

Providence as “Responsible Risk-Taking”: *A Discussion of the Methodological Framework of Open Theism*

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Abstract: This paper explores the concept of divine providence in the framework of open theism, focusing on the balance between God’s sovereignty and creaturely libertarian free will. It examines the extent to which God takes risks in creation and governance, assessing various risk-minimizing strategies, including limiting libertarian freedom, intervention through human agents, and the potential usefulness of divine foreknowledge. The discussion highlights the methodological assumptions underlying these perspectives, particularly the theological premises of a personal, risk-taking God and the metaphysical implications of presentism. The paper argues that a coherent model of providence in open theism requires a strong view of divine personhood while maintaining a nuanced approach to divine intervention. Ultimately, it suggests that God’s providential action is best understood as influencing history through creatures who freely cooperate with divine purposes rather than through unilateral intervention. This framework offers a way to reconcile divine love, human freedom, and the reality of risk within an open theist paradigm.

Keywords: Open Theism, Providence, Free will, Divine attributes, God-World relationship

1. Introduction

If God is a personal agent who freely created the world with the purpose of creating other agents who freely engage in a loving relationship with God, God must take some risk in this act of creation. John Sanders, a prominent defender of open theism, named his comprehensive monograph about the topic *The God Who Risks*, since, in his view, attributing libertarian free will to some creatures is

incompatible with a form of providence which guarantees a certain outcome of God’s creative act:

[G]eneral sovereignty [. . .] maintains that God has sovereignly established a type of world in which God sets up general structures or an overall framework for meaning and allows the creatures significant input into exactly how things will turn out. [. . .] Since God macro-manages the whole project (while remaining free to micromanage some things), God takes risks in governing the world. (Sanders 2007, 225)

God provides ‘space’ for us to operate and in so doing makes it possible that some of the specific goals he would like to see fulfilled may not come about. (Ibid., 248)

Where open theists differ in opinion is the extent of the risk God takes: Can God guarantee that intelligent life will appear at some point in the history of the cosmos through extensive *fine-tuning* (cf. Oord 2009, 31–36)? Can God foreknow and guarantee that a certain number of people will engage in a loving relationship with God (*statistical providence*, cf. Grössl and Vicens 2014)? Can God guarantee that an incarnation will occur in order to redeem and/or finalize creation (*soteriological providence*)? The prominent open theist Gregory Boyd assumes that God could guarantee the occurrence of certain events in human history, including “some of the central events that surround the life and death of Jesus Christ” (2001, 120).

In this article, I first outline and examine the crucial methodological, theological, and metaphysical assumptions that underlie providential strategies in open theism. I then present and critically evaluate prominent proposals for reconciling a moderate form of divine providence with the libertarian framework of open theism. I argue that there is a potential tension between robust accounts of human libertarian freedom and the claim, common among open theists, that God could intervene in human decisions but simply chooses not to. My thesis is that a coherent open account of providence requires a heightened emphasis on the personality of God, while simultaneously permitting a more restrained form of divine intervention consistent with this model.¹

2. Methodological Assumptions and Divine Personhood

In all theological disputes it is important to reveal one’s theological premises and methods. Especially in the analytic tradition lies a strong emphasis on

¹ Possibly, one can even advance a non-interventionist version of open theism with both a strong libertarian and a strong providential view, narrowing the gap to other prominent models of God and the God-world relation. But this must be discussed in another paper.

argumentative transparency. When engaging in debates on divine prophecy and divine risk-taking, many people avoid or circumvent the discussion by arguing that the simple idea of a God who takes risks is supposedly based on wrong assumptions or a wrong approach to talking about God. The open theist's approach is based on four core premises: (1) God is a personal agent who has created the world intentionally. (2) Human beings are in principle able to know and evaluate God's being and intentions.² (3) Human beings possess, at least at some times in their life, libertarian free will, which limits God's omnipotence to some extent.³ (4) Philosophical and theological presentism is true.

One might assume that it is obvious that all adherents of Abrahamic religions believe in a personal God. However, the term 'person' has been used in quite different ways in dogmatic history; this is obvious when looking at the development of the concept of the Trinity in the 3rd and 4th century, where one God in three persons did not mean one God comprised of three subjects, three instances of consciousness or three agents.⁴ Moreover, it is not even clear what 'person' means in modernity, which again becomes clear when people refer to unborn or almost-braindead people as persons, although they are lacking self-consciousness and agency. To avoid confusion, it might be best to use the term 'subject' or 'mind' when describing the similarity of human beings and God (following Hasker 2013, and others). If God is a personal agent, He has an irreducible I-perspective, an immaterial consciousness, is able to think and deliberate based upon reasons. If God is a free personal agent, His decisions are not determined by reasons or essential characteristics, but He can choose either what reasons to base His decisions on or, even if He is morally perfect, to choose to perform or omit supererogatory acts.

2.1. Theological Assumptions

Based upon the contingency of the world, one can—in accordance with Aquinas's *tertium via* and Leibniz's *principle of sufficient reason*—conclude that there must be a

² Of course, God can withhold some aspects of His characters or some of His intentions. The core conviction here is that God is not in principle ineffable and non-understandable, as 'negative theology' or apophatic theism claims, and that He makes an important part of this knowledge available to us, either through reason or revelation.

³ Some open theists would even reject the claim that God limits His omnipotence, as an anonymous reviewer has pointed out. They would rather say that a limitation of God's power is a logically necessary consequence of His creating a world with libertarian free will. I would, nevertheless, count this as an indirect self-limitation of omnipotence.

⁴ Nevertheless, modern interpretations of the Trinity include 'social trinitarianism', affirmed by many open theists. They usually argue that if God is essentially loving and love is a relationship between at least two persons, God must consist in at least two (and actually three) persons, so that His nature is not dependent on creatures to be loved.

necessary being who is the reason for the existence of the world (cf. Reichenbach 2022). We cannot prove that our world exists contingently; but we can deduce from practical reason that there is moral responsibility, thus there is free will, thus there is contingency *within* the world, thus the world as a whole exists contingently (with a severe argumentative leap from the third to the fourth step). Alternatively, we may deduce the contingency of the world from the contingency of the natural laws and natural constants (if we rule out a level IV multiverse theory due to the principle of ontological scarcity, cf. Tegmark 2007, 122f.). The best explanation for the contingency of the world, at least for open theists, is its origin in the *will* of a necessarily existing omnipotent being. God could have decided not to create the world; the world exists because God freely chose to create it. Since genuine free will is always based on (although not determined by) reasons, God created the world for a reason.⁵

There are ongoing debates about the extent to which human and divine reason differ, often linked to discussions about the impact of original sin on our reasoning abilities. These debates reveal significant differences between Catholic and Reformed Protestant perspectives. Consequently, views diverge on whether our reasoning faculties must be healed through divine grace before we can grasp aspects of God’s essence and reasoning, and whether the only way to understand God is through direct revelation from Him.

In my evaluation and comparison of different variants of open theism, I use a moderate natural-theological approach. From Anselm’s perfect-being theology, we can infer that, if God exists, He is omnipotent and morally perfect. Building on this, abductive reasoning can be used to address the problem of theodicy, concluding that God must have morally sufficient reasons to permit evil. The most plausible reason seems to be that allowing evil enables the possibility of creaturely libertarian free will, which is essential for genuine love to exist. This reasoning does not assume that a free-will defense alone resolves the problem of theodicy.

If God desires a loving relationship with His creation, it is reasonable to believe that certain intuitions of a personal, loving God are ingrained in human

⁵ How can we know for what reason God created the world, what His intentions were? There are three possible ways to answer this question: either not at all, or through natural reason, or through revelation (possibly also through a combination of the latter two). One of the most important methodological premises of most analytic-theological approaches is that human beings’ reason is a reflection of or in some way isomorphic to *objective reason* – a genuinely Platonic intuition. Christianity has adopted this intuition from Greek philosophy by equating the preexistent Second Trinitarian Person with universal reason (the *Logos*), as Josef Ratzinger has summarized: “The God who is logos guarantees the intelligibility of the world, the intelligibility of our existence, the aptitude of reason to know God and the reasonableness of God” (Ratzinger 1990, 24).

nature (*internal revelation*). These intuitions can be further confirmed by external revelation, either through prophecy or the incarnation as God's self-communication. If God is benevolent and desires His creatures to know Him—an essential element of fostering a loving relationship—then we can trust that He will assist humanity in the intellectual and spiritual journey toward a deeper understanding of Him. Although we can never be entirely certain that we fully understand God and His reasoning—especially since we cannot be sure of the authenticity of any revelation we encounter—the Christian concept of God supports an optimistic religious epistemology. It encourages the belief that we can develop preliminary models or theories of God and the God-world relationship. Our reasoning abilities are sufficiently robust to refine these models over time, making them progressively more accurate.

Assume God created the world in order to let creatures evolve who possess self-consciousness, free will, the ability to love, and the ability to understand God. This implies that God has restricted His power when creating the world, making Himself unable to reverse creaturely free decisions or manipulate immediate (probably even long-term) consequences thereof. Open theists do not only defend libertarian free will in the sense that one has the power to perform or omit certain actions, but they would specify that free will that is only given provisionally is not genuine free will. Thus, God must limit His omnipotence not only in the moment of creation but also acknowledge that His power to intervene will get smaller the larger the extent of creaturely autonomy becomes.⁶ Even divine intervention before creatures evolve might be limited in this framework, since God needs to guarantee that His existence and His intentions are not too obvious for His creatures since this would undermine creaturely freedom to believe or not believe in God. If, for example, a theory of intelligent design were the most plausible explanation of the empirical evidence on human evolution, it would be quite irrational not to believe in an intelligent creator. John Hick calls this the *epistemic distance argument* (1983, 56).

Because of libertarianism and a strong limitation of divine intervention (as a result of divine self-limitation), an open theist account of providence is only possible as a combination of intelligently planning ahead and moderate divine intervention at certain points in history, namely when creaturely freedom and responsibility are not undermined as a consequence.⁷

⁶ Assume, there was a time when a small number of predecessors of *homo sapiens sapiens* had existed, with each individual only having a small amount of libertarian freedom. At this time, God could have intervened in history a lot more often than today, where there are billions of free, rational individuals, whose actions have consequences for each other and the long-term future of our planet and humanity as a whole.

⁷ The process theologian would add that God might have put some 'energy' in creation which lets it shift slightly towards a positive outcome, "luring" creatures to the right decisions; however, it is hard to show how such soft manipulation is compatible with libertarianism.

2.2. *God’s Personhood*

These considerations about the God-world-relationship should lead open theists to affirm a strong view of God’s personhood: If love requires free will not to love, it is not only necessary that creatures are able not to love God, but it must also be possible that God does not love His creatures. Most open theists either reject such freedom on God’s part (since God essentially loves, as Clark Pinnock states “The open view of God emphasizes that He is a loving person; love is the very essence of his being.” (2001, 81) or Thomas Oord (cf. 2023) advocates) or defend such freedom only indirectly (saying that God could have not created the world while necessarily loving His creatures after having created them). As an implication of the thesis that love requires free will on both sides of a loving relationship, however, God must be free in a libertarian way not only regarding creation, but also regarding redemption. This is in strong contrast to most Christian theologies, which distinguish between the “order of creation” and “the order of redemption”. Given such extreme voluntarism, how can we understand the Christian definition of “God as love” or even as necessarily loving? Restrictive libertarianism gives a possible answer to this problem, although it leads to an even stronger anthropomorphic conception of God as most open theists want to defend. “Developmental theism”, as introduced by Peter Forrest (2007), advocates—interestingly in line with some prominent Jewish theories about God who learns and develops in interaction with His people (cf. Klapheck 2015)—that God *forms His character* over time, even with the support of His creatures. God can choose to irreversibly form His character, become love, so that He does not have the power not to love *any more*. This, of course, is in contradiction to the common open theist’s assumption that God does not change regarding His “essence” or “character” (Sanders 2007, 187; Boyd 2000, 78) but only regarding His relation to creation and His knowledge. Both concepts, however, agree that a personal God freely chose to create the world and take certain risks in creation.

2.3. *Metaphysical Assumptions*

A philosophical intuition all open theists share is that libertarianism is incompatible with metaphysical 4-dimensionalism, also known as the *block universe* theory (cf. Rhoda 2011, 74). In a block universe, all existing entities are 4-dimensional, with spatial and temporal properties; ‘now’ is only a matter of perspective, there is no objectively privileged timeframe. If 4-dimensionalism is

Possibly, this is just an alternative explication for the Christian assumption that grace works in us unless we actively reject it (cf. Stump, 2007, 103). Or, following Teilhard de Chardin, God’s providential action is simply an anti-force to the law of entropy – which predicts that all complexity, and thus all life, will come to an end at some time in the future.

true, the outcomes of my future decisions ‘already’ exist, although any information about them is epistemically inaccessible to me. Open theists often refer to themselves as “open view theists”, clarifying that they believe that the future is open both for us and for God. Since future states of affairs do not exist as of now, propositions about them cannot have a truth value since there is no truth value of contingent propositions without a truth-maker.⁸ This has the consequence that even an omniscient God (who knows everything which is logically possible to know) does not know future contingents. But since the amount of possible knowledge increases over time (unknowable future contingents become knowable present contingents and eventually past accidental necessities), the knowledge of an omniscient God must also increase over time, which requires God to be changeable at least regarding His knowledge.

In other words, even in a presentist (or *growing block*) framework, there are certain future states of affairs which are knowable to us and even more that are knowable to God. How can that be? In some cases, there is a truth-maker for future states of affairs, namely the present reality in combination with the natural laws (and, for theists, God’s plans and/or self-limitation). If a certain event occurs in all possible futures, it is contingently true today that the event will occur (since its occurrence is not necessary if some event in the past could have prevented it). In opposite to human beings, a ‘presentist’ God perfectly knows the current world state and the natural laws (He Himself has created or seen evolve), thus He is able to accurately predict future developments of the cosmos, of course without knowing what the outcome of genuinely free decisions will be. The bigger the number of free decisions an average creature makes in her life (and the larger the gravity of these decisions is), the less accurate God can make His predictions. Optimistic views assume that within the context of libertarianism God can guarantee certain outcomes based on statistical foreknowledge of free decision. However, if such statistical foreknowledge is only possible regarding unfree behavior based on formed habits, but not about genuinely free decisions (cf. Vicens 2016), certain unavoidable risks are not even preventable by an omnipotent God—insofar He has freely chosen to give creatures free will and thereby temporarily limit His omnipotence.

⁸ This *non-bivalence view* is the common position among open theists. Whether one assumes that they do not have a truth value (and thus God cannot know it) or one says that their truth value is neither ‘true’, nor ‘false’, but ‘undefined’, and God knows it to be undefined, does not make a difference here. There is, however, an alternative view, according to which all propositions about the future, if not stating events that happen in all possible futures, would be counted as false, as defended by Todd 2016. But this view cannot make sense of propositions like ‘X will contingently happen tomorrow’ (which semantically differs from ‘X will happen tomorrow’), which is why I regard, unlike Todd, the non-bivalence view as a necessary concomitant of open theism.

3. Risk-Minimizing Strategies

In a Christian context, the term ‘providence’ does not only mean ‘foresight’ of future events, but rather a certain degree of control over these events. David Fergusson specifies: “Within Christian theology, providence is the sequel to creation. After creating the world, God preserves and directs it to fulfil God's purposes” (2018, 1). Notably, very few thinkers have interpreted providence as God exercising absolute control over everything that happens within creation, for this would undermine any creaturely freedom, unless compatibilism is true. Open theists, who reject all compatibilist approaches, use several analogies to reconcile libertarian free will and providence. They say that God is like a professional chess player. He knows ahead of the game that He will win against the amateur, although He does not know how He will win. Other examples refer to the arts, such as the Persian Rug-Maker analogy: even if the beginner makes severe mistakes in weaving, a professional rug-maker can change the design ‘on the run’, such that in the end it seems that the mistakes were part of the complex design from the beginning. John Lucas (1976, 39-40) writes on this:

The children fail to carry out their father’s instructions exactly, but so great is their father’s skill, that he adapts his design at his end to take in each error at his children’s end, and work it into a new, constantly adapted, pattern. So too, God. He does not, cannot, have one single plan for the world, from which we by our errors, ignorances, and sins, are even further departing.

Other common analogies are those of God as Theater Director, Expedition Leader, or Discussion Leader (cf. Rhoda 2009). But all these analogies are insufficient to explain how exactly God can secure a certain outcome, such as humanity not destroying itself or that a certain minimal number of creatures freely engage in loving relationship with God. Guaranteeing both mentioned goals would require God to undermine human freedom, stopping a person from starting World War III or even forcing someone to love, which is logically impossible. But there are many goals which are in principle achievable such that making a loving relationship possible (enabling them to believe) for a maximum amount of persons, or to limit the scope and/or effects of certain free decisions. Such feasible risk-minimizing strategies will be discussed now.⁹

⁹ In a recent paper, Ryan Mullins and Emanuela Sani have evaluated that open theism lacks a theory of risk management: “Whatever amount of risk the open theist wishes to affirm, we say that something is missing from the open theist account of reality – divine risk management. If open theism is to be considered a plausible view, open theists need to stop playing up how much risk God takes, and start developing theories about how God mitigates the risks involved in

3.1. *Limiting Libertarianism*

In order to freely engage in a loving relationship with God, one needs not be free regarding all important decisions in one's life. Possibly, many of the decisions we make are ultimately determined by our own (only partially self-formed) character, psychological tendencies, external influences, or simply products of random neurological processes. This does not undermine libertarianism, since a sophisticated version should acknowledge this limitation; it is sufficient that we are free in some moments in our life, having some influence on our long-term character formation. In a modern Christian eschatology, it is not even necessary to freely engage in a relationship with God in our earthly existence: it might be sufficient that we leave our character in a way such that it can be eschatologically transformed into a (God-)loving agent—all we need to do in this life is *not* to reject the divine grace which makes this transformation happen.

A restrictive form of libertarianism helps with divine providence, because it limits the amount of possible histories God is confronted with in His creational decision. God can balance out the "amount" of freedom and the number of possible histories, thereby minimizing the number of histories where everything goes wrong. By limiting the free will of individuals (including by making them mortal by creating a world with certain laws of entropy), God even diminishes the amount of evil single individuals can bring into the world (cf. Swinburne 2004, 229-230). As a positive side-effect, our personal responsibility is increased, because we are now partially responsible for the scope of freedom other people have—especially children's characters are strongly influenced by the way their parents and their immediate surroundings affect and shape them.

However, over time, through many generations, negative effects can be magnified, and strong negative character formation is possible. Open theists like Clark Pinnock defend the idea of acquiring habits and forming an irreversible character mostly on the individual level:

[T]he range of viable options diminishes over time. [. . .] [O]ur ability to choose may diminish; as choices become habits, habits become character, and character becomes our very being, in a sense, we are becoming our choices. (Pinnock 2001, 170-171)

God might be able to foreknow and guarantee certain developments in short-term (as knowing what people with a strongly formed character will do in all

creating a universe with an open future. [. . .] This, we maintain, will raise the plausibility of open theism." (2021, 597).

kinds of possible situations), but not how the long-term development of a culture or society will look like.

3.2. *Undermining Libertarianism*

Open theists defend a creational account of God’s self-restricting His power in order to make free will possible.¹⁰ Freedom, which is only given provisionally, is not considered to be true freedom: “To take back freedom once it is given on the grounds that it is being used wrongly would mean that freedom was never given in the first place” (Boyd 2000, 73). There is, however, some dissent in the question of whether changing outcomes of free decisions counts as “taking back” freedom. Rigorous open theists argue in line with Kantian ethicists: Conditional freedom undermines autonomy; if someone could revoke your freedom whenever you “misuse” it, your actions would no longer be self-governed, but rather be subject to external control (cf. Allison 2013, 139). To be self-governed is not only about making a decision but being able to accurately predict possible outcomes of a decision. Non-rigorous open theists might say, in contrast, that manipulating consequences of free decisions does not undermine freedom as long as the agent does not and can never know about such manipulation.¹¹ For this view, it is much harder to construct a proper *free will defense*, since God would be still able to improve the consequences of evil actions without undermining free will.

In the rigorous (and more theodicy-sensitive) understanding of open theism, God cannot intervene in history in a way that He manipulates free agents, not even the outcomes of free decisions.¹² Since in the development of humanity, the effects of free decisions encompass the whole planet, even its ecological status, this assumption may almost nullify God’s ability to intervene and change the course of history in accordance with His intentions:

In fact, it seems that the amount of special intervention that could occur consistent with those [i.e. God’s] purposes may be rather small; almost certainly

¹⁰ The term *open theism* comprises different views on whether and to what extent God can intervene in history. Most open theists believe, contrary to process theists, that God can sometimes unilaterally intervene in history. But all agree that God cannot act in a coercive way.

¹¹ This distinction mirrors the debate on Frankfurt-style cases: rigorous open theists reject any divine “back-up mechanism” as undermining autonomy, while non-rigorous open theists accept it insofar as the agent’s subjective experience of freedom remains intact (cf. Frankfurt 1969). For a recent discussion on the compatibility of free will and types of divine manipulation see Visala 2023

¹² Certain opponents of open theism consequently reject this claim, such as Ron Highfield (2011, 150): “[If God can] reorient fallen freedom toward righteousness without doing it violence, he can direct human freedom according to his will in every other case without doing it violence.”

far less than would be needed to materially affect the overall balance of good and evil in the world. (Hasker 2004, 146)

This is why some thinkers relativize the libertarian account: God only restricted Himself *inasmuch* as He still can guarantee the long-term development of creation, leaving Him certain possibilities of interventions (or even the power to stop His creational project altogether). In Sanders' words "God could simply put an end to his project and halt all sin now" (2007, 233). Thus, God only gave limited freedom, so that He can achieve His goals. Boyd (2001, 185) states:

[The thesis that the power to influence is irrevocable] stipulates that to the extent that humans or angels are self-determining, to that extent their moral responsibility must be irrevocable. [...] [It] thus does not entail that God can never exercise coercive power in his interactions with free creatures [...]. [It] thus does not contradict the biblical portrayal of God occasionally intervening unilaterally in the world.

In a Kantian framework, even the smallest *proviso* (such as halting the creational project in a worst-case scenario or correcting foreseeable outcomes of free actions) would be incompatible with libertarian freedom. Accordingly, rigorous open theists would object to this strategy and favor an alternative approach. For example, contrary to exercising coercive power, it may not severely undermine libertarianism if God acts by slightly changing statistical processes. This way He can correct *non-intended and non-foreseeable* outcomes of actions—as long as these outcomes are not based on culpable ignorance (this would also undermine the agent's responsibility) or are related to other people's responsibilities.

It is questionable whether this strategy gives God sufficient 'openings' to intervene in history (cf. Hasker 2004, 146). It is also hard to draw a line between luring, nudging, and manipulating.¹³ With the danger of undermining libertarianism, some thinkers accept that God can make exceptions to His self-restriction, which must of course be considered from the beginning (cf. Basinger 1988, 63). It can be argued that if it is God's goal to make loving relationships based on free character formation possible, He must not only enable the development of freedom but also preclude that the freedom of the many is severely damaged or even destroyed by the freedom of the few. Would God intervene before someone is about to destroy all of humanity, or even all of intelligent life in the universe? Or would even such intervention destroy human

¹³ Some ethicists argue, for example, that nudging in certain contexts counts as a form of manipulation. A broad meta-study by Vugts et al. (2020) shows how nudges can both undermine or strengthen autonomy.

freedom, resulting in the fact that it has never been given in the first place, making genuine love impossible?

The limited-freedom strategy is tenable only if the risk God takes is that some of His creatures will never acquire true freedom because of the misused freedom of others. And it includes a divine *proviso*, reserving His right to limit or even destroy a person’s freedom in order to save other people’s freedom. The strongest challenge for this view of God’s omnipotence is clearly the problem of theodicy: Why doesn’t God stop murder, or at least mass-murders and genocides, since here He would only have to limit the freedom of few people in order to save the freedom of many?

3.3. *Intervention through Human Beings*

Contemporary theologians often argue that divine intervention is incompatible with human freedom. Even if this holds regarding libertarian free will, there is still a way God might be able to intervene while maintaining human freedom, namely in cases where believers freely allow God to act through them. Some prayers even involve giving God the permission to let Him use oneself as an instrument. Such *intramental intervention* in accordance with human autonomy (and not in violation with natural laws, cf. Stoeger 1995, 258f.) can make a difference for human history in the long term, the greater the number of believers with influential positions in society. However, in this account God cannot guarantee that He has the providential power He needs to fulfill His purposes, but at least His creatures are able to “give Him this power back”, gradually reversing God’s self-limitation by establishing the kingdom of God “from below”.

Of course, this theory is still “interventionist” because it has to explain how God intervenes in human consciousness, possibly through intervening directly in neurological processes. The advantage of restricting divine action to intramental activity (and only to cases where it does not undermine the agent’s freedom) is that, given the common interpretation that quantum processes are indeterminate and the hypothesis that the complexity of the human brain enables quantum amplification (cf. Ellis 2001; Hameroff 2012), God can act with consequences to the macroscopic level without breaking any natural laws. It also is not as big of a challenge to the problem of theodicy. But it might not be sufficient for a strong account of providence, which guarantees that God achieves certain major goals in creation. However, it is sufficient for believing that—as of now—humanity has already reached a state in which God has gained enough influence to be able to guide humanity toward a positive future.

3.4. *Providential Usefulness of Foreknowledge?*

There is an ongoing analytic discussion on the providential usefulness of divine foreknowledge. Most critics of open theism argue that God's foreknowledge of free acts provides an advantage for God to limit risks in creation. However, if God cannot control this foreknowledge and cannot make His decision what world to create dependent on this foreknowledge—as emphasized by David Hunt's *metaphysical principle*, which says that "It is impossible that a decision depend on a belief which depends on a future event which depends on the original decision." (2004, 486)—it is hard to tell what exactly this advantage should be. Dean Zimmerman discusses a theory why foreknowledge can provide some advantage: a *many-stage model of simple foreknowledge* allows God only as much foreknowledge as He wants and needs in order to make informed decisions to intervene and/or react to earthly events.

There are many stages in God's knowledge. Stage 1 contains just necessary truths. Stage 2 adds all the contingent facts about creation prior to the introduction of any free creatures. 1 and 2 are separated by God's decision to create a world with such-and-such initial segment leading up to free creatures. Stage 2 also contains God's foreknowledge about what initial free choices are made. After 2, God decides what the world should be like up until their next free choices, which generates Stage 3. And so on. (Zimmerman 2012, 174–196)

However, the same providential power holds for an 'open theist God' who knows all possible futures and makes contingency plans for any possibility of reaction that could arise in any possible history. The only model that provides significant providential advantage is Molinism (cf. Flint 2006, 35-74), claiming that God eternally (and logically independent of His creaturely act) knows what any possible creature would do in any possible circumstances; but because this theory is highly disputed (and, in my opinion, is fatally flawed due to the so-called grounding objection), it is not the best option to reconcile a theory of providence with the existence of creaturely libertarian freedom.¹⁴

3.5. *Evaluation*

It is possible to provide a weak account of providence even if one believes that God has self-restricted both His omnipotence and omniscience by creating a world with free creatures. In contrast to a strong account, this type of providence

¹⁴ As an anonymous reviewer has pointed out, Molinism is also limited by the nature of the true hypothetical conditionals of freedom, which God cannot determine—e.g., the number in any actualizable world that God knows will accept salvation.

is based on minimizing, but not eliminating creaturely risks. This leaves God power to “[order] all things sweetly” (*Dei Filius* 1870, ch. 1; cf. Wis 8:1) only by those kinds of interventions that do neither undermine human freedom nor creatures’ ability to freely believe or not believe in God.¹⁵ The ‘safest’ way for God is to restrict His power to intervene to instances when free creatures freely choose to become instruments of God’s love in the world. Accordingly, the larger the number of believers, the greater the influence God has on the future development of the cosmos. Possibly, this power to intervene is gradual, since even the non-ideological atheist can have implicit faith (be a human of ‘good will’) letting the divine power minimally influence his mental life by not actively rejecting divine grace.

4. Conclusion: A Risk-Taking Personal God

If there is a personal God, it is justified to assume that He created this world with certain goals. From a Christian perspective, “God is love” can be interpreted as “God aims for a loving relationship with His creatures”. Genuine love requires libertarian free will, which requires God’s self-determination and self-limitation in creation. However, if God is a benevolent and rational agent, He will do everything He can to achieve His goal or at least to make a successful outcome very likely. Providence can be defined as God’s seeking a balance between an increase of individual freedom and an increase of the chance of a successful creation. He may achieve such a balance through fine-tuning the initial conditions of the universe, mildly guiding the development of the cosmos towards the emergence of intelligent life forms, helping societies in their progress towards peace and an increase in individual and religious freedom. But moreover, He might intervene in history through those agents who freely choose to let God act through them, guiding their decisions, giving them strength to do what is right even in challenging circumstances.

The actual consequences of the presented framework are probably felt as an impertinence to many believers. God does not know the future—rather, He knows the set of all possible futures.¹⁶ God does not have a definite plan for your life—rather, He has many possible plans for you, and no matter what mistake

¹⁵ One should note that the First Vatican Council affirms exhaustive divine foreknowledge, contrary to the conviction of open theists. Nevertheless, in line with the Council of Trent, it rejects any form of predetermination. The adverb “sweetly” (lat. *suaviter*) conveys gentleness, care, and wisdom. It emphasizes that God’s guidance of history is not harsh, coercive, or chaotic, but loving and harmonious.

¹⁶ There are, of course, many future events that occur in every single possible future. God’s knowledge thus comprises many future events, but only those which are not contingent based on the current state of the world and the natural laws. To be precise, God does not know “the future” but can predict future events in case they happen in all possible future histories.

you make, He will always have an alternative plan. God does not, or very rarely, unilaterally intervene in history – rather, He acts through faithful human beings. Also, the Christological consequences of a risk-taking God must be discussed: God cannot guarantee salvation through Jesus Christ – rather, He needed some human cooperation (not just Mary’s, but of many generations among the people of Israel) to make the incarnation and eventually the redemption of humankind possible (cf. Lohfink and Weimer 2007). If Christian revelation is true, saying that the incarnation has happened and humanity is already redeemed, we do not have to worry too much about the risk God took in creation, some people say. But does the risk even continue now? For open theists there is no guarantee that even the Church will not be corrupted (in conflict with Mt 16:18), possibly by church leaders who do not sincerely commit their will to God’s will but only pretend to do so.¹⁷ Why should we trust dogmatic definitions of ecumenical councils if we concede that the spirit can only work through the assembly *if* the majority of participants sincerely allows God to act through them? Providing this trust is even harder when being confronted with abuse scandals and covering-up practices in these days. Possibly, God’s foreknowledge – though limited through human free will, but including divine contingency plans – was strong enough that 2000 years ago He did know that in all possible futures His Church will not be entirely corrupted. Nevertheless, He took the risk in creation even to the extent that the world could not be saved or that – following the succeeded salvation through the incarnation – the Gospel is misused and violence is defended in Christ’s name, which sadly is happening up until today.

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¹⁷ This worry is both applicable to Catholics and Protestants, although they share a different concept of what the Church is. If the Church is equated with an institution, the non-corruptibility is much harder to defend from an open theist’s view. If the Church is simply understood as the sum of all true believers, it can, by definition, not be corrupted, but rather cease to exist, which is a risk God probably tries to avoid.

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