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Book Review: Providence, Evil, And The Openness of God

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It is also worth noting that on the intermediate embodiment view a "resurrection" is the glorification of an already existing and living body. In no sense is it a rising from the grave. This is ironic given Corcoran's suggestion that contemporary dualists have neglected or misunderstood the meaning of 'resurrection.'

One of the principal ideas of the chapter is that the biblical case for dualism is not as straightforward as it is sometimes assumed. That is a point well worth making. Though a dualist interpretation can be defended, the anthropological teaching of the text (if any) is not entirely explicit. But it is also true that the materialist alternatives, and the intermediate embodiment view in particular, face some serious challenges.

Overall, *Rethinking Human Nature* is an excellent entry to current Christian reflection on the relation between mind and body, as well as the surrounding ethical and theological issues. It engages the reader, succinctly covers a wide range of arguments, and exemplifies thoughtful and careful reflection from a thoroughly Christian perspective. Corcoran does not pretend that all readers will be convinced by the case for the constitution view, but he offers his audience an appealing invitation to take it seriously. For many students and non-specialists, *Rethinking Human Nature* will be the best available introduction to an important facet of contemporary thinking on mind and body.

Providence, Evil and the Openness of God, by William Hasker. Routledge, 2004. Pp. 224. \$130 (hardback).

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"How does God run the world?" How can we account for "the prevalence of evil in a world supposedly governed by a God who is wise, good, and powerful?" (p. 1) In *Providence, Evil and the Openness of God*, William Hasker offers a series of reflections based largely upon these questions. Each chapter of this volume is a stand-alone essay, though all are united by one central theme: the superiority of open theism over rival conceptions of divine providence with respect to both the problem of evil and the existence of libertarian free will.

This volume is divided into two parts. The five essays in Part One comprise a discussion of the problem of evil; these essays deal very little with the differences among competing accounts of divine providence, but focus instead on the beliefs shared by most traditional theists. Hasker spends almost no time on the logical problem of evil, referring the reader to Alvin Plantinga's Free-Will Defense. Instead, the focus here is on the evidential problem of evil, "the version which claims that God's existence is *improbable* given the evidence of evil." (p. 24)

Prior to the discussion of the evidential problem, however, is an essay pertaining to the *existential* problem of evil. This version of the problem is articulated in the form of *moral protest* against a God who would create a world in which suffering is prevalent. In chapter one, "On regretting the

evils of this world," Hasker argues that few people, theists or atheists, could consistently raise such a protest.

In this fascinating, carefully argued essay, Hasker explicates our notions of "gladness" and "regret" into what he calls a "logic of preference." He distinguishes *circumstantial* gladness, where you are glad about some state of affairs *P* but regret some *Q* which you know to be necessary for *P*, from being *glad on the whole*. He defines the latter as follows:

'A is glad on the whole that *P*' =_{df} 'A is glad that *P*, and for any state-of-affairs *Q* such that A knows that if *Q* did not obtain neither would *P*, A is glad that *Q*.' (p. 14)¹

Armed with this distinction, Hasker goes on to note the massive historic contingency of the existence of any given person.² Assuming with Kripke that "personal identity requires an identical *genetic heritage*," any significant change in our history is likely to have resulted in a very different population (p. 11).³ Thus, if I am *glad on the whole* about my own existence, or about the existence of those that I love, then I must be glad about the history of the world having been as it has (p. 15). But I cannot consistently *complain* about that which I am *glad* about! Therefore, Hasker concludes,

If I am glad on the whole about my own existence, and that of persons close to me, then I cannot reproach God for the general character or the major events of the world's past history. (p. 19)

This is, of course, to say that I cannot consistently raise the existential problem of evil.

I believe that Hasker is right about this; if I am glad on the whole of my own existence, then I cannot consistently complain about any of the atrocities which may have been necessary for my own coming-into-existence.⁴ The trouble, as they say, is that one man's *modus ponens* is another's *modus tollens*. Hasker takes this argument to preclude most of us (the atheologist included) from raising the existential problem of evil. As I see it, the argument demonstrates that very few of us can be glad on the whole of our own existence.⁵ Consider in particular the atheologist who wishes to raise the existential problem of evil. Will he conclude, with Hasker, that he must prefer the Holocaust, the early American slave-trade, the influenza pandemics, and whatever else might be necessary for his own existence—simply because he is glad on the whole about his own existence?⁶ I think that he will not. Instead, he will likely conclude that he can be at best *circumstantially* glad about his own existence. But circumstantial gladness does *not* require that he be glad about the circumstances necessary for his own existence, and so the atheologist will remain perfectly capable of raising the existential problem of evil without running the risk of inconsistency.

The remaining chapters in part one address the evidential problem of evil. Central to the discussion is Hasker's claim that a wholly good God, contrary to traditional theistic belief, *could and should* allow for the existence of evil that is genuinely gratuitous. In chapter two, "Suffering, soul-making and salvation," Hasker offers what he takes to be the most promising theodicy

in light of the evidential problem of evil. This chapter also includes a discussion of theodicy in general, as well as a critical evaluation of Eleonore Stump's theodicy of "suffering for redemption" (p. 23).⁷ Ultimately, Hasker concludes that a variant of John Hick's soul-making theodicy is "an adequate solution for the problem of inflicted moral and natural evil" (p. 40).⁸ Chapter three, "The sceptical solution of the problem of evil," focuses on a particular theistic response to William Rowe's famous formulation of the evidential problem of evil.⁹ Here Hasker, drawing on the work of Richard Swinburne, emphasizes the danger of appealing to our epistemic limitations in order to deny the existence of gratuitous evil.¹⁰ Instead, he suggests that the theist reconsider her support for the following premise:

An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse. (p. 43)

In rejecting this premise, and accepting the fact that God might allow gratuitous evils to occur, the theist is free to reject the conclusion of Rowe's evidential argument from evil.

The two succeeding chapters continue this theme. Chapter four ("The necessity of gratuitous evil") offers an argument for the claim that God *must not* prevent the occurrence of all such evils if His creatures are to be endowed with libertarian freedom. Chapter five, "Can God permit 'just enough' evil?" furthers this point, concluding that "theists should reject the idea that God must prevent all gratuitous evil" (p. 91).

In part two, the focus shifts to competing accounts of divine providence. Here, Hasker considers the relative impact of atheistic arguments from evil upon each of these accounts. The bulk of the discussion concerns Molinism, Theological Determinism, and Open Theism, but Process Theism is addressed here as well. In chapter six, "The openness of God," Hasker offers a broad presentation of the "open" view of God. Beginning with a brief account of his own conversion to open theism, he details the basic commitments of this "risk-taking" conception of God and addresses some of the more common objections to this position.

In chapters seven and eight, Hasker compares Open Theism both to Molinism and to Theological Determinism. Chapter seven, "Providence and Evil," is an evaluation of each theory in light of two features: their ability to ground an adequate theodicy for the evidential problem of evil, and their ability to make sense of genuine divine-human dialogue. Here Hasker concludes that Open Theism is in the best position with respect to both of these tasks. In chapter eight, "The God who takes risks," Hasker further advances the position that open theism offers the most promising account of divine providence available to Christian theists. He maintains that the risk-taking nature ascribed to God on such an account, often assumed to be a *liability* of open theism, is in fact a benefit, for it enables the open theist both to do justice to the emotional language attributed to God in scripture and to avoid the "dark paradoxes of theological determinism" (p. 134).

In chapter nine, "The problem of evil in process theism and classical free-will theism," the discussion broadens to include process theism.

Here, Hasker considers the claim that process theism is better equipped to handle the problem of evil than are the more traditional theistic accounts of providence, and concludes that open theism—unlike Molinism and Theological Determinism—possesses no disadvantage in this regard.

In chapter ten, “antinomies of divine providence,” the focus returns to the three primary accounts of divine providence. Central to this chapter is the apparent tension between divine sovereignty and creaturely freedom, though a version of the Grounding Objection to Molinism is raised here as well. Finally, in chapter eleven, Hasker considers the traditional Christian belief that God is perfectly good in light of the (equally traditional) belief that creation was a free act of God. Much of this discussion centers upon a recent dialogue between William Rowe and Thomas Morris.¹¹ Taking this dialogue as his starting point, Hasker suggests that Christians re-evaluate their conception of God’s goodness. By emphasizing “the intrinsic excellence of his holy and gracious love,” Hasker believes that the apparent constraints imposed upon God’s freedom by His goodness can be shown to be illusory (p. 184).

This book concludes with an appendix entitled “Replies to My Critics.” The appendix begins with a continuation of Hasker’s arguments against both Molinism and the “simple foreknowledge” account of providence. The bulk of the appendix, however, consists of a defense of open theism against recently formulated objections.

Throughout part two of this volume, Hasker’s rejection of Molinism plays a central role in advancing the position that Open Theism offers the best account of providence available to the traditional Christian theist.¹² At the heart of Hasker’s rejection of Molinism is the Grounding Objection.¹³ In response to this objection, Hasker writes, “Some Molinists have counterattacked, claiming that the grounding objection is without force because the requirement for grounding has not been given a precise enough formulation” (p. 194). For this reason, in the appendix, Hasker offers a precise formulation of the grounding requirement. I would like, briefly, to evaluate Hasker’s grounding requirement, and to provide a defense of Molinism in light of Hasker’s proposal.

Hasker begins by defining a “concrete state or event” as “the *exemplification of an occurrent property by a substance at a time, or of an occurrent relation by two or more substances at a time*” (p. 195). His proposed grounding principle, then, is as follows:

(GP) *Any true contingent proposition is true in virtue of the existence or non-existence of some concrete state or event.* (p. 195)

Hasker follows his grounding principle with a few clarifying comments, not all of which are relevant for our purposes.¹⁴ One comment that I deem crucial to the discussion is as follows. Hasker asks,

Why must we allow grounding to consist in the *non-existence* of a state or event? The answer is that “non-existence” needs to be included in order to account for negative and universal propositions. The truth of “All crows are black” depends on the *non-existence* of crows which are not black. (p. 195)¹⁵

He continues,

The fundamental idea behind this requirement is that contingent propositions are descriptive of the actual state of the world; in order for such a proposition to be true, the world must be as the proposition says it is. And this must take the form of one or more *concrete objects* having properties or standing in relations (or failing to do so); *no situation involving merely abstract entities can make a contingent proposition true.* (p. 195, emphasis added)

I have chosen to include both of these quotations in their entirety for the following reason: I have great difficulty understanding how we are to reconcile the appeal to non-existent crows in the former quotation with the subsequent requirement that truths be grounded in concrete objects.

I imagine that we are all agreed that there *are* no non-existent crows. In his treatment of Molinism in chapter seven, Hasker considers God's knowledge of the counterfactuals of freedom pertaining to possible, non-actual creatures. He writes, "Since there are no creatures that don't exist, this knowledge strictly speaking concerns uninstantiated essences" (p. 163, fn. 7). These essences, uninstantiated *or* instantiated, are presumably what Hasker intends to exclude by insisting upon the concrete nature of the states or events that ground contingent truths. Why, then, is it acceptable to appeal to the non-existence of some concrete state or event? What *is* it for a concrete event to *fail to exist*?

The problem here is not a new one. In "A World of States of Affairs," David Armstrong refers to the "vexed question whether or not to admit *negative* states of affairs."¹⁶ In Herbert Hochberg's review of Armstrong's book by the same title, he finds fault with Armstrong's attempt to "ground true negations by positive facts" (p. 482).¹⁷ Hochberg concludes that Armstrong implicitly relies upon "categorical properties, or 'quiddities'" (p. 482). The message is clear: grounding negative and universal truths in concrete events or states of affairs is no simple task. It is possible that Hasker has an account whereby this can be done, but if so this account has not yet been given.

If Hasker's (GP) is true, then it seems likely that there can be no true counterfactuals of creaturely freedom. However, absent some account of how it is that concrete states or events can *fail to exist*, or how *non-existent objects* can stand in relations, it seems equally likely that there can be no true universal or negative facts. Yet there *are* true universal and negative facts. For this reason, I maintain that the Molinist need not be troubled by Hasker's Grounding Principle. In being unable to meet the requirements of this principle, counterfactuals of creaturely freedom are in good company.

Providence, Evil and the Openness of God is an impressive collection of essays covering a wide range of material. However, while the chapters are thematically unified, the structure of the work as a whole is a bit disappointing. There is a great deal of overlap between the chapters, and little to no acknowledgement of, or reference to, material outside of any given chapter. This is, perhaps, to be expected from a collection of essays. However, it can be disorienting as a reader to be introduced, for example, to

both the problem of evil and open theism in chapter nine, 138 pages into a detailed discussion of both themes.¹⁸ The appendix offers much that is new, but—given the nature of an appendix—the arguments offered here are quite cursory. Every essay in this volume is undoubtedly worth reading, but I look forward to seeing the *synthesis* of these earlier essays with the newer material, rather than simply being given the essays themselves.

In a similar vein, some of the essays contained in this volume were originally directed at a more general audience. As such, Hasker occasionally alludes to “technical problems” with formulating a criterion precisely, and “technical philosophical reasons” for terminology, in ways that the philosophical audience at which *this* volume is aimed will find unsatisfactory (pp. 80, 103, fn13).

These quibbles aside, there is much to recommend in *Providence, Evil and the Openness of God*. “The freedom and goodness of God,” is new to this volume and, I think, one of the most interesting and thought-provoking essays here. Additionally, the appendix contains a great deal of new material that any reader is sure to find challenging and insightful. The remaining chapters may not contain much that is new, but they are certainly replete with arguments, illustrations and assertions that will undoubtedly provoke continued (perhaps heated) discussion among philosophers of religion.

NOTES

1. “In order to avoid use-mention confusions I will use ‘P’ to stand for the sentence which expresses the proposition that P, and ‘P’ as the name of the state of affairs such that P” (p. 20). I will follow Hasker’s lead throughout this review.

2. He appeals to the following principle here: “A necessary condition of my coming-into existence is the coming-into existence of my body” (p. 11). Hasker notes that not everyone will accept this principle. (I myself am inclined to reject this principle, but will grant it for the purposes of this review.)

3. Indeed, Hasker notes that “even genetic identity is not sufficient: identical twins are not identical persons” (p. 11).

4. Of course, as Hasker notes, I do not technically *know* that these atrocities were necessary for my own coming-into existence. Still, I have no reason to believe that I *would* have existed had these atrocities not occurred. Thus, Hasker writes, “What I have no reason to suppose true must for practical purposes be disregarded” (p. 15).

5. This may be too presumptuous; really, I think that most people *should* not be glad on the whole of their own existence. I cannot, and I’d like to think that most people—upon reflection—would find themselves in a similar situation. However, because the reflections must be conducted from the first-person perspective, I cannot be certain of how others will respond.

6. The Holocaust is surely an inflammatory example, but I believe it to be a fair one as well. In my own case, I am fairly confident that the Holocaust was necessary for my own existence. It seems plausible that, had Hitler’s actions been less atrocious, the US would not have entered into WWII. Prior to WWII, my maternal grandfather was engaged to marry a woman who is decidedly not my grandmother. When he went to war, she married someone else. So, for me at least, the odds of having come into existence absent the Holocaust are not so good. Nevertheless, I am not the slightest bit inclined to *prefer* the occurrence of the Holocaust to its non-occurrence, despite the fact that I am very happy to be alive.

7. Eleonore Stump, "The Problem of Evil," *Faith and Philosophy* 2 (1985), pp. 392–423.

8. John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1996; revised edition 1978).

9. "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, ed. Howard-Snyder (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996).

10. Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1994).

11. William Rowe, "The Problem of Divine Perfection and Freedom" in *Reasoned Faith*, ed. Eleonore Stump (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 223–33. See also "The Problem of No Best World," *Faith and Philosophy* 11:2 (April 1994), pp. 269–71; and "Can God Be Free?" *Faith and Philosophy* 19:4 (October 2002) pp. 405–24; Thomas Morris, "Perfection and Creation" in *Reasoned Faith*, ed. Eleonore Stump, pp. 234–47.

12. For example, in "The God Who Takes Risks" (Chap. 8) Hasker assumes that Molinism cannot address the grounding objection and so does not take it to be a viable alternative to Open Theism. He thus concludes, contra Molinism, that any theistic account according to which creatures are endowed with libertarian freedom will be an account on which God takes risks (pp. 125–26). In Chap. 10, "Antinomies of Divine Providence," Hasker grants that Molinism, as opposed to Open Theism and Theological Determinism, is initially in the best position to reconcile divine sovereignty with creaturely freedom. He again rejects Molinism on the basis of the Grounding Objection (pp. 153–58).

13. Briefly stated, the objection runs as follows: "Molinism might do a great job of balancing the freedom of creatures with the sovereignty of God, but it simply cannot be true. God cannot have Middle Knowledge; He cannot know which counterfactuals of creaturely freedom are the true ones, because there are no such truths. There is nothing in virtue of which these counterfactuals could be true; they are groundless, and as such are neither true nor false." In the interest of space, and given the scope of this review, I will operate on the assumption that the reader is familiar with the relevant background material here. I refer the reader to Thomas Flint's *Divine Providence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998) for an accessible yet comprehensive account and defense of Molinism.

14. Hasker defends (a) the limitation of this principle to contingent propositions, and (b) the insistence upon *occurrent* properties, entailed by his definition of concrete events, on page 195.

15. It is also important to note, as Hasker does, that "existence" here is to be taken trans-temporally (p. 195).

16. *Philosophical Perspectives* Vol. 7, *Language and Logic* (1993), pp. 429–40 at 436.

17. D. M. Armstrong, *A World of States of Affairs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Herbert Hochberg, "D. M. Armstrong, A World of States of Affairs," *Nous* 33:3 (1999), pp. 473–95.

18. A more dramatic example: chapter four is entitled "The necessity of gratuitous evil." There, Hasker defends the claim that God *must* allow for evil that is in some sense gratuitous; it is not possible for God only to allow for "just enough" evil to ensure some great good. Chapter five, "Can God permit 'just enough' evil?" makes the very same claim and, oddly enough, does so as if the arguments of the previous chapter had not yet been raised.