self-limitation fails to reconcile the unlimited with the limited God and undermines the doctrine of creation from nothing.

I. THE GOD OF OPEN THEISM

Open theism proposes extensive revisions in the doctrines of immutability and impassibility. The notion that God does not change in any respect (immutability), open theism argues, is irreconcilable with the biblical picture of God. In the biblical narrative, God knows and experiences the

[4] Thomas Oden, "The Real Reformers Are Traditionalists," *Christianity Today* 42/2 (February 9, 1998) 46.

[5] Stephen J. Wellum, "The Importance of the Nature of Sovereignty for Our View of Scripture," *SBJT* 4/2 (2000) 76–90. See also Wellum's forthcoming (2001) article in *Reformation and Revival Journal*: "The Openness of God: A Critical Assessment." My thanks to professor Wellum for e-mailing me a copy of his manuscript in advance of its publication.

[6] Wendy Murray Zorba, "God at Risk," *Christianity Today* 45/4 (March 5, 2001) 56.

[7] Douglas Kelly, "Afraid of Infinitude," *Christianity Today* 39/1 (January 9, 1995) 32.

[8] Timothy George, "A Transcendence-Starved Deity," *Christianity Today* 39/1 (January 9, 1995) 33.

[9] Albert Mohler, "The Battle over the Doctrine of God," *SBJT* 1/1 (1997) 15. For more on the critics of open theism, see Clark Pinnock's new book *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001) 10–18. For a periodically updated bibliography on open theism, pro and con, see The Edgren Fellowship web page: http://www.edgren.org/bibliography.html.

[10] I am not, on the other hand, vouching for open theists in these areas. I think the critics who have taken these approaches have made many good arguments against open theism. I do not think, however, that you can make decisive arguments on such broad issues.

changing world "on a momentary basis."[11] God acts freely and responsively in the world and is affected by it. Though "the essence of God does not change," God changes "in experience, knowledge, emotions and actions."[12] Contrary to the classical doctrine of impassibility, open theism claims God can feel pain and suffer loss. In the OT, God is passionate, experiencing the full range of emotions: mercy, regret, sadness, and anger. The NT affirms God is love—a love clearly more than mere benevolence. God's love for humans makes him vulnerable to the pain of rejection and opens him "to the possibility of joy and sorrow, depending on what happens to us."[13] Above all, the incarnation and death of the Son of God demonstrates that God can suffer, for in Jesus God experiences suffering and death "from our side."[14]

Closely related to those of immutability and impassibility are the questions of God's eternity and his relationship to time. Open theism challenges the traditional notion that God is beyond time or timeless. According to Pinnock, the doctrine of God's timelessness threatens the biblical teaching that God is "an agent who works sequentially in time."[15] To the contrary, explains Pinnock, "God experiences temporal passage, learns new facts when they occur and changes plans in response to what humans do."[16] According to Hasker, time is real for God, even apart from creation. "God is everlasting—without beginning or end but nevertheless undergoing a sequence of experiences, even apart from God's relation to creation."[17]

Open theists, consistent with their view of God and time, revise the classical attribute of omniscience. Traditional theology affirmed God's complete knowledge of the future, as well as of the past and the present. open theism denies complete foreknowledge to God and affirms "present knowledge" only.[18] God, according to the theory of present knowledge, knows the past and present exhaustively, but knows the future only insofar as it is determined by the past and present or will be determined by God's unilateral

[11] Richard Rice, "Divine Foreknowledge and Free-Will Theism," in *The Grace of God, The Will of Man: A Case for Arminianism* (ed. Clark H. Pinnock; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989) 133.

[12] Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998) 187. For more criticisms of immutability see Pinnock, "God Limits His Knowledge," in *Predestination & Free Will: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty & Human Freedom* (ed. D. Basinger and R. Basinger; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986) 146–47, 155; Richard Rice, "Biblical Support for a New Perspective," in *The Openness of God* 28, 36, 47–49; John Sanders, "Historical Considerations," in *The Openness of God* 79; Clark Pinnock, "Systematic Theology" 117–18; William Hasker, "A Philosophical Perspective" 129, 133; Clark Pinnock, "From Augustine to Arminius: A Pilgrimage in Theology," in *The Grace of God, The Will of Man* 24; *idem*, "Between Classical and Process," in *Process Theology* (ed. Ronald Nash; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987) 322.

[13] Hasker, "Philosophical Considerations" 133–34.

[14] Sanders, *The God Who Risks* 106.

[15] Pinnock, "God Limits His Knowledge" 156.

[16] Pinnock, "Systematic Theology" 118.

[17] William Hasker, "An Adequate God," in *Searching for An Adequate God: A Dialogue Between Process and Free Will Theists* (ed. John B. Cobb Jr. and Clark H. Pinnock; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 218.

[18] Sanders, *The God Who Risks* 198.

action.[19] If we take human freedom seriously as the power to act or refrain from acting in a certain way under defined conditions ("libertarian freedom"),[20] then a free act "cannot be known ahead of time by God or anyone else."[21] Open theists insist rather strongly that their rejection of foreknowledge does not compromise their affirmation of omniscience. God knows everything it is possible to know—every possibility and every actual thing. But God cannot know future free actions because, in Gregory Boyd's terms, "there is nothing there for God to know."[22]

The traditional doctrine of God's omnipotence denies any external limits on God's power to carry out his will. Creatures have power only by God's grace, and they exercise that power in dependence on and in concurrence with God. Open theists do not deny that God is "omnipotent." "Of course God is omnipotent!" exclaims Pinnock. God "can do what he chooses to do."[23] But God "exercises the kind of omnipotence which is compatible with his own decision to create a world with free agents."[24] Hasker defines omnipotence as God's power to "perform any action the performance of which is logically possible and consistent with God's perfect nature."[25] According to open theists, God could have created a world in which he determines and controls everything that happens.[26] Since God created a world containing free beings, however, "we do not believe that God can unilaterally ensure that all and only that which he desires to come about in our world will in fact occur . . . God voluntarily forfeits control."[27] Open theists affirm that God can create any possible world he chooses, but a world that contains libertarian freedom *and* unfolds necessarily as God desires is not possible.

According to traditional theology, God does not depend on creatures in any way. What God is or does is never conditioned by what creatures are or

[19] Robert E. Picirilli observes correctly that within the open theist framework God does not actually know what he will do in the future. "In such matters God really 'knows' only his present determination." See Picirilli, "An Arminian Response to John Sanders's *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence," JETS* 44 (2001) 480.

[20] Sanders, *The God Who Risks* 221. According to Hasker, *"An agent is free with respect to a given action at a given time if at that time it is within the agent's power to perform the action and also in the agent's power to refrain from the action"* ("A Philosophical Perspective" 136–37; italics original).

[21] Pinnock, "God Limits His Knowledge" 138. David Basinger affirms present knowledge but dissents from Pinnock, Hasker, and other open theists who argue that foreknowledge and middle knowledge are logically impossible. See *The Case for Freewill Theism: A Philosophical Assessment* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996) 42, and the literature cited in footnotes 8 and 9 (p. 142).

[22] Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000) 16; cf. 123, 125.

[23] "God Limits His Knowledge" 153.

[24] Ibid.

[25] "A Philosophical Perspective" 135.

[26] Pinnock insists against process theology that "the God of the openness model is still capable of coercion, and such a God who is only self-limited could at any time be un-limited. In the openness model, God still reserves the power to control everything" ("Introduction," in *Searching for An Adequate God* xi). See also Pinnock, "Between Classical and process theism" 334.

[27] David Basinger, "Practical Considerations," in *The Openness of God* 159.

do. Creatures are what they are by virtue of their relation to God, but God is not God by virtue of his relation to creatures. Open theism challenges this view. The divine-human relationship described in the Bible, according to John Sanders, "includes genuine give-and-take relations between God and humans such that there is receptivity and a degree of contingency in God."[28] "God is dependent on the world for information about the world," says Pinnock, in defiance of classical theology.[29] God is "relationally dependent" on creatures, according to Hasker, because some of what he does depends on their free decisions.[30] God cannot achieve his plan for creation unless human beings freely cooperate.[31]

As we would expect, open theism's doctrine of providence manifests the effects of these revisions in the traditional attributes. According to John Sanders, these new insights require a new model for the doctrine of providence. God is not a sovereign commanding his subjects, a potter manipulating the clay or a novelist creating his characters. Rather, he is a "risk-taker" aiming at a general goal but adapting to changing circumstances along the way.[32] In creating our world, God began a risky venture. "The divine project of developing people who freely enter into a loving and trusting relationship with God lacks an unconditional guarantee of success."[33] God "hopes that individuals will always freely choose to do what he would have them do . . . but there can be no assurance that they will do so."[34] God has opened "himself up to the real possibility of failure and disappointment."[35] God does not "micromanage"[36] history according to a "blueprint."[37] God's "project" has a goal (free beings in loving relationship with their Creator), but the "routes remain open."[38] Like a great jazz player, God improvises, responds, and adjusts as his creatures make free decisions. But might not his risk-laden project ultimately fail? Might not all or most humans reject God's loving overtures? Hasker admits this possibility, but argues that, since this danger "might be overwhelmingly improbable," we need not entertain it as "a serious objection."[39] Responding to a similar concern, Sanders assures the questioner that we can put our hope in God "because we have a God with a proven track record of successfully navigating the vicissitudes of human history."[40]

[28] Sanders, *The God Who Risks* 12.
[29] Pinnock, "God Limits His Knowledge" 146.
[30] Hasker, "An Adequate God" 219.
[31] Rice, "Biblical Support for a New Perspective" 44.
[32] Sanders, *The God Who Risks* 11; David Basinger, *The Case for Freewill Theism* 36; Hasker, "A Philosophical Perspective" 151.
[33] Sanders, *The God Who Risks* 89.
[34] David Basinger, *The Case for Freewill Theism* 36.
[35] Hasker, "A Philosophical Perspective" 151.
[36] Sanders, *The God Who Risks* 112.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Sanders, *The God Who Risks* 124, 127, 170, 187, 206, 259.
[39] Hasker, "A Philosophical Perspective" 153–54.
[40] Sanders, *The God Who Risks* 129; see also 183.

II. FUNCTION AND FAILURE OF DIVINE SELF-LIMITATION

1. *The function of divine self-limitation*. As this survey discloses, open theism clearly teaches that God is limited by the world. Creation imposes conditions on God. God cannot achieve his goals without the help of creatures. God reacts to, suffers because of, and waits on his human creatures. In creating our world, God took great risks, and there are no guarantees God's purposes will come to fruition. The obvious question to be asked by inquirer and critic alike is: "Is not Open Theism simply another form of finite God theory, similar to those put forward by early twentieth-century Boston Personalism or contemporary Process Theology?"[41] Open theists have a vital stake in answering this question with an emphatic "No." The genius of open theism is its claim that it can revise the classical doctrine of God without giving up the doctrine of God's unlimited nature and the companion doctrine of creation from nothing. If it cannot maintain this balance, open theism will probably come to be regarded as another form of process theology, albeit less coherent.

In response to this challenge open theists have but one card to play—divine self-limitation (hereafter DSL). Though God is not limited by nature and eternally, they assert, he can limit himself. He can choose to create a particular world and then play by its rules even if the game goes against him. Rice, for example, distinguishes open theism from process theism through the concept of DSL. For the open view, "the ultimate metaphysical fact is not God-and-world, but God, period."[42] Open theists believe "the conviction that God is the sole fundamental reality, the one and only ultimate explanatory principle, is essential to the Christian vision of things."[43] Rice rejects the following disjunction: either God determines everything or God determines nothing. "We have the option that an omnipotent God voluntarily decides to share his power with his creatures and henceforth cooperates with them in reaching his objectives for the universe."[44]

According to Pinnock, open theism differs from process theism decisively by affirming that God created the world freely, out of nothing. God's "openness to the world" and the limits this openness entails are "freely chosen,

[41] I am thinking especially of Edgar Sheffield Brightman (1884–1953) who taught philosophy at Boston University. For a summary of Brightman's finite God theory, see John Macquarrie, *Twentieth Century Religious Thought: The Frontiers of Philosophy and Theology 1900–1980* (rev. ed.; New York: Scribner's Sons, 1981) 67–68. The book, *Searching for an Adequate God*, cited in full above, consists of a dialogue between open theists William Hasker and Richard Rice and the prominent process theists, John Cobb, David R. Griffin, and Nancy R. Howell. Griffin aggressively chides open theists for their refusal to take their revisions of the doctrine of God to their logical ends. He also rejects open theism's strategy of rooting God's *de facto* limitations in a divine self-limitation ("Process Theology and the Christian Good News: A Response to Classic Free Will Theism" 1–38).

[42] Rice, "process theism and the Open View of God" 185.

[43] Ibid. 187.

[44] Ibid. 191. In this "sharing" does God alienate himself from this "portion" of his power? It would seem that open theists must answer yes.

not compelled."[45] In creating a world like ours, God "surrenders power" and accepts "the limitations of this decision."[46] God "has chosen to limit his power by delegating some to the creature."[47] Open theism, according to Pinnock, "understands God to be voluntarily self-limited, making room for creaturely freedom. Without making God finite, this definition appreciates God's delighting in a universe which he does not totally control."[48] Pinnock reminds us that, in contrast to the process model, "the God of the openness model is still capable of coercion, and such a God who is only self-limited could at any time be un-limited."[49] Reversing these limitations would mean, of course, the undoing of creaturely freedom—a consequence Pinnock fails to mention.

DSL, for John Sanders, is an exercise of God's sovereignty. God "sovereignly decided to providentially operate in a dynamic give-and-take relationship."[50] God "sovereignly makes himself vulnerable."[51] "God sovereignly decides that not everything will be up to God."[52] God takes a "*sovereign risk*."[53] "God sovereignly enters into a relationship with his creatures in a way that involves risk for both God and his creatures. The almighty God creates significant others with freedom and grants them space to be alongside him and to collaborate with him."[54] God "sovereignly decreed" that he should not exercise "exhaustive divine control."[55] God "respects the rules of the game he established."[56] David Basinger argues that, because God has granted "power to exercise pervasive, morally significant freedom of choice," God cannot control everything.[57] This choice must be viewed, according to Basinger, as a "self-limitation."[58] Basinger continues, "Freewill theists acknowledge that God does not control much of what occurs. However, unlike process theists, they are adamant in their belief that this is the result of a moral choice, not an external restriction."[59] Hasker agrees: "God's capacity to control the detailed course of events is limited only by his self-restraint, not by any inability to do so."[60]

The notion of DSL pervades open theist literature and plays a crucial role there. It functions as a kind of "Great Wall" to protect open theism from

[45] "Systematic Theology" 112.
[46] Ibid. 113.
[47] Ibid. 115.
[48] Ibid. 117.
[49] "Preface," in *Searching for an Adequate God* xi.
[50] *The God Who Risks* 87.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid. 44.
[53] Ibid. 46. Italics original.
[54] Ibid. 137.
[55] Ibid. 45. Sanders uses expressions such as these on almost every page, 45 times by my count. Connecting "sovereignty" with limits begins to sound like bravado after the fortieth time.
[56] Ibid. 177. See also 211.
[57] *The Case for Freewill Theism* 36.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Ibid.
[60] *God, Time and Knowledge* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989) 196.

being overrun by process theism. It allows the open theist to have a God with process-like limitations—supposedly good for dealing with evil and protecting libertarian freedom—without having to give up some cherished divine attributes. One might think that open theists would have devoted considerable efforts to elucidating and defending this concept's coherence and its capacity to carry the weight placed on it. To date, however, open theists have developed no more than the rudiments of a DSL theory. The concept is used rather in a common sense way (almost in an "off the cuff" or *ad hoc* fashion) as if its meaning and serviceability were obvious. Open theism expects no objections. Not to put too fine a point on it, it is as if the open theist thinks to himself: "I could deal effectively with the problems of evil and human freedom if I had a God that was limited in power and knowledge. But I 'shudder'[61] at the idea of a God limited by nature. I can have it both ways, however, if I root God's *de facto* limitations in an act of the divine will rather than in the necessary structure of the divine nature." Is this "*via media*"[62] really that easily established? Will this concept of DSL stand up to scrutiny? I shall argue that it cannot.

2. *The failure of divine self-limitation.*

a. *Do all negations limit God?* John Sanders's brief section, "The Concept of Divine Self-Limitation," in *The God Who Risks*, is one of the few theoretical discussions of DSL in the literature of open theism. We will follow his thoughts closely in what follows.[63] Sanders begins by anticipating a standard objection, that is, that open theism offers us a "limited God."[64] He points out that open theism is not alone in speaking of God in the language of limitation. The Christian tradition has always spoken of God as "limited" in some ways. The Bible itself and tradition have noted many things God "cannot" do. God cannot lie, die, or sin, for example. Indeed, Sanders asserts, try as hard as they may, not even the most fastidious traditionalist can avoid "some sort of divine limitation":

> If it is impossible for God to create beings over which he does not exercise specific sovereignty, then God is limited. If God must control every detail of human life in order to achieve his goals, then God is limited. If God cannot create personal agents who may act independently of the divine will, then God is limited. If it is not possible for God to create beings who can surprise and possibly disappoint him, then God is limited. If an omnipotent God cannot create a world in which the future actions of free creatures is unknown, then God is limited. If it is impossible for God to make himself contingent on the decisions

[61] Pinnock, "Between Classical and Process" 318.

[62] Ibid. 321.

[63] See pp. 224–28. As far as I have been able to determine, Sanders's brief section (5 pages) is the most sustained reflection on divine self-limitation in open theist literature. Richard Rice includes a two-page section, "A Theology of Divine Restraint," in his book chapter, "process theism and the Open View of God," in *Searching for An Adequate God*.

[64] Albert Mohler, "The Battle over the Doctrine of God," *SBJT* 1/1 (1997) 15.

> of creatures, then God is limited. Consequently, both sides of the sovereignty debate employ the concept of divine limitation, whether they admit it or not.[65]

Sanders's preemptive argument is straightforward: if the Bible, tradition, and even open theism's contemporary opponents cannot avoid attributing limitations to God, there is no *prima facie* objection to open theism's practice of doing so. Sanders's argument suffers from a serious flaw, however. He fails to distinguish between negative language that *imposes* a limit and negative language that *removes* a limit. Traditional theology used negative (*apophatic*) language to negate the limitations and defects of creatures to avoid attributing them to God.[66] To say "God cannot die" does not limit God. It expresses, rather, God's unlimited nature with respect to death. The negative word "cannot" negates the limit represented by the word "die." Mortal beings do not have more being or more possibilities because they are mortal; they have less. When traditional theology says "God cannot lie," it is not limiting God's possibilities for speech, thereby cutting God off from a whole range of other possibilities. It is negating a moral defect that is intertwined with all sorts of inadequacies and impotencies. The statement, "God cannot lie," asserts, among other things, that God is free from any internal self-contradiction or external needs that might tempt God to lie. Liars do not experience reality more deeply, but less, because of their lies. This use of the language of limitation does not limit God at all but marks the "boundary" between God's being and nothingness.

The limiting language used by open theists, however, is of a different order. It imposes true limits on God. A true limit is a boundary drawn, not between being and nothingness, but within being. As finite, I face some limits about which I can do nothing. Because of the finite speed of light, I can never know anything that happens in the physical universe outside of my "light cone."[67] Other limits I accept as means to desired ends. If I am having trouble with high cholesterol and my doctor limits me to low-cholesterol foods, she has created a division among foods. Many good foods will be on the "wrong" side of the boundary. Speaking of God as under true limitations is what troubles many about open theism. That creation limits God's ability to do his will, that God cannot know the future, and that God is limited

[65] *The God Who Risks* 225–26.

[66] *Apophatic* theology assumed, in the words of Basil of Caesarea, that the essence of God is "unexpressible by the human voice" and "incomprehensible to human reason" (*In Hexaemeron* 2.2, quoted in Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture: The Metamorphosis of Natural Theology in the Christian Encounter with Hellenism* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993] 42). This being true, the language of negation reminds us of our limits and keeps us humble before the mystery of the unlimited God. Pelikan examines the Cappadocian fathers' rationale for *apophatic* theology in his chapter, "The Language of Negation" (pp. 40–56).

[67] According to Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time: From Big Bang to Black Holes* (New York: Bantam, 1988) 185, a light cone is "a surface in space-time that marks out the possible directions for light rays passing through a given event." In more common (three-dimensional) terms: Suppose I live 85 years. In this case, I am limited to experiencing events that were within 85 light years at the time of my birth. I have absolutely no access to any event outside that limit.

by the free action of humans—these are true limitations. Open theists draw a boundary between the genuine possibilities God can realize and those he cannot; they make a division among possible goods. They admit that God may want to accomplish certain things, but cannot do them because the resources are unavailable, he must play by the rules, or humans will not cooperate. God is a risk-taker, and creation is a "risky adventure."[68]

Now let us apply the distinction between negative language that imposes limits and negative language that removes limits to Sanders's claim that classical theists cannot avoid limiting God. How we evaluate this claim, we now see, depends on whether or not the limits expressed by the classical theist are true limits or are merely limit forms that actually remove limits. The six propositions in the long quote above concern the nature of God's sovereignty over possible worlds he might actualize. They can be reduced to one claim: if God cannot create a being that is uncontrollable (at least in some respects) by God, then God is limited.[69] To be impressed by Sanders's argument we would need to be convinced that the (hypothetical) classical theist's assertion, "God cannot create an uncontrollable being," imposes a *true* limit on God.[70] The following consideration shows that it does not. Is the statement, "God cannot create a world that is in part uncontrollable by him," in the same class with the statement,

(1) "God cannot make a world where mice grow to be five feet long from head to tail,"

or with the statement,

(2) "God cannot create a second God"?

Clearly, to limit God's ability to create mice of whatever size is to place a true limit on God. To "limit" God's ability to create a second God, however, does not constitute a true limit. It actually removes a limit, for it is part of God's divine perfection to be unique. God would be less than God if he could duplicate himself.

Sanders argues that God *can* and has created an uncontrollable being. He recognizes that the existence of this being imposes a true limit on God. Sanders does not appear to recognize, however, that a being that is uncontrollable by God (or independent of God) could be considered a sort of second God. Sanders's argument, then, begs the question of the ontological status of an "uncontrollable" being. One need not be a hidebound traditionalist to suspect that uncontrollability (or independence) in any strict sense is an attribute of God alone. Attributing to God the "ability" to create a second

[68] Clark Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996) 56.

[69] Open theists do not maintain that God gives up control irreversibly. God could "control" everything. The question here is whether God can create a being whose very essence is to be independent and thus excludes being controlled by another, even by God. In this case, to control is to destroy.

[70] Sanders gives no help here. He simply asks these questions without addressing the issue I have raised. Does he think the answers are so obvious that no one could disagree or is he simply obfuscating?

independent being actually calls God's unique deity into question. Conversely, the (traditional) statement, "God cannot create an independent (uncontrollable) being," really removes a limit from God and affirms his unique deity. Sanders's preemptive argument, contrary to his intentions, actually demonstrates the fundamental soundness of classical theology's intuitions. I believe we are now at the heart of open theism's most troubling deficiencies: its confused and confusing grasp of God's transcendence and its misunderstanding of the doctrine of creation. This will become abundantly clear as we proceed to Sanders's explicit DSL theory.

b. *Does the sheer existence of creatures limit God?* Sanders proposes four ways in which God may limit himself. Though Sanders presents these ways as "ideas that have been put forward," by others, I believe we can take them as on the whole approved by him. They are:

(1) The very existence of a creation of any kind "implies a limitation on God, since God is no longer the only being that exists." God now has a relationship to creation and "being in relation to" is a sort of dependence.

(2) The creation of human beings "implies limitation, since God is not the humans and God is dependent on them in order to be in divine-human relation." God would not be Creator without creation.

(3) God limits himself by making choices among various possibilities. He cannot do some things without leaving others undone. For example, God cannot create a universe that has both libertarian freedom and the property of being under God's complete control.

(4) "God cannot exercise meticulous providence and grant human beings libertarian freedom."[71]

[71] *The God Who Risks* 225. Sanders follows his list of four types of DSL with a brief discussion of the term self-restraint. He opines that this concept might better capture what he and other open theists mean by DSL. The term "restraint" keeps before us that God did not lose his omnipotence at creation; rather, without giving up his power, he restrains his action to fit his project of creating beings that freely return God's love. I doubt, however, that self-restraint is strong enough to cover what open theists mean by self-limitation. God does not merely restrain himself from knowing the future; he cannot know it, given the existence of beings with libertarian freedom. God does not merely hold himself back from accomplishing his will unfailingly; he cannot do it while preserving libertarian freedom. Can self-restraint do for the problem of evil what open theists think self-limitation does? Do open theists tend to say, "God restrained himself from stopping the Holocaust for the sake of his project" or simply, "God could not stop the Holocaust, and that pained him infinitely"? (See Boyd, *God of the Possible* 98; Sanders, *The God Who Risks* 258; and Basinger, "Practical Implications" 170.) The concept of divine self-restraint has its own set of conceptual problems. Divine self-restraint implies that God is in some way at odds with himself. If I restrain myself from eating another piece of cheesecake with strawberry and whipped cream topping, I am divided by the desire to eat more cake and the desire for long-term health. As this example shows, self-restraint is usually understood as a more rational power "constraining" an irrational desire. In the same way, divine self-restraint projects some division of desire and irrationality within God. Perhaps God would like to ease the suffering that will come with my next kidney stone—since my suffering also causes God pain—but God also desires to maintain the structures of his project intact for the greater, long-term good involved. So, God holds back from preventing my pain.

Sanders's first two types of DSL can be collapsed into one, since both discuss a limitation God brings upon himself by allowing the sheer existence of other beings. Why would the sheer existence of a creature "alongside" God limit God?[72] Let us answer this question by asking and answering another. Why would the existence of another eternal being—material or spiritual—"alongside" God limit God? The Church fathers dealt with this question extensively in their struggle against polytheism and different forms of metaphysical dualism or pluralism. If there were an eternal Other "alongside" God, God would not be the source of all things, all-powerful, ultimate, omnipresent, and so on.[73] Grasping the totality of good, being, beauty, truth, and power would require us to combine God's portion and the Other's portion. So, the All (God plus the Other) would be greater than God alone. God would be truly and eternally limited by the existence of this eternal Other! Open theists agree with the Church fathers here. Pinnock criticizes process theology precisely for proposing an eternal realm alongside God. This will not do, says Pinnock, for then "God would be like a Greek god who was in the grip of a more ultimate metaphysical ground."[74]

Open theists stumble, however, when they address the original question, "Why would the sheer existence of a creature 'alongside' God limit God?" According to open theists, once the created other exists, and as long as it exists, God finds himself limited in ways similar to the ways he would be limited if metaphysical dualism were true. God must vacate "space" to make room for creatures.[75] He must cease action to allow creatures scope for their own action. He must give up control, so creatures can exercise their freedom. Created beings, too, have their own power, being, good, and beauty. In open theism—as in metaphysical dualism—the totality of power, being, good, and beauty is calculated by combining God's portion and the world's

[72] Notice the spatial metaphor. The metaphor of space is use frequently in openness literature. Just as two physical bodies cannot occupy the same space at the same time, God and creatures cannot both be fully present in being and action at the same time and space. See Sanders, *The God Who Risks* 44, 46, 47, 85, 137, 176, 224, 278, and 282. If we take the metaphor to mean more than a qualitative ontological distinction between Creator and creature expressed in a metaphor of spatial separation, we introduce severe problems into the doctrine of creation. We cannot do justice to the doctrine of creation if, for example, we insist that the creature's existence "alongside" God means that God is quantitatively absent—or even diminished in presence—"where" the creature is. This and other problems will become apparent in the discussion that follows. I explore the metaphor of space at much greater length in my article, "Divine Self-Limitation in the Theology of Jürgen Moltmann: A Critical Assessment," *Christian Scholars Review* (forthcoming, 2002).

[73] John of Damascus observes: "The Deity is perfect, and without blemish in goodness, and wisdom, and power, without beginning without end, everlasting, uncircumscribed, and in short, perfect in all things. Should we say, then, that there are many Gods, we must recognize difference among the many. For if there is no difference among them, they are one rather than many. But if there is difference among them, what becomes of the perfectness? For that which comes short of perfection, whether it be in goodness, or power, or wisdom, or time, or place, could not be God. But it is this very identity in all respects that shews that the Deity is one and not many. If there were many Gods, how can one maintain that God is uncircumscribed? For where the one would be, the other could not be" (*Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, I, 5, NPNF, vol. ix).

[74] "Between Classical and Process Theism" 319.

[75] See footnote 71.

portion. The conclusion is irresistible, though open theists may be loath to draw it: since there is a world "alongside" God, and as long as there is such a world, God plus the world is greater than God alone.[76]

Though they affirm the doctrine of creation from nothing in the face of process theism, it appears that open theists have not grasped the radical implications of this doctrine. To affirm the doctrine of creation from nothing is to affirm that God and the world enjoy an utterly different kind of relationship than God and the Other do in metaphysical dualism.[77] Otto Weber voices the consensus of tradition when he affirms that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* implies that "God bears the ground and the presuppositions of his creative activity within himself . . . outside the Creator there is nothing other than the creature."[78] Colin Gunton speaks of "an absolute ontological distinction between creator and creature"[79] that excludes a hierarchy of being needed to mediate between God and the world. Since God created the world from nothing, the world adds nothing to God. No good, power, being, or beauty resides in the world that was not already in God. Robert Sokolowski rightly says that God would be God "in undiminished greatness and goodness even if the world had not been."[80] Speaking to God in his *Proslogion*, Anselm of Canterbury says, "You are in no way less, even if they [creatures] should return to nothing."[81] God is not defined as God or constituted more or less God by being (or not being) in relation to the world.[82] God plus the world is not greater than God alone.

Open theism has not carried this radically different understanding into its doctrine of God's relationship to the world. Ironically, for all its criticisms of classical theology's use of "pagan" philosophy, open theism reasons about God's relationship to the world on presuppositions that resemble

[76] After all, open theists tell us repeatedly that the final state of the future will be determined by God *and* humans, not by God alone. See Pinnock, "Systematic Theology" 116, and Rice, "Biblical Support for a New Perspective" 16.

[77] Colin Gunton rightly considers even Augustine's transference of the "eternal forms of things" to the space within the divine mind "only half way to the doctrine of creation out of nothing" (*The Triune Creator: A Historical and Systematic Study* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998] 78).

[78] Otto Weber, *Foundations of Dogmatics*, vol. 1 (trans. Darrell L. Guder; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981) 501. Wolfhart Pannenberg sees the thesis of the "unlimited freedom" of God's act of creation as identical with the formula "creation from nothing" (*Systematic Theology* [trans. Geoffrey Bromiley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994] 2.13). Affirming the doctrine of creation out of nothing, argues Pannenberg, "rules out . . . any dualistic view of the origin of the world. The world is not the result of any working of God with another principle" (p. 15).

[79] *The Triune Creator* 67.

[80] *The God of Faith and Reason: Foundations of Christian Theology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1995) 19. Sokolowski explains this notion more fully in two brilliant chapters on Anselm's ontological argument: "Beginning with St. Anselm" (pp. 1–11) and "That Truly God Exists" (pp. 104–18).

[81] Chapter 20, quoted in Sokolowski, *God of Faith and Reason* 10, n. 2.

[82] Thomas Aquinas's doctrine of the asymmetry between God's relation to the world and the world's relation to God follows from the doctrine of creation from nothing (see *Summa Theologica* I, 13, 7). William Hasker, in an autobiographical moment, tells of how he had always been "puzzled" over the medieval doctrine of God's unreal or logical relation to the world. In the course of his musings, he makes a telling admission: "That God is really related to creatures is a genuine and important point of agreement between Process Theism and the open view of God" ("An Adequate

metaphysical dualism more than they resemble the Christian doctrine of creation. It assumes that God's relation to the world is now (even if it was not eternally) constitutive of God.[83] Without creation, God would not be who he is. God and creatures are now in a dialectical relationship so that, not only are creatures defined by their similarities and dissimilarities to God, God is defined by his similarities and dissimilarities to the creature. So, God must vacate "space" to "make room" for creatures. God must cease action where human action takes up. Divine freedom and human freedom necessarily exclude each other. Divine power must diminish as human power increases. Divine knowledge may enter only in the wake of human freedom. Hence, the first and second types of DSL contradict *creatio ex nihilo.*

c. *Must God make hard choices?* We turn now the Sanders's third form of DSL. According to Sanders, God limits himself when he chooses to create a particular universe that excludes other possible universes. "God cannot do everything," Sanders observes, "selection is limitation."[84] We are familiar with this form of limitation, for we make choices among possibilities constantly. I am sitting alone at a hotel desk writing these words. My choice to get away for a few days to write limited my contact with my family. Both of these possibilities held out good, but I limited myself to one. In the same way, open theists contend, God can make a world with set A properties or set B properties, but God may not be able to make a world with set A+B properties. If set A contains elements that are incompatible with those in set B, God cannot actualize a world with set A+B properties. Suppose set A includes the property that God's will is invariably done (A_1) and set B includes the property of libertarian freedom (B_1). Sanders and other open theists argue that God cannot create a world containing both A_1 and B_1.[85]

We must keep in mind that Sanders offers this alternative as a model of *self*-limitation, a way to show how the unlimited God limits himself voluntarily. Clearly, it will not work for this purpose, however, because this type of self-limiting act always presupposes an already existing limitation. In a sense, I voluntarily limit myself to a lonely hotel room instead of the com-

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God" 217). In his admission of a "real" relation between God and creatures, Hasker makes a significant, if not decisive, concession to process theism. A "real" relation, according to Weinandy's interpretation of Aquinas, "is founded on something that is real within the two terms;" that is, it is constitutive of both terms. The existence of such a relation would imply that God could not be God without creation, and this implication clearly contradicts the doctrine of creation from nothing (Thomas G. Weinandy, O.F.M., Cap. *Does God Suffer* [Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000] 130).

[83] Earl Muller, S.J., warns, "One can dispense with this relational asymmetry only by rejecting the transcendence of God . . . a [real] relation affirmed of God's relation to the world would have the effect of erecting the world as another 'Person' in the Trinity" ("Real Relations and the Divine: Issues in Thomas's Understanding of God's Relation to the World," *Theological Studies* 56 [1995] 678–79). His warning seems apropos to open theism.

[84] *The God Who Risks* 225.

[85] Ibid.

panionship of my family. Even before I chose, however, my choices were limited by circumstances and by my very nature as a finite being. I could not choose to do both at the same time.[86] In the same way, if, in order to create, God must choose one or more universes from among a larger range of possible universes, God is already limited before choosing and creating. In this DSL model, God exists eternally in a situation not of his own making. He stands forever before a range of mutually exclusively possibilities that he did not choose and cannot control. God is eternally limited after all. Hence, open theism's DSL theory fails to protect God's unlimited nature.[87]

d. *Does human freedom limit God?* Sanders's fourth DSL model is really a specific instance of the third type. God limits himself by creating a universe that contains beings with libertarian freedom. God can choose a universe in which his will is always done or one in which there is libertarian freedom, but he cannot choose a universe with both properties, for they are contradictory. Sanders quotes Keith Ward approvingly:

> Creation is thus in one sense a self-limitation of God. His power is limited by the existence of beings, however limited, with power to oppose him. His knowledge is limited by the freedom of creatures to actualize genuinely new states of affairs, unknown by him until they happen. His beatitude is limited by the suffering involved in creaturely existence.[88]

Three facets of this fourth DSL model call for commentary and criticism. First, we note that my criticisms of the third type apply to this model as well. Supposedly a voluntary self-limitation, it really places God in an eternal situation of not being able to realize his ideal universe, because it

[86] On this point I have benefited from Marcel Sarot's discussion of DSL in the work of Vincent Brümmer. See Sarot's chapter, "Omnipotence and Self-limitation," in *Christian Faith and Philosophical Theology: Essays in Honour of Vincent Brümmer* (ed. Gijsbert van den Brink, Luco J. van Brom, and Marcel Sarot; Kampen, The Netherlands: Kok Pharos, 1992) 178.

[87] One reviewer of this article offered an objection to my argument worthy of rebuttal in advance: "Well, I'm not convinced that *potential* limitations should be charged against God as if they were *real* limitations" (private communication courtesy of the *JETS* editor; italics original). I shall make but a brief response. First, I am not, as the objector assumes, equating "potential limitations" with "real limitations." I am arguing rather that the *de facto*, temporal limitations (on God's knowledge for example) open theists attribute to God presuppose *eternal* limitations they ostensibly deny. In the open theist framework, God experiences *something* that limits him eternally, however one may conceive the ontological status of that something. My point is that in open theism God cannot realize the good he wills because something other than himself conditions him—eternally. Second, the objector's argument hinges on her or his distinction between "potential" limits and "real" limits. Perhaps God is potentially limited before making himself really limited, but potentiality is not the same as reality, the reviewer reasons. Open theism therefore should not be accused of attributing eternally "real" limitations to God. I do not use this distinction in my argument, so the author must be assuming that my logic requires it. I reject this implication. I argue that open theism presupposes *actual*—not merely potential—limits to God's power. God's eternal inability to actualize his will perfectly is "real." This limit is put to God by an eternal reality other than God; hence the objection fails.

[88] *The God Who Risks* 225. Sanders quotes *Rational Theology and the Creativity of God* (New York: Pilgrim, 1982) 84.

contains contradictory properties. God is already limited by this situation. Second, this DSL model assumes "there are"[89] many possible universes God might have actualized, some more, some less in keeping with God's ideal universe.[90] But none of these possible universes that contains free beings also has the property of unfolding exactly and necessarily according to the will of God. God must choose from among the available possible universes—presumably the one closest to his ideal—and then "play by its rules." Actualizing universes is always a process of "give and take." And, in any possible universe, the good of free will comes at the price of the possibility of evil.

But notice what we have here. God is set from all eternity in a situation that he did not choose and cannot control. God must cope eternally with the sheer fact that some universes are possible and others are not. In creating, God must conform to the eternal rules that determine which universes are possible. Again, we find in open theism a way of thinking that is excluded by the doctrine of creation from nothing. For that preexisting set of rules is not "nothing." It is clearly "another principle,"[91] existing "alongside" God eternally. This quasi-divine reality, analogous to Plato's forms, imposes eternal limits on God.[92] If open theists really intend to take creation from nothing seriously, however, they must renounce the notion of God's act of creation as a self-limitation. I have demonstrated that the concept of DSL relies on a prior essential limitation, and such prior limitation is excluded by the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* ("Outside the Creator there is nothing other than the creature"[93]). Since the doctrine of creation out of nothing excludes any preexisting restraints such as eternal "rules for universes," holding to it requires us to think of God as free to actualize the universe he wants without any self-limitation, any deal with the devil or any "give and take."

My third criticism focuses on libertarian freedom. In this fourth DSL model, libertarian freedom is a desired property of God's ideal universe. But it comes with an undesirable entailment, the possibility of evil. There is no possible universe in which the possibility of evil is not entailed in libertarian freedom. God cannot therefore actualize a universe in which there is libertarian freedom and God's will is always and necessarily done. In assessing this view, some critics attack the presupposition that libertarian freedom and God's complete control are incompatible. Advocates of the theory of middle knowledge take this approach. According to this theory, God knows what every possible individual would freely choose in every conceivable situation. God controls the course of events perfectly by actualizing only those individuals and situations in which they will freely choose what

[89] Notice how we must speak of these possible universes as if they exist somewhere. Where is "there"? If they "are" they must "be" in some sense.

[90] This is characteristic of all the divine self-limitation theories I have encountered.

[91] Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* 2.15. Pannenberg's words in full are: "The world is not the result of any working of God with another principle, as, e.g., in the description of the world's origin in Plato's *Timaeus* as the shaping of formless matter by a demiurge."

[92] These rules must be external to God if they are to limit God. If they were God's own rules, they would merely reflect the divine will and hence not impose a limit.

[93] Otto Weber, *Foundations* 1.501.

God ordains should happen. I leave to others the defense or criticism of this ingenious theory.

I want rather to raise some concerns specifically about open theists' theory and use of libertarian freedom.[94] Recall Hasker's definition of libertarian freedom: "*An agent is free with respect to a given action at a given time if at that time it is within the agent's power to perform the action and also in the agent's power to refrain from the action.*"[95] It is understandable that a philosopher would frame a definition of freedom in as general terms as possible, using abstractions such as "agent," "a given action," and "within the agent's power." A theological analysis of freedom, however, cannot do without the information lost in the abstraction process; it requires much more concreteness. Who is the agent—God, angel, devil, unfallen, fallen or redeemed humanity? What kind of action are we talking about—eating a cheese omelet or loving God with all your heart, soul, and mind? And perhaps most urgent of all, what does the phrase "within the agent's power" mean?

Hasker gives some indication of what he intends by the phrase when he says it means that "nothing whatever exists that would make it impossible for the power in question to be exercised."[96] In this gloss, Hasker attempts to exclude any compatibilist understanding of freedom. On a compatibilist reading, we are free as long as we have the power to do what we choose, even if we have internal dispositions (e.g. original sin) that render it impossible for us to choose some things (e.g. to love God). Hasker's words "nothing whatever" exclude not only external forces but also internal dispositions—loves, hates, or desires—that might "make it impossible" for us to choose one way or the other. Hasker's "agent" then appears to be a transcendental (pure) will hovering above the entire causal nexus, above itself as a concrete entity or even beyond itself as an essence.

It is not, however, with abstract agents that open theists are ultimately concerned. Hasker and Sanders apply their theory of libertarian freedom to human beings, human beings as they are understood in the Christian faith. These "agents" are God's creatures, created from nothing, embodied and sinful. They and all their "powers" exist as a result of God's creative action. Creatures do not have the power of being. Creatures cannot create from nothing, and they cannot sustain themselves in being. They continue to

[94] I shall not attempt to evaluate the concept of libertarian freedom in general, which would be a huge project well beyond the scope of this study. I limit myself rather to the narrow question of whether or not open theists' theory of libertarian freedom is consistent with their profession of belief in God's unlimited nature and their adherence to the doctrine of creation from nothing.

[95] Hasker, "A Philosophical Perspective" 136–37 (italics original). Hasker provides a more sophisticated definition in his monograph *God, Time and Knowledge*: "N is free at T with respect to performing A=$_{df}$. It is in N's power at T to perform A, and it is in N's power at T to refrain from performing A" (p. 66). David Basinger's definition says essentially the same thing: an agent "has it in her power to choose to perform A or choose not to perform A. Both A and not A could actually occur; which will actually occur has not yet been determined" ("Middle Knowledge and Classical Christian Thought," *Religious Studies* 22 [1986] 416).

[96] Ibid. In the next line he adds, "If I am free in this sense, then whether or not the action is performed depends on me."

exist by the gracious power of God's creative Spirit and Word. The creature's "powers" continue to exist for the same reason. Open theists ostensibly agree with these affirmations.[97]

Now, in this light, consider the libertarian phrase, "within the agent's power," again. Hasker explained only what this phrase excluded and not the positive nature and character of the agent's power and action, which are very important matters for theology to know. If we presuppose the doctrine of creation from nothing, as open theists profess they do, we must reject the notion that the power for action originates mysteriously in the creaturely agent. The creature and its powers, we affirm, originate in and continue to depend on God. Hasker himself says truly, "All created things depend on God for their existence from moment to moment."[98] If, however, the existence of our powers depends on God's conservation "from moment to moment,"[99] the exercise of them in action cannot escape that dependence either. Acknowledging that God must act for the agent and its powers to continue in existence and yet contending that God need not—indeed, for the sake of our freedom, must not—act in our action so that it may have being, duration, and results lands open theism in a self-contradiction.[100] The doctrine of creation from nothing implies the necessity of God's continual conservation of creation in being; and concurrence—God's acting in and with our acting, which Karl Barth calls "the divine accompanying"[101] —is conservation applied to action. The doctrine of concurrence, therefore, follows from the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*.

In their advocacy of the incompatibility of human freedom with divine foreknowledge and sovereignty over free action, open theists assume without argument what Alfred Freddoso calls "mere conservationism"[102] and reject divine concurrence. The existence of libertarian freedom, according to open theists, requires DSL, divine withdrawal, and so excludes "divine accompanying." The action of the agent, in so far as it is free, must originate and be carried out absolutely independently of God or any other reality.

[97] Open theists correctly connect divine conservation with creation out of nothing. Hasker says, "All created things depend on God for their existence from moment to moment; this is the divine 'conservation' of created reality" ("An Adequate God" 219). In an observation on John Cobb's views, Hasker says, "The persistence of any entity in existence depends wholly on the divine activity—which is just what is affirmed by the doctrine of divine conservation" (ibid. 225).

[98] Ibid. 219.

[99] Ibid.

[100] Determining the precise metaphysical nature of action is not necessary for my argument. Is action a property of the agent, of the patient or of some relation between the two? According to Alfred J. Freddoso, the medieval consensus was that action is a determination of the patient ("God's General Concurrence with Secondary Causes: Pitfalls and Prospects," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 67 [1994] 138).

[101] *CD* III, 3, 90–154.

[102] Alfred J. Freddoso, "God's General Concurrence with Secondary Causes: Pitfalls and Prospects" 134. See also Freddoso, "God's General Concurrence with Secondary Causes: Why Conservation is Not Enough," *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (1991) 554, where he says: "According to mere conservationism, God contributes to the ordinary course of nature solely by creating and conserving natural substances and their accidents, including their active and passive powers."

Sanders can even say our free actions originate "*ex nihilo*."[103] And yet, if the doctrine of concurrence is derived by applying conservation to action and conservation is a necessary corollary of *creatio ex nihilo*, rejecting concurrence undermines the doctrine of creation from nothing. Francisco Suarez, the sixteenth-century Spanish Jesuit, made this clear in the following argument:

> If God does not have an immediate influence on every action of a creature, then a created action itself does not of itself require God's influence essentially in order to exist, even thought it, too, is a participation in being; therefore, there is no reason why the form that comes to exist through such an action should require for its conservation an actual influence of the First Cause.[104]

Luis de Molina, another sixteenth-century Spanish Jesuit, also argues effectively against mere conservation:

> No effect at all can exist in nature unless God . . . immediately conserves it . . . But since that which is necessary for the conservation of a thing is *a fortiori* necessary for the first production of the thing, it surely follows that nothing at all can be produced by secondary causes unless at the same time the immediate and actual influence of the First Cause intervenes.[105]

Can open theists really make good on their claim to affirm creation from nothing, if they make our free action an exception to the rule that everything in creation depends on God? I do not think so.

We see here the final result of open theism's dialectical thinking about God and the world. The open theist attributes to the human being's free action a status similar to that attributed to the uncreated Other in metaphysical dualism. It cuts out of God's space a little room into which God is forbidden to enter. Yet, that room is not a void, sheer nothingness, because of God's absence. Human freedom is there, sitting on its diminutive throne, ruling its little domain, and deciding what God shall know and do in response to its autonomous action. Here we have a monstrous scene, native to pre-Christian pluralism, where the divine attributes are shared by many beings. Even if, as open theism claims, this little god is a creature, it diminishes the unique deity of God to admit that such a "creature" is even so much as possible.

III. CONCLUSION

Open theism's theory of divine self-limitation fails to show how God can be limited by the factual existence of the world and yet be unlimited in his

[103] "God as Personal" 176: "Our response is, in a real sense, *ex nihilo*, since it originates within us and is not merely the effect of divine causation."

[104] *Disputationes Metaphysicae* 22, I, 9, quoted in Freddoso, "God's General Concurrence with Secondary Causes: Why Conservation is Not Enough" 571. Freddoso also discusses three other arguments Suarez made against mere conservationism.

[105] *Concordia*, II. 25, 14, quoted in Freddoso, "God's General Concurrence with Secondary Causes: Why Conservation is Not Enough" 568.

essential nature. The doctrine of DSL claims that the unlimited God limits himself freely, but we discovered that every form of this theory presupposes that God is eternally limited. The God of open theism finds himself eternally situated before a range of possible universes. He cannot simply do his will but must choose from among universes, none of which conforms to his ideal world. Open theism claims to champion *creatio ex nihilo* against process theism's denials, but we discovered that open theists undermine this doctrine's foundations and contradict its implications. The notion that God must step aside to make space and time for creatures harbors the assumption that God and creatures share some divine attributes the exercise of which must be parallel or sequential. In open theism's fanatical quest for the purest doctrine of libertarian freedom, it rejects the doctrine of divine concurrence, which is clearly implied by the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo.*

The failure of its theory of divine self-limitation casts a long shadow over open theism's entire doctrine of God. The barrier open theists built to keep at bay the armies of process theism and other finite God theories turns out to be, not a Great Wall but a picket fence of ornamental value only. What open theists celebrate as voluntary and temporary limitations exhibiting God's willing condescension to his creation appear now, after closer inspection, to be involuntary and eternal conditions that limit God's ability to achieve his good will. God's power is limited eternally by the fact that he cannot remain omnipotent while creating a world like ours, with creatures like us. God's "present knowledge" turns out to be of less significance than his present ignorance, which reaches all the way back into eternity. It appears now that God suffers, not merely temporally, but eternally, for he has always known the painful truth that he cannot be assured of accomplishing his good will; and, even after the *eschaton*, he will always know that things could have been better than the state of affairs he was able to bring about.

Open theism has little good news for us. It mumbles under its breath that God may not have the power to accomplish perfectly his good will toward us and that we, too, must suffer eternally (along with God) from the knowledge that things could have been better. Open theists promise a "freedom" that we cannot actualize unless God leaves us alone, a "freedom" we can exercise truly even by refusing God's good will for us, dreaming of godhood, hating God and our neighbor, and creating hell for ourselves. The limited God of open theism can inspire in us only a limited hope, a limited faith, and, yes, a limited love. In words that could have been spoken to open theists yesterday, Karl Barth, almost fifty years ago, warned:

> And if anyone thinks it necessary to diminish the sovereignty of the activity of God or to set a limit to His omnipotence [for the sake of human freedom], let him consider what he is doing. For if that is the direction in which his thoughts and utterances run, then he is contending for the greatest possible evil that could ever befall the creature as such.[106]

[106] *CD* III, 3, 149–50.

Open theism—näively, ignorantly, misguidedly perhaps—brings upon us "the greatest possible evil that could ever befall the creature as such," because it robs us of the God in whom we can trust absolutely, the God who cannot fail to achieve his good will for us. The first question of the Heidelberg Catechism asks, "What is thy only comfort in life and in death?" The answer comes ringing back in joyous and confident tones:

> That I, with body and soul, both in life and in death, am not my own, but belong to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ, who with his precious blood has fully satisfied for all my sins, and redeemed me from all the power of the devil; and so preserves me that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; yes, that all things must work together for my salvation. Wherefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me heartily willing and ready henceforth to live unto him.[107]

Accepting open theism, I am afraid, would take from us the ability to repeat these joyous and comforting words in full confidence of faith, without reservation. Even if there were no others, this would be reason enough to reject it.

[107] Philip Schaff, "The Evangelical Protestant Creeds," vol. 2, *Creeds of Christendom* (6th ed.; 1931; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990) 307–8.